

# How Does God Speak to Us in Prayer?



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Prayer is often called a "dialogue" between God and us.

But, in prayer,

while we usually speak words toward God,  
whether oral or silent,

God does not ordinarily speak words back to us.

We don't normally hear voices in the tabernacle,

visions in the night,

or the skies opening and God speaking.

We often pray for things:

a personal favor,

a spiritual gift

a direction in life,

forgiveness and reconciliation,

praise and honor of God,

vocational clarity,

moral direction...

But do we simply end our prayer with our words,

or does God respond to us somehow?

*In what way does God ordinarily speak to a person in prayer?*

Karl Rahner SJ wrote of this in his classic, *Christian at the Crossroads*,

and the Second Vatican Council picked up his insights

in its work on prayer and liturgy.

Brian McDermott SJ has also written about this

in his excellent *What Are They Saying about the Grace of Christ?*

God, we would say, "speaks" not many words to us,

but rather *a single word*.

The word divinely spoken is nothing less

than the life of the one who prays.

For we are aware that God is with us, continually creating us,

constantly loving us and revealing us to ourselves at all times.

## **We Are Spoken**

We are the ones who are spoken in prayer,

and to enter into our lives as divine in their source

and divine in their destiny, is to enter into prayer.

We are bound up with God



in such a dramatic way  
that the intricacies of our lives are filled with divine energy.  
So hearing God is hearing our lives as they are drawn into God  
in the everydayness where we live.  
We aren't waiting for voices from heaven, or signs in the night.  
No, the voice of God is speaking right now in our lives  
when we listen with our inner ear  
to the One who is the Light of the World.

We hear God speaking as we pay attention to those around us,  
in our homes and in the wider society.  
We hear God in our intuition, imagination, and thoughts  
when they are urging us to love.  
We find the word of God present and spoken,  
in the inner voice of our conscience,  
in our inner sense of right and wrong.  
Likewise, we hear God's voice in the actions and words of liturgy.

### **We Don't Always Hear Well**

But we aren't accustomed to listening, so we often don't hear  
when God speaks like this.

Sometimes we are blocked in our hearing  
by psychological, ideological, sociological,  
or other factors of life.

Sometimes we try to see ourselves  
apart from God's revelation,  
inspiration, or instigation,  
but when we do that,  
we are mired in a narrow sense of self  
and we are not listening in prayer.

And sometimes we fail to speak our truths, whatever they might be,  
and we are blocked in our ability to be in touch with the Sacred Energy.  
If we withhold or suppress areas of darkness,  
memories or dreams, hurts, sins, or failures,  
desires, urges, or feelings, we stop short of full Divine Life.

### **One Good Way to Pray**

How can we learn to offer our full selves in prayer?

For most of us, a simple pattern of quiet listening can help us pray.

Everyone who prays has his or her own method,  
but these steps seem important to most people:



### **The First Step**

First, become comfortable and quiet:

whether sitting, walking, driving, folding laundry, or whatever...

This sort of prayer isn't something that will necessarily occur in a chapel or at formal prayer times.

The sense of the Spirit with which we are blessed isn't very easily scheduled although it often occurs in the midst of liturgical celebrations when we allow our hearts to swell as we participate there.

### **The Second Step**

Second, pause deeply and allow yourself to relax and rest:

drop the shoulders and jaw, settle your mind,  
and breathe deeply.

The idea isn't that we must learn some complex system of exercises that will guarantee success here.

It's rather that we learn to slow down our busy lives.

This relaxing is more like putting a car on "idle" than like shifting gears to "park."



### **The Third Step**

Third, bring to mind that for which you wish to pray:

a friend soon to visit,  
someone you have wronged,  
a challenging moment,  
a want or need,  
a night dream or a daydream,  
your own sense of well-being,  
a problem to solve,  
a new insight...

You won't have to work very hard at this because what we have to pray for is already there, waiting in our deep minds to be awakened by this simple way of paying attention to it.

Bring to mind gently whatever is there, let it come slowly & willingly, and let it linger in the shadows of your consciousness, almost at the back of your mind.

If someone were to ask you, "What's on your mind these days?" that would be your "agenda" for prayer.

You may wish to mix this "agenda" with Scripture, spiritual reading or a reflection on the mysteries of our faith.

### **The Fourth Step**

Fourth, watch and listen to the scene you see and hear.

Pay attention to your own feelings, ideas, and imagination.

Be present to the Source of Divine Love, the Sacred One.

If you sense resistance, check that; in it you will find what blocks you.

If you sense light, follow it gladly.

If you sense consolation, that deep sense of rightness and well-being,  
you are very close to the heart of the Lord.

### **The Fifth Step**

Fifth, after a while begin to take in what you hear and see:

begin to consolidate your thinking;

begin to mentally record your experience.

Try putting words on it, letting it gel, and even writing it down a little,  
at least some notes about it.

At this point, you may find yourself in dialogue with God,

speaking your own mind freely and “hearing” God respond:

God may thank you or strengthen you;

open your heart to a new insight;

laugh with you or suffer with you.

### **The Sixth Step**

Sixth, become grateful for the gifts you have received  
and know them to have God as their source.

Bask in gratitude for a moment, not coming away from your prayer  
until you are ready.

Let your heart swell with praise, the kind of wordless, speechless awe  
you feel in the face of beauty, love, and generosity;

for you have just seen beauty, love, and endless divine generosity.

### **The Outcomes**

By this method of letting the Divine One  
enter into the "stuff" of our ordinary lives,  
we are drawn into God more and more.

We feel God's acceptance, God's unconditional forgiveness,  
God's urgent call to us to live as we are created to.

And in this, we are converted into ever-deeper relationship with God,  
and this leads us to lives of service, honesty, love, & witness.

The everyday details of our lives are touched by Divine presence  
and we come to know deeply how to live and what choices to make.



## This is Contemplation

Contemplation is also called "mental prayer"  
by the great mystics of the Catholic Church.

It is a loving gaze through the eyes of faith  
at the mystery of God revealed in Christ Jesus.

Contemplation is being captivated by the loving gaze of God,  
who is captivated by humanity.

God, in other words gazes on us, and we gaze back on God,  
as the Curé of Ars put it.

This holy exchange of glances  
between the eyes of the heart and the eyes of God,  
is at once the most human, tender, intimate, reciprocal, vulnerable  
and divine of self-disclosures.

Contemplative prayer yields a kind of knowing  
which changes the whole of one's life,  
igniting the heart with love stronger than death,  
and illuminating the mind with the very splendors of God.

We center this prayer on the Cross and, in fact,  
it transforms the inner person because it opens up  
the deepest recesses of the heart,  
the suffering of human misery or the heights of joy,  
to the loving goodness of God.

It is an unfolding conversation with the Risen Lord  
which constantly gives us confidence to persevere in faithfulness.

