

Hearing God's Voice in Daily Prayer

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Hi, my name is Ryan O'Hara, a Catholic speaker from St. Paul, Minnesota. And in this "Pray More Healing Retreat" series so far, we have asked some really important questions: Where is God in the midst of our suffering? And in Isaiah, we see in Chapter 43 that He says that we belong to Him and that He is right there with us as we go through the raging waters or as the temperature or the fire raises around us, God is with us. And we see this most clearly in the Eucharist and in the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us at Pentecost. God is with us quite literally and physically in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Second, we looked at this question about the crosses that Jesus entrusts to us in our life; can they actually be something beautiful? It's easy for us to imagine that Jesus' cross was beautiful, it was where the salvation of the world was one, and it was one out of love, love for you and for me. And yet He invites us as we follow Him to take up our crosses. And even though they can be quite thorny and rough and heavy, there is a way too that our crosses can actually be beautiful, that suffering can be redemptive, can be a place of healing and hope. It's a place where we can experience love most profoundly from God. And in this third session, we're going to look at hearing the voice of God, and what do we need to do to ensure that we can pray every day? So let's begin in prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, God, we give You thanks. It is our desire to hear Your voice and to do Your will. Please teach us, Lord, how to better attune our hearts, our minds, our ears, if You will, to hear your voice. Help us to take the right approach in our prayer times to ensure that your voice is first and foremost. We pray all of this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What Does God's Voice Sound Like?

So I don't know about you, but I have AirTags for everything. Do you know what an AirTag is? I've got an example right here. This is an AirTag on my keys. And I've got an AirTag on my AirPods, they've got a special little case made just for this little AirTag; because I lose my AirPods, I'm always losing my keys. And the beautiful thing about it is that if you get close enough, you know, within 25 to 30 feet of one of these AirTags, there's an app on your phone called Find My, and you can kind of go right to the, you know, AirPods or right to the keys, and you can click a sound... Or, I'm sorry, you can click a button that says Play Sound. And it works when you're close enough, but it really only works if the room is quiet enough. And so, I've lived with teenagers for many years and if I'm trying to find, you know, something with an AirTag, everybody in the room has got to get quiet.

And I think that's the most important principle that I've learned, and the Scriptures bear this out, that in order to hear God's voice, it's possible, we can always hear God's voice, it's loud enough for us to hear, if we can get quiet enough to listen. These little AirTags sort of send

out this beep, but it doesn't override the physical distractions and noise of a room. And just like in our own lives, God's voice is loud enough to hear if we get quiet enough to listen. And so, the first question I want to address is, well, what does God's voice sound like?

A Guaranteed Encounter With God through Scripture

I think it's a good question to ask. There's a lot of different voices that we might hear when we get quiet. And so, let's look at that question first. So, first and foremost, the easiest way to think about this first, I think, is to say that God's voice first sounds like the Scriptures, that God's voice will not contradict Scripture or church teaching. And so, if you wonder, "Was that God's voice? Was it God's voice telling me to divorce my wife and to become a priest?" No, that was not God's voice, that may have been some other voice, but it wasn't God's voice because that would sort of contradict God's vision and plan for marriage as we see in the Scriptures and as we see outlined well in church teaching.

So that's just a simple example, and of course you know that. But what God's voice is going to sound like, first and foremost, is what we hear and what we see in the Scriptures; because just like every sacrament is a guaranteed encounter with Jesus, every word of the Scriptures is a guaranteed encounter with God's voice. And so, we are so privileged, we never have to wonder, first of all, "How can I hear God speak to me?" Well, the first and foremost way He's going to do it is in and through Scripture. And that's going to be a key part of helping us make prayer an everyday part of our lives. So that's the first thing.

God's voice is going to sound like and not contradict the Scriptures and church teaching. Second, God's voice is going to sound like conviction, not condemnation. I don't know if you did the Bible in a year or the catechism in a year with Father Mike Schmitz, but this was one of the key takeaways that I took from those experiences. He talked a lot about this idea that God's voice is going to sound like conviction, but not condemnation. And so, it's often the case that we are going astray. And when we turn our back on God or we just are not attentive to His presence, He has to get our attention, and He often uses what I would call, or what Father Mike called in this case, the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

A Sound of Conviction and Peace

In the Scriptures, in Hebrews, it says that there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ. And so, when it comes to God's voice and when He's inviting us to turn back to Him, or when He's inviting us to change our life in some way, if it sounds like condemnation, if it sounds like I am bad, that's shame; whereas conviction is that God is good and that God is Holy and that we are to turn our lives back towards Him. Conviction will always shine a bright light on the goodness and the holiness of God. And that because of His love for us, He's inviting us back towards Him: conviction.

And I think you could see that's what was happening with the Prodigal Son. There was a conviction in His heart, he had a change of mind and thus he could have now a change of direction to head back to the Father. And that beckoning of the Father deep in his heart was one of conviction. And he might have even thought it was condemnation, he was stirred up in conviction to return to His Father.

So that's the second thing, God's voice is going to sound like conviction, not condemnation. Third, God's voice is going to sound like peace, not anxiousness. It will bring an abiding calm and peace when you hear God's voice, it will actually lead you into more of a serene place, it will settle your heart, it will in fact calm the storms and it won't stir them up. We see this in Philippians 4, that when we make our requests known to God, He will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus in peace and not in anxiety. And it says in Philippians 4 that as we make our requests known to God, that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

A Sound of Clarity

And so, as we are in conversation with God and God is back in conversation with us, we can see that He brings peace and not anxiousness. Fourth and final, I would say that God's voice sounds like clarity, not confusion; that so often we're trying to decide what it is that we're supposed to do. It could be big things around vocation, it could be also big things around making a move or making a life change that's quite significant, or it could be a smaller thing. What am I supposed to do today on my day off? That as we sit with God, as we talk with God, again, God will always bring us to a place of clarity. And it often happens when we just get still enough, quiet enough to listen, just to open up our hearts and minds to receive something from Him. And in that, He will impress upon our hearts or show us something even in the Scriptures that gives us clarity and not confusion.

This is what I have seen over and over through the years of what God's voice sounds like. First and foremost, it always sounds like the Scriptures and church teaching. Second of all, it always sounds like conviction, not condemnation, it sounds like peace, not anxiousness, and certainly, it also sounds like clarity and not confusion. But, you know, this is a hard fought set of lessons for us to learn because, let's face it, God's voice isn't audible, it's not like if I just get quiet enough, I can actually hear this whisper, not audibly at least. And so, what our challenge is, is that in this whisper, it's a spiritual whisper, it's a whisper within our hearts. And we have to be attuned to that. And that takes time.

The Role of Prayer

When I first experienced conversion in college, I was sort of snared by bad grades, bad peer, and bad relationships. But I was invited on a retreat where the possibility that the Lord would be loved with all of my mind, heart, soul, and strength, I desired that so much. And as I went back into my daily life, the most important shift that happened was I began to pray, yes, I went back to the sacraments and I was experiencing the grace of God. I was able to go to confession and then to mass on a weekly basis. But the thing that kept me going from Sunday to Sunday was I began to pray each of those days. And at first, it was just a couple of minutes; and this is 30 years ago, so I didn't have the distraction of phones and AirPods and all those other things. But when I had a quiet moment on my own on campus or walking to and from where I lived, I opened myself to speak with God. Saint John Chrysostom says that prayer is conversation with God. And so, that habit has persisted in my life and has been a transforming habit.

Matthew Kelly says that our lives will change when our habits change. And that's certainly true when it comes to the habit of daily prayer. There's another great quote that I love from a British poet and philosopher, John Dryden. He says that we make our habits and then our habits make us. I'm sure you've had that experience. I know in my life the daily habit of exercise makes me healthy, but daily Dairy Queen does not.

So we see how we make our habits and then our habits make us for better or worse. The habit of prayer is one of the greatest gifts of grace that God wants to give each of us. And I hope and pray that during this Pray More Healing Retreat, that you can take ground in your life to make prayer habitual, that it becomes something you cannot imagine living without each and every day. And I think it's important to think, let's pray five minutes a day rather than just 30 minutes a week. Can we build something consistent each and every day, even if it's only a few minutes? But what I'd like us to consider is that there are three things that I think we can, in a sense, pre-decide. You know, if I'm going to, you know, exercise every day, it helps if I could set my running clothes out, and my AirPods ready to go, and a playlist queued up. If I can do some things the night before to give myself the best shot at praying, or rather at exercising the next day, all the better.

Setting Your Prayer Time

So, I want to think about three things that we can pre-decide when it comes to ensuring we have the best shot at praying every day. The first thing is we need a consistent time. You know, if you sort of pick and choose when you're going to pray, depending on the day, I think it could happen that a number of times that opportunity doesn't quite show up. Again, there are lots of forces, spiritual and otherwise, that are arrayed against us, that are keeping us either from praying or distracting us while we're praying. And so, one of the best things we can do is to ask ourselves, when during your day in the morning, at lunchtime, in the early or late afternoon, or perhaps after dinner or before bed, when in your day could you give God 15 minutes of your undivided attention? That's the first thing to consider.

And I think it's important that while many people can pray at a variety of times during the day, I wonder when the best time is for you, when do you have energy and attention that you can clearly give to God? When can you give God best your undivided attention? I wonder what time of day that is. And I'd encourage you if you have a notepad nearby, think about that. Write down the time of day when you could best give God 15 minutes of your undivided attention.

Second, we don't just need a consistent time, we need a quiet place. And I think quiet is a bunch of different ways we want to think about quiet. We need literal quiet, where is it that you can actually enter into silence? Where is that that you can actually enter into silence, physical silence. The second kind of silence that we need also is digital silence. As helpful as our phones are when it comes to praying, and there are so many wonderful apps to help.

I'm a huge Hallow fan, for instance, I love Hallow. But one of Hallow's stated intentions is that their goal isn't to keep you on the app, they want the app to assist you to enter into prayer. So sometimes even our phones can be quite a distraction. And so, if my phone is nearby, I turn it on Do Not Disturb, I have a setting for 25 minutes of Do Not Disturb, that's what I set every time I sit down to pray, and it has a little timer that helps me know when

that's done. And so, for me, I turn my phone essentially off, the distractions are too many for me. But the other thing to consider is emotional space. So, for instance, depending on the kind of work that you do or just the pace of your day, when are you quietest, if you will, quietest of heart? When is that time of day where emotionally you are your most calm?

For me, all of these three things work best at a certain time and in this sort of quiet place I have in my living room where my prayer books are, there's a lovely lamp right next to the chair, and I can look out the window. This is a beautiful, quiet place. I know also many people love to pray in the car. You've got a long commute, maybe you have something that can help you to pray that you listen to, or maybe you're just taking advantage of this little cell, if you will, this little hermitage, this sort of traveling hermitage that is your car, that you can get quiet to hear God's voice, or maybe it's a walk outdoors.

A good priest friend of mine suggested this way of praying. He said, "Go for a walk outdoors where you can talk out loud to God, and go in one direction saying everything it is you want to say to God. And then when you've got it all out, stop and turn around and head back in the same direction in total silence, listening for God's response. I loved this idea. And this has been a really powerful way of praying, of even being in nature, there's a quiet and stillness that takes over, and I love that, it's a great place to be attentive to God and to hear His voice. So we need a consistent time, a quiet place. But you know what? What we also need is a simple plan, or I'd even say a conversational plan. Some way in which good conversation with God can be facilitated so that it's oriented to us hearing God's voice, to being in conversation with God just as Saint John Chrysostom says that prayer is conversation with God.

Lectio Divina

And so, I'd like to propose a simple approach that includes three "Rs," and it's very similar to what we understand Lectio Divina to be: read, reflect, and respond. Read, reflect and respond. So because God's voice first and foremost sounds like the Scriptures, I take the daily readings, and I read carefully and slowly each of the readings of the day. And what I'm looking for is what jumps off the page? What gets my attention? I'm reading so as to find a direction that God wants to point me towards. And this happens sometimes in the first reading, sometimes in the Psalm, and sometimes in the Gospel, it just depends on the day. And so, I'm reading so as to pay attention to what stirs inside of me. And then when something catches my attention, I stick with it and I stop.

I'm now no longer reading, now I move to the next step: reflect. And to reflect is to mull something over in your mind, it's to consider "Why is it that God brought this to my attention? What does this Word or phrase mean? What might it mean for my life?" And I begin to talk with God about it, I begin to consider what it is that God is trying to speak to me; and it can be a whole variety of different things.

And so, that's the second step, we read carefully and slowly, paying attention to what God wants to point out to us, then we reflect on that word or phrase that He brings to our attention, and then, finally, we make a response. As we consider, "What is it that God is wanting to speak to me," then "What is it that I want to say in response, and how can I make a prayer of response back to God?" Maybe it's even in the form of a resolution. "What is it that I want to

do differently today or this week or this month because of this Word that God has spoken? There's a lot of different ways that this can play out, and I think this is really what we see in this pattern of Lectio Divina.

If you want to grab one more "R," it's a beautiful one, it's related to contemplation, it's the word rest. That after we have read and reflected and responded to God's Word, that fourth piece of Lectio Divina is rest. And I like to think of this as a certain satisfied silence. We no longer have to be productive, we no longer have to work hard to hear God's voice, we just get to enjoy His presence. And so, I hope that this can be a simple conversational plan at the right time and in the right place in your life. I wonder which time of day is best for you, I wonder which space in your life, maybe it's even your adoration chapel nearby, and I wonder what best conversational plan you could take on. Maybe something as simple as reading, reflecting, and responding, and then at the end of that prayer to rest in God's presence; He loves you so much.

Looking forward to our last session next, a beautiful reflection on Matthew 11:28-30.