

Recall that one way to define prayer is: conversation with God. Conversation is a two-way street, which means that prayer is not just us speaking to God but also God speaking to us. Do you realize that the infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing God, who *does* know what's around every corner, who does know what the best thing for you and how to bring it about *wants* to speak to you personally, individually? There is no question about that, the question is: do we hear? The more we dispose ourselves to Him, in prayer, the better we will hear. Now we have to be careful here. Sometimes people start to enter a little bit into conversion and they think that every thought that comes into their mind is from God. This is not an unusual trap. In fact, it's common enough that St John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church and the great Doctor of spiritual theology, warned against this. If you hear someone constantly saying: the Holy Spirit told me this, that, and the other – a good degree of caution is warranted. It's not unusual for this to be a sign of spiritual pride and perhaps sloth and arrested development as well. The person who has matured in their relation with God has no need to advertise it to others, no more so than a husband and wife who have reached a deep communion in their marriage. We spent a good deal of time on the necessary mindset for prayer, humility is the cornerstone.

This begs the question of: how do I know if it's *God* speaking to me or if it's just my own desires (called the flesh), or "the world," or even the tempter himself? That's a good question. To start to answer it, we have to ask: *how* does God speak to people? A person might say: I've never heard an actual voice or had our Lord or anyone appear to me; does that mean God has never spoken to me? Our Lord rarely speaks to people in the direct way that we speak to one another with verbal, audible words. Most people, most saints, go through their whole lives without hearing an audible voice or seeing an apparition. Our Lord speaks to us in our thoughts, and it can be in various times or circumstances. Probably most often – not always, but often – it will be when we've really silenced ourselves and have raised our minds to God – i.e., when we've really entered into prayer. Take an example of meditation used in an earlier article. Maybe a person is sitting there looking at a Nativity set and really thinking deeply on the birth of our Lord, picturing it in their mind and so on. Let's say it's a wife and mother and she begins to think about what it would be like if she was in Mary's place: the husband seems to have not provided much, not many comforts, and so on, and she thinks: what would my reaction be? And she realizes that she would have probably scorned her husband and then she realizes she has put some distance between her and our Lord by giving too much importance to status and material well-being. This is our Lord entering into the thoughts of that person. That lady could not realize that on her own. The same example could be used for the husband. As he contemplates the Nativity he might realize he's looking down his nose at St Joseph – good for him but not for me is maybe his interior reaction – but when he really realizes what he's doing, he becomes deeply sorry for it. The same is true there – that is the Lord entering into his thoughts.

My own experience has been that this most often occurs – or at least His voice comes through most clearly – when sitting in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, i.e., during Eucharistic Adoration, when we are in His actual physical presence. Remember: silence is not just the absence of exterior noise but also freedom from interior noise; I clear my mind of everything else and really raise my mind to God. Without creating our own inner room, a place of silence where it's me and the Lord, I won't hear His voice.

While silence in Eucharistic Adoration is a prime place where our Lord, or our Holy Mother or other messengers of God, enter our thoughts it's not by any means the only place. A husband or wife might be driving down the road and think: I shouldn't have spoken harshly like that to my spouse, or it could be any of a variety of similar things. Remember that we cannot do any good without the grace of God. So something like this – say reconciling with a spouse – is God speaking to us.

Why is it important to be aware of these various circumstances in which our Lord is trying to speak to us? It's because if we aren't, we will easily pass them by, we will easily dismiss them as just passing thoughts.

Continuing, then, with various ways and circumstances, in which our Lord tries to speak, or various means through which He speaks, another is through reading good Catholic materials. The lives of the saints illustrate this as well – St Francis, for example, established a whole religious order based on a reading from Scripture,

and Francis is just one example. Augustine's conversion began with hearing: take and read, take and read and he turned to Scripture and immediately entered into conversion. St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was completely converted to Catholicism after reading the Autobiography of St Teresa of Avila in one night. St Ignatius of Loyola also came to real conversion through such reading, during a time of convalescence. Incidentally, the difficult times of life are almost always God knocking on our door to speak to us.

We do have to be careful here. We're not talking about reading something like "Chicken Soup for the Soul." Remember to let *God* speak to us – not just our own desires and especially not just a desire for some particular feeling or comfort – seek God, not self-satisfaction. God will speak to us in sacred sources – Sacred Scripture and the living Tradition. Some people find it hard to read Scripture. Well, I'd suggest trying it a little bit at a time. However, the lives and writings of the saints, which constitute in part the living Tradition, are also great sources. I have a great fondness for the mystics of the Church myself. Of course, God can speak through anything, not just sacred sources – even things like videos or movies, provided it's not something immoral. Maybe I see some great example of virtue in a movie and I start to think about it and then choose to really begin to practice it. That was God speaking to you, using whatever source He can.

Getting to know the saints also helps us realize and understand the many ways in which our Lord tries to speak to us. The saints have often been deeply moved when hearing some preaching or teaching of the faith. I have experienced this myself as well – experience, verified by the lives of the saints, is a good teacher. A priest, faithful to the teachings of Christ, at the last parish I was at before entering seminary, was giving a little class using some book by an Opus Dei author. The thing I remember most is being interiorly moved while attending that class. I experienced the same thing in seminary. I remember especially, one time, when one of our philosophy teachers was talking about materialism, realizing that some of these things had crept into my own mind as well. It didn't feel good, but I was glad the old sore was brought to light so I could clear my mind of falsehood and change direction. Here again we see the example of the saints. I believe it was St Benedict, as just one example, who, after hearing one homily on poverty, sold all he had to live a life of dedicated to God.

To summarize:

- Our good God and Father wants to, and will, speak to you, most often in your thoughts
- We have to dispose ourselves to listening
- This means being aware of the fact that He does speak to us, and in various times, places, and circumstances
- We will not hear Him, we will not receive His guidance and friendship, if we don't practice prayer.

This still leaves the question of: how do I know if it's a "thought" from God or from myself or from the world or from the tempter? To even ask this question is a good start – it is a reflection of the humility needed to have "conversation with God." Not every thought that comes into a person's mind is from God. So how do you tell? Most of the time a person cannot be *absolutely* certain but there are guidelines that can help. First of all, whatever it is that has come to our mind has to be consistent with what God has revealed and what He teaches definitively in and through His Church. It is not by any means uncommon for people to say something like: oh well this came to me "in prayer" and so it's from God – and it's something that is clearly contrary to the will of God. For example, maybe somebody gets honked off at somebody else for something and they start thinking up ways to put that person in their place (i.e., vengeance) and they go into the church for awhile and they come out convinced that this is the right thing to do, claiming prayer confirmed it. No it didn't! Our Lord clearly commands against what they have planned. Knowing the faith – the dogmatic, moral, and spiritual teachings of the Church – serves as a great and necessary guardrail against fooling ourselves. Here again the lives of the saints illustrate. Numerous saints, St Antony of the Desert for example, have experienced intense temptations – even to lust – during prayer. Prayer is something good, something that leads man to genuine happiness, which means it will be attacked by hell and its demons. Perhaps next week's article will say a few more words about discernment but for now, remember that whatever the thought is, it has to be consistent with what God has revealed. He does not contradict Himself, He does not make exceptions to His rule.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.