

# SPEAK LORD, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING

The Church forcefully and specially exhorts all the Christian faithful to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures..... Let them remember however that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and Man. For we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.

The spiritual writers, paraphrasing Matthew 7:7 summarize in this way, the dispositions of the heart nourished by the word of God in prayer: “Seek in reading and you will find in meditating; knock in mental prayer and it will be opened to you by contemplation.”

(The Catechism of the Church #2653 & 2654)

Dear Friend in Christ,

I'm very glad that you have decided to commit yourself to a daily program of reading and meditating on the holy Scriptures. Very often people come to me lamenting that their prayer life is dry and fruitless. The first question I usually ask them is "do you listen to God when you pray?" We believe that to pray is to come into the presence of God and we very rightly believe that God is the most fascinating, exciting and interesting of all beings, so why is it that our prayer life is dull unless it be that we do not listen to Him when we pray. We're so busy telling God how to run our lives and our world that we don't hear what he might have to say in turn. The entire purpose of these notes you are reading is to suggest ways by which we may dispose ourselves for listening to God, hearing his words, thinking his thoughts.

In reading the Scripture daily we learn to put on the mind of Christ. If wrong thinking has brought about problems in our lives, then it is reasonable to expect resolution of those problems through exposing our minds to the light of God's thinking. As the prophet Isaiah says "my ways are not your ways, my thoughts your thoughts says the Lord, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts". And the Psalmist says "in your light we see light"

I would like to propose to you a way of approaching the Scriptures in prayer that has brought great consolation and strength to me over the years. I would like to present a way of reading the Scriptures first, and then a way of listening for God to speak at the end of our reading

To read the Scripture well, we can do no better, in my estimation, than to follow the way outlined by Father Armand Nigro, which he calls "The 5 'p's' of prayer. The five steps are these:

- 1) posture (relaxed and free)
- 2) presence (awareness of God's presence)
- 3) pray (to the Holy Spirit, to help me)
- 4) passage (whispered aloud to myself)
- 5) pause (to let God speak)

Let's look at these five steps in detail:

First; a proper prayer posture. It is helpful to have my familiar prayer space, to which I may go everyday. A space where I may relax, and a comfortable chair to sit in. My time should free; my family and friends should know that this is my time with God. As if I were keeping an appointment with any other very important person, so I do not respond to the phone, the doorbell or other intrusions on my privacy during my time of reading the Scriptures.

Secondly; I become aware of God's presence. God has been waiting for me all day, to come and join him in my prayer space. He wants to converse with me far more than I want to converse with Him. I spend some time becoming aware of this truth.. God is closer to me than the sounds and the things around me, closer than my breathing, closer than the beatings of my heart. I become aware of all these things and relax in the knowledge that God is at the very centre of my being.

Thirdly; I pray to the Holy Spirit to help me understand the passage I am about to read. I don't need a long prayer or a formal prayer at this point; simply saying "Come Holy Spirit" or something else to that effect could suffice. I, personally, like to repeat the words "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love", until I sense the light of the Holy Spirit upon me. The Bible cannot be approached like a magazine or newspaper article or any other human writing, since it is God's writing. To read the Bible without the light of God's help is like reading some writings in a foreign language, one in which I am unfamiliar. It's only reasonable to ask the Holy Spirit for help in understanding the Holy Scriptures, since He is their author. Imagine trying to understand a passage in a favourite novel, and then hearing that the author of that novel is in town autographing copies of his/her novel. We would gladly rush over to that place and ask the author what he or she meant by such and such a passage. No one can better explain the meaning of a written work than the author of the work, no one can guide us to a true understanding of the Scriptures if not the Holy Spirit.

And so we are led to the fourth step, which is to read the passage. It's good to have the passage already marked and ready to read, saving time flipping about in the Bible. I like to read about 15 verses at a time as I go through the Gospels in order. Each person will learn for him/herself how much they like to read at any one time. Certainly we can do no better than to dwell on the Gospels over and over again, but we may feel drawn to other parts of the Bible as well on occasion. In the Psalms, the New Testament Epistles, the Prophets and the Books of Moses, God has wonderful things to tell us as well. But we should always be glad to return to the Gospels after any "side-trips". I like to whisper the passage out loud when reading. In this way I slow myself down, giving the words a chance to sink in and I become involved in the passage, since I am reading it not just with my eyes, but with my eyes, my mouth and my ears.

If I follow these four steps faithfully, (steps which become like second nature over a short time) I should find that certain phrases or sentences of the passage I am reading get my attention. This is not the time to go on to other verses of the passage. Rather, this is the time to move on to the fifth step, which is to pause to give God a chance to speak.

At this point it is good to consider how, exactly, God does speak to us. It is not often that we hear God audibly. Rather, He chooses to communicate with us through five mental faculties that he created within us. These are like five antennae we have within us, for receiving God's messages, but I prefer to call them the "five fingers of God", since they are five ways He has for "touching" us. They are, our intellect, our will, our emotions, our imagination and our memory. The intellect is the faculty that most of us are most familiar and comfortable with. When I gain a new insight from reading the Scriptures, a sense of "Aha! I never thought of that before", then I can be sure that God has touched my intellect.

On some occasions I may enter my scripture feeling very weak and battered by life, a feeling of "I can't go on." By the end of prayer I feel stronger, I feel that I can go on. I may not be able to explain precisely how the change was worked in me, but I can be sure that God has touched my will. God gave us our imaginations as the way to appreciate his beauty. It is his way of drawing our hearts to him. There may be times when I am pausing to hear God and he gives me a vision of something - it could be of the Bible scene I have been reading; or it could be a vision of Jesus or Mary or the angels and saints in heaven. Whatever it may be, the vision has a beauty that touches me. I can be sure that God has touched my imagination.

There may be times when I am pausing in prayer and it is not quite clear to me how God is touching me. However, at the end of prayer time I find myself humming a tune, or I feel very peaceful, or I feel upset about something that needs to be confronted in my life. I know that God has touched me in my emotions.

Lastly, some memory may come into my prayer time. At first I might want to treat it as a distraction. I gently offer it to God that he gently take it from me, since I want to be totally open to Him alone during my prayer. However, if the memory returns and particularly if it returns during this "pause" time in my prayer then instead of resisting the memory I should actually go with it. I try to place myself in the memory, imagining the surrounding, the time of day, how I felt etc. When I'm in the midst of the memory I imagine Jesus and perhaps, Mary coming into the scene. I try to imagine what they say and do. It's amazing how effectively Jesus can work during these grace-filled moments to free me from burdens of the past. That's because he has touched my memory.

These are the five ways that God ordinarily uses to speak to us, "The five fingers of God", and he normally touches us in one or more of these ways during the "pause" time of prayer. As you can see, a lot can go on during this time of waiting on the Lord, this pause time, so I'd like to approach it from another direction, in order to help you appreciate how rich and fulfilling it can be.

To guide us I would like to look at the way the monks used to pray with Scripture. They discerned that there were four movements that the person ordinarily experienced when praying the Scriptures. They called these four movements

- 1) the lectio (scripture reading)
- 2) the meditatio (meditating on what was read)
- 3) the oratio (a prayer-dialogue with God)
- 4) the comtemplatio (basking in the light of God's presence)

If you have been following me so far as I have been outlining the 5 "p's" approach to Scripture reading then you can readily see that this approach is showing the proper way to do the first movement, or "lectio" of the monks. The final three movements, meditation, prayer-dialogue and basking in the light of God's presence properly fit into the "pause" time of prayer (the fifth "p" of the "p's" of prayer)

You might recall that I said some phrase or sentence from the passage I'm reading arrests my attention, causing me to pause. What I should do at this point is simply repeat that key phrase again and again gently and slowly to myself savoring it, loving it. If I do so, then I am meditating. That is all that the word "meditation" means, a simple repetition over and over of a delightful thought from the Bible. We have been fooled into thinking that meditation is something different, something very difficult that only holy people can do. But the latin word "meditatio" means, quite simply, "the action of a cow chewing her cud", that is bringing the food back up to chew on again, savoring it and digesting it again. So when we meditate we bring the sacred word back to mind again and again and, in doing so it gradually penetrates us, moving from our minds to our hearts.

Quite normally, at this point in my prayer the phrase I'm meditating on begins to shed light on some incident, some relationship or some problem that I'm wrestling with in my own life. In other words, I start to see why that particular phrase caught my attention when I was reading the Scriptures. It did so because it addressed something in my sub-conscious that God wishes to bring to my conscious attention. This, too, is meditation, meditation in it's fullest sense, a kind of "second step" in meditation following upon my repetition of the Scriptural phrase. As the Catechism of the Church says:

"Mediation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking....To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: The book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them. It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light. "Lord what do you want me to do?.....Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly" (Catechism #2705,2706, 2707)

What can naturally happen at this point, when God's word is acting in our hearts, is that we are put in touch with our deep need for God. We can enter very freely into dialogue with Him because he gives us a poverty of Spirit which moves us to speak to Him very sincerely, very directly. The Catechism of the Church (#2711) says it in this way:

We let our masks fall and turn our heart back to the Lord who loves us so to hand ourselves over to him as an offering to be purified and transformed.

From this dialogue with God a prayer can and does rise from our heart like a cry for help to God. All this is what the monks meant when they said that the second step of Scripture prayer (*meditatio*) was followed by the third step, the "*oratio*" of monastic prayer. St Augustine said that the monks of the desert used to pray in very short and sharp cries "like javelins hurled at the heart of God." This, too, I take to be the "*oratio*" of monastic prayer. What I do know is that this dialogue prayer from my heart is usually followed by a sense of entering into the radiance of God's presence. This is a time of pure gift, pure grace from God, silent love. If I arrive at this point in my prayer time then I do nothing but sit back and enjoy as long as time permits. This is the fourth step, the "*contemplatio*" that the monks spoke about, I assume.

The amazing thing is that all of this can, and does, take place during the time I give to God in pausing during my Scripture prayer. It might seem that you need hours to do all of the things I have outlined. Again, it might seem hopelessly complicated, like operating some delicate piece of machinery. Yet I can testify that in one half hour or one full hour given to God in this way any and all of the blessings and benefits I have outlined above can be regularly experienced. And far from being a complicated "technique" to prayer, what I have outlined is only the most natural way of gaining the simplicity needed to hear God speak. I hope that this article will bear reading and re-reading, and that it become clearer and more understandable with each reading. I hope even more so that you will find ways of incorporating all or some of it's teaching into your prayer time. I hope most of all that you be richly blessed by hearing God speak to your heart. As Bishop Fred Henry says "as I go to Bible reading each day I get excited. I ask myself what is God going to tell me today?"

#### P.S. On Keeping a Prayer Journal

Keeping a diary of the impressions I have received during my Scripture time can be very simple. All I need do is to write down 1) The key phrase that spoke to me, the phrase I meditated on. 2) The way that God touched me during my prayer (my will, intellect, emotion, memory or imagination) and 3) any other matters that I think relevant. If I go over this journal after a month or two, I should notice a pattern in the way I'm hearing God. This in turn give me a sense that he is guiding me in a certain direction. These prayer times are not just isolated moments, and random experiences; rather, they show God's loving plan for my life. Keeping a prayer journal can reveal this to me.



# THE "FIVE FINGERS OF GOD"

WILL

INTELLECT

IMAGINATION

MEMORY

EMOTION

