

## Discerning God's Still Small Voice



Christopher News Notes

*“Listen with the ear of your heart.”  
—St. Benedict of Nursia*

**WOULDN'T IT BE NICE IF GOD COULD SEND US HOW-TO INSTRUCTIONS on this project called life, or at least some obvious clues that might lead us in the right direction? We pray and reflect, looking for signs that we're on the right path, but we often spend a lot of our time "recalculating," like a GPS trying to guide us toward our intended destination after several wrong turns.**

Life isn't easy, and discerning God's still small voice amid the noise and chaos seems downright impossible. But, if we carve out time for those necessary one-on-one conversations with the Lord, we'll start to recognize the Spirit moving in our life. Regular doses of silence and solitude, in which we put ourselves fully in the presence of God, rank among the top must-haves for both spiritual seekers and those yearning to grow in their faith.

## Seek Out Sacred Silence

*"Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation."*

—Father Thomas Keating, Trappist monk and priest

When Becky Eldredge was a junior at Louisiana State University 20-something years ago, she took part in a Busy Person's Retreat, where she learned how to pause in her daily life to make time for stillness and prayer. She devised a term for the sacred space within us where God resides: "the inner chapel." She has used that term many times in her work as a spiritual director and has now authored a book with that title.

Making time for stillness, Becky learned, is key. During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, she explained, "What [being still] does to our body...is take all those heightened emotions and...adrenaline, and it starts calming it. So it does something to us physically. Then, it's the gift of...coming into this silence and knowing it's not an empty silence—knowing that in our Christian tradition...it's making daily time to be with the one who completely loves us unconditionally, who offers us mercy like we can't even fathom. It's the Christ, the one we belong to."

Author and filmmaker Cassidy Hall was moved to quit her job and visit all of the Trappist monasteries in the United States (17 at that time) after reading monk and author Thomas Merton's book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. And Hall is well aware of the "tension" that we confront when trying to discern God's still small voice amid the constant chatter and busyness of our day-to-day world. She notes that in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,

## Making Space for God

Discerning God's still small voice means making space for God in your life—both physically and spiritually. Here are some tips for clearing out the clutter of your mind so God can fill the void:

- Create a sacred space at home, even if it's only a single bookshelf or end table in your living room or bedroom. Make a place where you go to pray each day. Put a few sacred or special items there—an icon, a cross, a candle.
- Look at your daily routine and see where you can carve out some time for God. Maybe you can set your alarm 15 minutes earlier and pray in silence each morning. Maybe you can turn off the TV or put away social media 30 minutes before bed and spend that time with God and Scripture. If all else fails, can you use your commute time to pray, or maybe your daily dog walks?
- Try a new practice that sparks renewed interest in prayer. If you've never tried silent meditation, set a timer for 10 minutes and see how it goes. Or settle down with the Gospel of Matthew and read it straight through for a week. Or try your hand at using a prayer journal or even a collage journal to document your spiritual journey.
- Go on a retreat to give yourself time apart to build a good foundation, and/or find some like-minded friends to support you and become a prayer community.

Merton states that it can be damaging for us "to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything."

Sometimes, it isn't just the world outside keeping us from silence, but our own seemingly-endless anxious thoughts. Hall recalled a nun at Santa Rita Abbey in Arizona saying to her, "Sooner or later, you have to get to the point where you take on your own inner noise and let God take you by the hand and lead you along."

Hall has a full schedule herself, co-hosting the *Encountering Silence* podcast, producing a film by the same name, and working on a documentary about Merton. She therefore recommends counting the silences "within our loudest days." It could be as simple as a glance out a window while our children clamor behind us or the wind on our face as we take out the trash. She adds, "Silence is already here; it is already yours. Silence is the space between each word you're reading, the pause between your daily tasks, the emptiness that connects us together, the knowing glance

you give your partner...It's so important to nurture daily silence, sacred pauses amid the mundane moments of our lives where God speaks to us."

## An Honest Look at Life

In her book *Present Over Perfect: Leaving Behind Frantic for a Simpler, More Soulful Way of Living*, Shauna Niequest talks about how her successful life as a writer, wife, and mother began to take its toll as she tried to keep up with the obligations others told her she should take on. As a result of being overcommitted, she became physically, mentally, and spiritually drained—and forgot how to live with joy. She eventually chose to change the priorities in her life, which led to her world being transformed.

Niequest says, "One of the greatest delights in life is walking away from what someone told you that you *should* be in favor of—and walking toward what you truly love in your own heart, in your own secret soul. You were made by hand with great love by the God of the universe and He planted deep inside you a set of loves and dreams and idiosyncrasies, and you can ignore them as

long as you want, but they will at some point start yelling. Worse than that, if you ignore them long enough, they will go silent—and that's the real tragedy."

## Listening as prayer

When it comes to discerning God's still small voice, there's simply no getting around the tough interior work of prayer and meditation—and the countercultural work of building silence and sacred space into our busy days. The world says, "Do, do, do! Go, go, go!" If we could hear God, He would probably say, as we read in Scripture, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31).

Look at just about any of the great saints and spiritual masters and you'll quickly realize that silence is a key part of the discernment equation. Like Elijah on the mountaintop expecting to find God in floods and earthquakes and fire, we, too, often expect God to show up in our lives in spectacular ways. But, as Elijah taught us, it was in the tiny whisper that he finally heard God speak. If God is whispering to you today, right now, would you hear it?

"I am in the rigorous habit of sitting outdoors for prayer and meditation," writes Trappist monk Paul Quenon in his book *In Praise of the Useless Life*. "I take Mother Nature as my spiritual teacher, tough and gentle. I stay at her feet through each year's long twelve-month lesson...If the temperature is four above zero, I'm out there for the usual

thirty-minute session. Sometimes this calls for endurance, but no more than what a farmer tending the cows needs, or a daily commuter waiting for a bus."

Few of us are prepared to sit outside in the freezing cold for thirty minutes in hopes of discerning God's still small voice. But can you find your own version of the "twelve-month lesson"? Is there a location, a prayer practice, a time of day that you can commit to wholeheartedly, if not for a full year, at least for a full week or month to see how it might change your days, your perspective, and maybe even your life?

Spiritual director and retreat leader Diane Cameron says that too often today our lives consist of "discernment by Google." Rather than sit in silence and contemplation, we search and search anywhere and any way we can. She recommends a more practical approach that begins with three steps. *Step 1*: "Frame the question you have about your life. Are you asking the right question?" *Step 2*: "Take it to prayer with a light hand, not begging." In other words, don't plead for answers but simply let God know you are there and listening. *Step 3*: Use visualization and imagination to "live as if" the situation you're visualizing is true.

Cameron suggests going so far as to "live as if" a particular decision is absolutely true for a full week and seeing how it feels and what it means for you. Then the next week, live as if you've chosen a different option, and pay attention to the differences in feelings, in what's moving through you. "We do this as contemplative practice," she explains.

Journal about it, notice your dreams, turn to God and say, "Show me where I am." Over time, you should be better able to hear God's still small voice and have it lead you toward becoming the person He created you to be.

  
**"It's better to light one candle  
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

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**Christopher News Note 632**

ISBN: 8755-69601

*"Silence creates an environment in which God  
can be heard and welcomed."*

—Norvene Vest, *No Moment Too Small:  
Rhythms of Silence, Prayer & Holy Reading*