

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

The Gift of Listening — A Rare Treasure

PART I
TO PRAY IS TO LISTEN

In a world filled with noise pollution and endless chatter, it is good to come upon literature written in praise of silence and the seemingly lost art of listening. We have many more mouths opened today in utterance than audiences ready to receive the message. Someone said it well recently when he remarked that the Lord gave us two ears and only one mouth, but we have failed to take the hint.



Dialogue is a common word in our modern vocabulary. But its meaning seems to have escaped us. It takes at least two to begin a dialogue — a speaker and a listener, and the roles have to be interchanged during the process. Otherwise, we have a monologue with one who becomes the victim of the other's verbiage. And if there is to be any utterance worthy of an audience, some vertical thinking (reflection) has to precede it. Else, words add up to sound and fury signifying nothing. St. Paul used the term 'clanging cymbals' to describe the scene.

Our friends are indeed blessed if we are good listeners. In listening to more than the words they utter, we are attentive to the depths of who they are. A good listener is really saying to a friend: "You are worth listening to; you are valuable." Have you ever noticed how often in conversations we drift off into our own dreams? We start thinking about what we will say next or we begin wondering about the impression we are making. If we truly listen, we are really present to each other and we are gifting each other with our selves, our interests and the

values that we share.

Our whole prayer life depends on our ability to listen. Prayer is working through our relationship with God. It involves much more than saying words. Our Lord has warned us: "In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard." (Matthew 6:7) To be present before God, as in all relationships, one has to listen. And we prepare ourselves to listen to God by learning to listen to ourselves and to others.

In listening to myself I can find that great truth that God has so loved me that He has given me life — a gift to be shared. I begin to learn in the silence of my own life that God's love for me calls for a response. Coming to know God has always required this knowledge of self. At times I shall find inside of me feelings that are hard to accept. But it is through the acceptance of our failures and inner conflicts and the recognition of the gifts and goodness within us that we meet the real self.

Prayer involves listening to others — making contact with their goodness and values which can help our own growth. Such listening gives us, too, a better chance of loving others as our understanding of them deepens.

Prayer culminates in our listening to God. To have a true image of who God is, we have to listen carefully. We listen and we reflect on His Word in the Scriptures. We also listen when we reflect on the marvel and beauty of the universe. When we find the traits of His goodness in ourselves and in others, when we listen to the preachers of His Word as though the message were intended solely for us.

Listening in prayer is an attitude of openness to the ultimate challenges of God's Word. We are urged to be like young Samuel

who dared to say, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:9) Prayer is a process that liberates us from trying to be someone else, frees us from false images of God and frees us to love ourselves, others and God.

In our times, as in the time of Christ, we have a call to be quiet, to be still, to live with silence as we pray: "And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at street corners for people to see them. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father Who is in that secret place, and your Father Who sees all that is done in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:5-6)

It is in the stillness of prayer that we make the discovery that transforms our whole life: "God has loved us first." (1 John 4:19) When we learn this truth, life has meaning and surprises, for our God is a God of surprises whose love for us forms us into a people of hope.

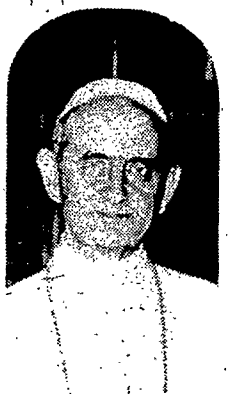
May I assure my readers that my observations that prayer — meeting the Word of God — depends on a cultivated silence and listening are more than the product of personal experience. Scripture assures us that it was out of the silence of wordlessness that the Word of God entered our history. The Christmas liturgy recalls this truth using a passage from the Book of Wisdom: "When a profound stillness compassed everything, your all-powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne." St. Augustine, grappling with this same truth, wrote:

"In the beginning was the Word. Only wordlessly can we come to a perception of this."

The Christian in Today's World

The Holy Father delivered the following address at the general audience of Oct. 15.

The moment and the place in which we find ourselves, the Holy Year and these apostolic tombs, offer us in its clearest and most dramatic perspective the practical and principal question of our Christian life, the comparison, the relationship, between the profession of our faith and the world in which we live. It is a vital question: can a Christian, who wishes to be consistent and faithful to his adherence to the Catholic religion, plunge into the



powerful, stormy sea of modern life. Is there a contrast, a conflict, a clash between the outlook on life of a baptized person, an authentic son of the Church, and the ideas, the morals of a no less authentic son of our century?

It is an ancient question. It goes back to the Gospel, which, on the one hand, professes an adaptability open to all nations, to all civilizations: "Go," Christ said to his disciples and his apostles, "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28, 19); and, on the other hand, it does not conceal an irreducible difference, an antagonism between those who wish to be followers of Christ and those who are not and oppose these followers. For Jesus said: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves;" (Mt 10, 16): you will be persecuted; your life will be made hard and difficult; division may arise

even within the same family. "You will be hated by all for my name's sake"; "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword . . ." (Mt 10, 34); "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (Jn 16, 2).

The tragic story of the Saint we canonized last Sunday, Oliver Plunkett, is one of the many dramatic testimonies to this, and how many Christians, even today, are being suffocated by systematic oppression because they are Christians, because they are Catholics! The drama of faithfulness to Christ, and of freedom of religion, continues, even though masked by categorical declarations in favor of the rights of the person and of the brotherhood of man!

Why are we recalling this sad fate meted out to so many brothers in the faith, even today? We are recalling it, first, because we must remember these brothers in our prayers, we must keep them in our heart, and make an honest attempt to obtain for them, too, justice, peace and freedom in the civil profession of their religious sentiments. Second: because all of us must reflect realistically on this aspect of our faith: it always involves fortitude, consistency of life, the capacity for patience and witness. Third: because we can read and reread that great page of the Council, which is entitled *Gaudium et Spes*, where this immense problem of the confrontation of the Christian life with secular and modern life is analyzed wisely and in a practical way, with such optimism, such broadmindedness, such a sense of historical reality.

We will just mention here the three attitudes which seem to us recommendable in such a situation. First, the attitude of faithfulness to Christ, to the Church, to our inalienable relationship with religious truth, with our vital and supernatural destiny. We will repeat once more St. Peter's words of exhortation: be "firm in your faith" (1 Pet 5, 9); and do not give in to the lure of fashionable opportunism, or the biased sociological or political priority sometimes given to questions of religion and conscience. Second, a critical, moral attitude to ideological and moral expressions, which often become conventional in public opinion, and find easy support in the collective acquiescence of decadent morals; particularly when superior values are at stake, both in connection with thought and with practical conduct, values which the magisterium of the Church has defended authoritatively. St. Paul said: "Test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5, 21-22). And third, an apostolic attitude, full of esteem, sympathy and trust, also towards the men of our time: that is, let us try not only to defend ourselves from the contagion of evil, which we can recognize, unfortunately, as being present nearly everywhere (cf. 1 Jn 5, 19), but also to promote good, support it, bear witness to it, defend it and increase it. Christianity possesses so many resources of good, that we must sometimes blame ourselves if the world is going badly, because of our ignorance, our sloth, our cowardice. Let us be exhorted by the Apostle: "You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep!" (Rom 13, 11). Courage, therefore! With our Apostolic Blessing.