

## How to Recognize the Lord's Voice in Prayer

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Hello, my name is Sr. Orienne Pietra René, and I'm a daughter of St. Paul. I'm so honored to be able to sit here with you guys and pray with you and for you and thank you for praying with me and for me as well. And thank you for taking this time to really step away and to act on that desire to be able to spend time intimately with God in silence and retreat and pursuing a deeper relationship with Him in prayer.

So, for this segment, we're going to be dealing especially with, you know what really is prayer first of all. How do we recognize the Lord's voice in prayer? How do we give in prayer and how do we receive in prayer? And I don't think that there is a better person to teach us openness and receptivity and giving than Mary, so we will open by asking for her intercession.

### Hail Mary

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### What is Prayer?

All right, so what is prayer? What is prayer? Even because it's difficult to talk about anything else if we don't even know what prayer is, right? Essentially at its core, prayer is our communication with God. And it's true that I think we can look at our own lives and recognize that we are not perfect communicators and we do not speak with perfect communicators. But at the same time, we know that God is a perfect communicator. The Trinity within itself is the perfect communication, and He communicates with us, so no matter what our difficulties are, we are dealing with a perfect communicator. He knows how to communicate to us even if we struggle to receive it. And even if we struggle to receive it, to recognize it, to understand it. And even if we have trouble responding in communication, always know that through the grace of your baptism, if you've been baptized, and if you have not, I really would just take a moment to invite you to consider that, that step in your relationship with the Lord.

But if we have been baptized, we have the indwelling of God within us, we have the perfect communicator within us, and we are reminded in scripture that we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit prays within us with inexpressible groanings. He can say what we cannot say, He can express what we cannot express, He can understand what we cannot fathom, so be consoled. This is possible. No matter how much you struggle with communication with anybody else, this is possible, okay? So, do not be afraid.

## How to Recognize God's Voice in Prayer?

So, we're going to begin today with talking about how do we recognize God's voice in prayer? It's easy to be able to recognize somebody's voice who speaks to you provided you can hear. If you can't hear, you have your own ways of recognizing somebody's voice or somebody's presence, right? If you're blind, you have a different way of recognizing someone's presence if they're not speaking.

And I think that that's a really important example actually for us, is that there are different ways of recognizing when the Lord is speaking. And just as we may speak to different people differently based on how they understand things, how they relate to things, how they communicate, so too does God speak differently to each of us. There's always a common denominator, it's still Him speaking just as it's still me speaking to a four year old and to an adult, right? I'm speaking differently. I might be saying the same thing. It's both with the equivalent amount of sincerity, but I'm going to say it in a different way, so that it is understood, right? We speak to be understood. That is true communication. And God can do that. He can do that with us.

## Speaking Through His Silence

So, how do we recognize the voice of God then? If he's not speaking to me in the exact same way as he's speaking to Joe beside me, how do I know that He's speaking? How do I recognize His voice especially if I've never heard it before, right? If you are here and you can honestly say like, yeah, I pray, God works in my life, but I've never heard Him. He's never really said anything to me. You're in a totally normal position. Be at peace. The Lord is speaking to you, but you might not be able to recognize it. And if you know that the Lord speaks to you and you've heard it before and He's in a time of silence with you right now, maybe He's speaking to you in a different way that you haven't quite learned to recognize, but maybe His silence is His communication. And He's not passive aggressive, okay?

So, if we come from families or friend groups or whatever, where when people are ticked off at you, they just give you a cold shoulder and won't speak to you for weeks. I've certainly had that experience within my own life. That is not what God is silent with us for. He does not punish us through silence. He may call us to conversion through silence, but He never punishes us through silence. He's not passive aggressive. He's actually quite direct. Sometimes a little too direct for our sensibilities, but be at peace of that. If that is a wound that you carry, know that God will never do that to you, okay? You can trust Him on that one.

## Going Back to Sacred Scripture

So, how do we recognize God's voice? The very first most foundational thing that we need to do to be able to recognize God's voice is go back to His voice in sacred scripture. God has written you a letter. This is for the entire church, but it is also for you, for you specifically and for me, me specifically, and for each and every individual in the church in the body of Christ specifically. And if you go to the gospels, which I encourage you to do, you'll find the direct words of Jesus. So, when we're talking about how to recognize God's voice, it is absolutely

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essential, brothers and sisters that we go open up to the gospels, to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Find where Jesus is speaking, speaking. Read a passage of that slowly and prayerfully and ask the Holy Spirit to kind of like highlight or underline if you will, a word or a phrase for you. And just sit with that word or phrase that kind of strikes you, that the Holy Spirit's kind of underlining or really making stand out to you and ask the Lord, why is this striking me? Why is this leaving an impression on me? What are you saying to me here? In the context of this passage, these words, what are you saying to me?

That is one of the most beautiful ways that the Lord can speak to us directly in sacred scripture. In the church we call it *Lectio Divina*, which means holy reading of sacred scripture. So, I would encourage you to learn to get to know His voice that way. When we read the gospels in their entirety, not only do we see God's words, not only do we see what Jesus says, but we see some of His body language.

Some of the gospel writers recorded certain mannerisms that He had, so you get to know His words, you get to know what He loved, what He delighted in. You kind of see his little quippy sense of humor sometimes, which some people will experience in prayer. Others will not because He knows it's not their sense of humor. We see what makes His heart break. We see where He challenges people, where He calls people out, so that they will come back to Him, where He is gentle and always will be, where He is faithful, where He weeps, where He laughs, where He rejoices, where He raises an eyebrow or gives a face palm. Like, not that those are recorded specifically, but you can see certain circumstances where you're pretty sure He did some kind of equivalent.

These are the things we start to recognize about the Lord's voice and His personality, how He communicates. And the more familiar we become with how He communicates to us in scripture by the people who were standing next to Him, the better able we are to then recognize His voice when He speaks around us, because we've heard it before. We know what He sounds like. We know the kinds of things that He says, right? We know His sense of humor. We know what delights Him. We know what breaks His heart. We know what He yearns to share with us, what He yearns to call us to, we know how He speaks.

So that is our very first lesson in getting to know the voice of the Lord. And when we feel like the Lord might be speaking to us, that might be in the silence of our heart in prayer. Some of us will hear the Lord that way. Some of us might not, that might not be our primary way of like hearing the Lord speak. But obviously prayer and silence is still very important. If you hear the Lord speaking to you in the silence of your heart in prayer, or if you are feeling like He's saying something to you through *Lectio Divina*, if you feel like maybe He has said something to you through the words of another person, whether you approve of that person as a messenger of God, or you would've much preferred that He chose someone else to say these words.

Maybe you saw an interaction that kind of reminded you of something or revealed something to you and you feel like God is using that interaction that you saw or witnessed in the line at the grocery store or whatever to speak to you. Whether it's something in nature. However, however you feel like the Lord might have spoken to you, here are some ways to be able to recognize if it really was the Lord or if it was just kind of like you having some thought or if it's being planted

there by our enemy, right? Because those are questions that can come into our head sometimes especially when we're first learning to recognize the voice of the Lord. But it's something we should also always be attentive to anyway.

### Does it Contradict to His Word and Teachings?

So, the first tester, if you will, is does it contradict what the Lord has spoken to us through scripture and through the tradition and teaching of the church, which was handed down by the apostles, right? And guided by the Holy Spirit. Does it contradict what He has said in scripture and in the teaching of the church? Because as we know from scripture, the Lord cannot deny Himself, He will never contradict Himself, right? So, does it contradict or not? If it contradicts, red flag. If it does not contradict, proceed to the other questions.

### Does it Bring Deep Relationship with Him?

All right, so the next question is, is this something that brings me deeper into a relationship of trust with the Lord? That is always a really key thing to be asking. So, for example, if it's something that feels uncomfortable to us, maybe it's a difficult memory or something that we really messed up on, or God is calling us out on something because He does that sometimes as we see in scripture and in our own lives.

Is He presenting something that is causing us to turn away? Is He presenting something or is this being presented in a voice of condemnation or shame or in any manner that turns us back in on ourselves, turns us away from other people, turns us away from God, gives us this desire to hide ourselves, to beat up on ourselves, to condemn ourselves. Red flag, red flag. God will never do that. Why? Because God comes to bring us closer to Himself. *"Return to me with your whole heart"* is what He says in scripture. He will never push you away. He has come to draw you closer.

So, is He bringing up something difficult or is this coming up in a way that is pushing you away? Or is this something that is bringing you closer to God, helping you step into His mercy, inviting you into His mercy, inviting you to trust, inviting you to make amends and inviting you to allow Him to work healing in this aspect of your life? That's not a red flag, that's a great sign, proceed.

### Does it Help Me Understand My Identity?

Last question. Is this something that keeps the focus of my understanding of my own identity, of my own growth centered on God and on who He is? Because if this is something that I'm hearing or thinking or experiencing, that is making me focus or hyper-focus on something else in a way that puts my identity on it, that's a problem, right? Because our identity is hidden in the Lord. We are made in His image and likeness. We are His child, His spouse. We are not anything else. I am a child of God before I am a writer. I'm a child of God before I am a carpenter. I'm a child of God before I am anything else. And all those other gifts, all those other things are rooted back in being a child of God, right?

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So, is this word, is this thought or this expression that's coming to you in prayer, is it keeping your identity rooted and centered where it is supposed to be? That doesn't mean that we're not praying about someone else or praying about a gift or an opportunity or anything like that but is this idea putting our identity in that thing or is it keeping us centered in God and in listening and being open and receptive to Him and His work in that gift, in that circumstance, in that person, in whatever.

### Take a Moment to Look Back

So, I mean, there are many other rules of discernment that are way too vast to get into, but these are three primary questions that can guide you in being confident in your conversations with the Lord. So when you are speaking to the Lord and you are learning to recognize His voice, it's also really good to be able to go back in your own life, in the history of your own life and ask yourself, is there a moment back there where you can actually recognize, oh yeah, God really did answer a prayer here, or God really did answer a question for me here, or God really did speak to me here or redefine something for me here, or heal something in me here. Whether it was a conscious like I heard His voice in my heart or not if He used something else to speak that to you.

Go back in your own life and look for a moment like that. What did He use to speak to you? Because He'll probably do it again. And He'll use other ways too. But there are ways He tends to speak to us more often, like a larger percentage of the time. And when we can identify those ways, we start to expect them, we start to look for them, and it can help us to be more open to recognizing when He is speaking in our life.

So, I would invite you just to take a moment to look back and see if you can identify one of those moments. And if you can't, ask the Holy Spirit to help you, because He will, He's a good one that way. Once you've identified a time in your life where you've heard God speak, and once you've gone back to scripture to spend some time listening to His words, maybe noticing His body language and you're on a better track to being able to recognize the voice of God in your prayer, the question then comes up, right? How do I receive it? How do I receive it? And when we hear the voice of God, especially when it's new or especially when it's unexpected, we tend to have one of two reactions, sometimes it's a blend of both.

We may be in absolute wonder and awe to the point of either laughter or tears, or we may be freaked out like absolutely panicked or both. It's really beautiful to be able to recognize how big, how other God is, because when we recognize how great He is and how small we are, we understand the absolute gift that it is that He comes to speak to us as an intimate friend, as a beloved child, as a faithful spouse. Him being the faithful spouse. And calling us to that same reciprocity of relationship. That should really just knock our socks off, it should. And it's beautiful. And it's okay for it to inspire laughter or tears or even a feeling of fear.

But just know that if you are experiencing a feeling of fear, and I can honestly say that I have been in this camp multiple times, that this ought to be a fear that does not, Not the kind of fear that like I'm afraid I'm going to run away because there's danger here. Not that kind of fear, there's no danger. But the type of fear that allows us to recognize how big God is, how small we

are, how beautiful and big and beautiful and intimate this relationship is. This fact that He's speaking to us is, and to allow that to be a spring and a well of gratitude in us. Allow that to inspire a response of overwhelming gratitude to the love we have received. That is the fruit of the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. That is the fear, "the fear" that we are called to have in response to the Lord's presence with us. It's not a fear of like, "I'm freaked out, there's danger. I must fight or flight." But it is a fear of recognizing what is going on here and how beautiful it is. Again, very normal, okay?

## Turn to The Holy Spirit and Our Blessed Mother

So, as you are praying to receive the Lord, ask the Holy Spirit to help you hold on to what He is saying. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you ponder what He says to you. So many times in the Old Testament, he repeats remember. Remember, tell your children. Remember, repeat, remember. If you are like me and you have a terrible memory, write it down. Write it down, draw it out if you are more artistically inclined, I am not. Whatever way that you can put it to memory, so that you have an opportunity to go back in times of dryness, of silence, of, you know, if the situation comes up again and He's already given you the answer, but you forget it, remember. Find a way to remember. That is a type of receptivity.

And we see that exemplified in Mary, where we see in the scriptures that Mary pondered these things in her heart. She held them, she remembered them, she reflected on them over and over, and allowed the Lord to illumine them in deeper ways for her to apply them to other situations in her life, to recognize their fulfillment when it came to live out of it, to allow it to give her life. That's a beautiful type of receptivity.

And remember that the receptivity of the Lord's Word, you know, the Word of the Lord is living and is sharper than a two-edged sword, we hear in scripture. It should shake things up in us in a good way, in a good way. It should bring us to a place of deeper love for the Lord. And deeper love for the Lord means a deeper love of those whom He loves, them, them out there. Joe next door, who drives you nuts, who mows his lawn at 5:00 AM in the morning. Whatever the problem is, the people that you are having trouble loving, receptivity to the Word of the Lord, to prayer to the Lord in prayer should reverberate not only in your relationship, your personal relationship with the Lord, but your personal relationship with the Lord should touch the people around you and your understanding of your receptivity of your love toward the other. True receptivity of the Lord, when we allow, when we're living out of that indwelling that we have in our baptism, right, of the Lord with us, the natural response of that is to give back.

## Building Our Capacity of Receptivity

So, now that we've talked about how to recognize the voice of the Lord, how we can learn to receive and how we can learn to allow the Lord to build our capacity for receptivity, because we all have our limitations, right? We all have wounds. We all have things we project onto God. And our own difficulties communicating with others or having received certain types of communication from others.

Don't project those onto the Lord. It's normal for you to do it but try to be conscious of it. And as you are speaking with Him, again, that natural reaction is to desire to give, to gift, to respond in love and gratitude. If we are having difficulty communicating to God how we are feeling, what we are longing for, what we're struggling with, what we're rejoicing in, there's not much that He can work with. If we're not giving areas of ourselves that need to be healed to Him, we're not entrusting that to Him.

He's not going to force Himself into us to mess with those things. He's waiting for us to give them to Him. He's waiting for us to come to Him with our whole heart. The nasty parts, the great parts, the in-between that spectrum parts, all of it, all of it.

## Be Honest with Him

If you were having trouble being honest with the Lord, I would invite you to go back to the Psalms because David had no trouble with that apparently. He writes very raw, he has many psalms of joy. He has many psalms of anger where he's literally cursing people in parts of them and raging even against God and saying, where are you, what are you doing? Like, be faithful to me, I'm being faithful to you. Or Psalms where he's like, "I messed up and I think you're gone. Come back. I think you left me because I messed up, come back."

The fact that he's so honest about how he feels in bitterness towards other people, in railing against God, in feeling abandoned or rejected by God, even though he hasn't been. Because he's honest with the Lord about that, the Lord works with it and He heals it. And even in the trajectory of a single Psalm like that, if you go back and find them, you'll see that David has these like up and down moments, right? This like emotional trajectory that he goes through. But by the end of those Psalms, almost every time without fail, the Lord brings him to a place of peace, of surrender, of remembrance of His faithfulness, of love, of being able to see things in perspective again.

And it's not like David had some like A, B, C, D, E, F, G formula that he follows to write these Psalms, he didn't. But because he's so raw with the Lord, because he gives him everything, he gives the Lord everything that the Lord has asked for in trust, even when he is having a hard time trusting, he gives it to him because that's an act of trust. Even when the emotional trust isn't there, we can still choose it, we can still act in it, right? We can give those things to the Lord even when we're having a hard time emotionally wanting to. Because David does that, the Lord can heal those things.

So, in the trajectory of those Psalms and in the trajectory of David's own life, right? Every time David falls, and he falls a lot. Every time David falls, the Lord heals him. The Lord brings him back. The Lord works in the circumstances. The Lord is faithful to David in the course of his own life and far beyond, right? Far beyond. And I think that's something really important for us. When we're having difficulty giving back to the Lord in prayer, ask the Holy Spirit, first of all to illumine how you're feeling if you're having a hard time identifying it. And ask Him to help you be honest, to express the things that you're having trouble expressing or to put a vocabulary on the things that you just don't have a vocabulary for. You feel it, but you can't express it. You know, the Lord understands. And when you entrust those things to Him as He's asked you to, He

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can work wonders in you. And then by consequence in your life, your interactions with others, all of those things will be changed. It's long term, takes a while, but it's possible. And He is the one who makes it possible. So, rely on His grace for that today.

So, we will close praying a prayer of great trust that Jesus himself gave to us. And in case it helps us think of these words or recognize them in a new way if we've prayed it so much that we kind of just go on autopilot and don't think about the prayer anymore, we can sing it. And if you would rather not sing, that's totally fine. You can say it along with us. If you know this particular tune, great. If you don't, that's fine.

Again, you can pray to whatever tune you know. But let us say this prayer in special trust, asking the Lord to reveal His voice to us today, to help us be attentive to recognizing and asking the Lord to help us deepen our capacity for receptivity of Him, of His love, of His healing of His will in our lives. And asking the Lord to help us give back everything with trust and love and even excitement in the way that He has asked us to.

### Our Father

So, we pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you, guys.