

The Alluring Voice of God

FORMING DAILY ENCOUNTERS

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Introduction

- Sometimes I feel as if God isn't listening to me.
- I want to have a closer relationship with God, but I just don't know where to start.
- My prayer life is incredibly repetitive and dry. I want to pray, but why is it that when others pray, they get a sense of peace? When I pray, I feel so empty.
- I pray, pray, and pray, but I just don't understand what God is calling me to do.
- Does God really speak to people? What does he sound like? How can I tell if he is speaking to me?

These are the questions that reverberate in my mind. They are the questions that—as a spiritual director—my youth, young adults, and directees pose to me as they share their desire to draw closer to God and follow his will. How many nights have I found myself listening and guiding someone who needed help understanding where God is amid their struggles? Their questions, frustrations, and yearnings to hear God respond to their prayers weighed on my thoughts.

My heart went out to them because I also had felt that way. I was a cradle Catholic who went to Sunday Mass and prayed the rosary daily. Still, I had no concept of what a true

relationship with God looked like. I didn't know how to have a meaningful relationship with him, how to discern what he was calling me to do, or even how to listen to his voice.

What Do Sacramental Preparation Programs Need?

When I was a director of youth and young-adult ministry, our young-adult group proved to be the most challenging—and the most rewarding. I had been fortunate to see some of my junior high and high school participants become empowered, faith-filled, young-adult parish leaders. But I also witnessed the slow growth and even spiritual decline in some members of our young-adult group. I spent countless hours striving to develop a ministry and retreat geared to their specific needs, and I desperately desired to reach those young adults who would attend Mass but who I would never hear from. What happened to all our newly confirmed teens who were once on fire for God? Why don't we see them anymore after they receive the sacrament of confirmation? Why are there so many young adults missing from our pews? What are they seeking?

According to a Gallup poll, dating from the 1950s there has been an alarming 36 percent decrease in weekly Catholic church attendance. In addition, there has been a significant increase in people with no religious affiliation. “Over the past two decades,” Gallup reports, “the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any religion grew from 8 percent in 1998–2000 to 13 percent in 2008–10, and 21 percent” from 2018–20. Although this trend is being seen in all religious groups and all ages in the United States, Gallup says this decrease in religious affiliation is most pronounced among millennials—America's young adults. While many reli-

gious worshipers in the United States are aging, those who self-identify as agnostic, atheist, or “nothing in particular” are getting younger.

Sadly, I am not surprised. Like me, numerous Catholics have been catechized through years of sacramental preparation. But once they complete these programs, far too many leave with knowledge about God but little understanding of how to develop a personal, living relationship with him. They can list the Ten Commandments, recite the Apostles’ Creed, name the sacraments, and describe several saints, but if you were to ask a majority what their relationship with God is like, they might answer: “Good, I guess,” “It could be better,” “What do you mean by that? I go to church on Sundays, and I believe in God. I enjoyed the classes,” or “Uh...it’s OK. I still find prayer rather difficult, but I still like going to church.”

If I were to ask these same individuals how they hear God speak to them or how they see God responding to their prayers, most would shrug their shoulders and give me a look of bewilderment. How, then, can we expect our youth and young adults to hold fast to our beloved Catholic faith when many have yet to know God personally?

A Pew Research Center “Religious Landscape Study” reports that the percentage of Catholics who say they believe in God has dropped by 8 percent. Even so, among those who still identify as Catholic, there is a growing interest in daily prayer, prayer groups, and meditation. In comparison to an earlier study, the percentage of Catholics who pray daily, attend weekly prayer groups, and meditate weekly has increased by 1 percent, 4 percent, and 4 percent, respectively. The overall numbers, though alarming, reveal what

Catholics seek the most—a deeper connection to God. They yearn to see his face, hear his voice, and feel his presence in their everyday lives, and when they lack the means to do so, they leave. It is not enough to know facts about God. It is not enough to know popular Scripture passages from the Bible. It is not enough to know what the Catholic faith teaches. Catholics want to encounter God in profound and life-changing ways. Those ways begin with prayer.

Prayer Is a Living, Personal Relationship with God

As a spiritual director, I have the privilege of accompanying directees on their spiritual journey to God. Spiritual direction seeks to deepen the directee's prayer life through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate spiritual director. Directees often seek spiritual direction when they need help discerning God's will, guidance on how to overcome obstacles in prayer, clarity on how God may be working in their lives, assistance recognizing God's presence throughout their day, and instruction on how to distinguish God's voice, among other reasons. Like my youth and young adults, directees want to feel God's loving presence and hear him speak in response to their prayers.

What many are missing, however, is a fundamental understanding and experience of what prayer is. It's not just a set of memorized lines or something to check off a to-do list. Prayer is the way we communicate with God and the way in which God communicates with us. It is an ongoing encounter with our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend. As such, prayer requires two essential actions from us: talking to and listening to God.

For many of us, talking to God comes easier than listening. Still, we may try to keep parts of our lives hidden from God or fall into a routine of sharing the same things over and over. Listening to God presents even more challenges. We think: “How can I hear God when he is not physically present?” What is so incredible about God is that he can speak to us not only through human tongues but in everything he created. His voice compels us. His words change us. His presence enlivens us. We cannot help but be moved and inspired when we discover his voice in our lives.

Often, the reason we cannot hear God is because we do not understand how he speaks. Since God is limitless, so are the ways in which he chooses to communicate. God can speak to us in the stillness of our hearts. God can speak to us through Scripture, his living word. God can speak to us through traditions handed down to us by the apostles, the closest friends of Christ. God can speak to us in unexpected ways that are unique to us alone. God’s loving presence and compassionate voice is closer to us than we might imagine. The key is uncovering the tools that will help us become more aware of his voice in our lives.

Who Is *The Alluring Voice of God* for?

This book is for all Catholics—especially young adults—who want to develop a meaningful relationship with God. It is for those who have been catechized but lack the tools to communicate and listen to him. It is meant to help seekers understand the various ways God speaks to us and what is needed to foster a fruitful prayer life. Throughout the book, you will find sections I call “Prayer Traps.” These sidebars il-

illuminate common obstacles to prayer and tips to overcome them. More specifically, these sections point out and clarify misunderstandings many have about God and our relationship with him.

How to Use This Book

The Alluring Voice of God can be used in two ways: for private reflection and personal growth and within a class or small-group setting.

I recommend you complete “For Practice and Reflection” at the end of each chapter. These activities and questions enable seekers to experience firsthand how God speaks to them. They provide the means to put into practice all that is learned from the chapter. These are the tools that will help you discern God’s loving voice in your life.

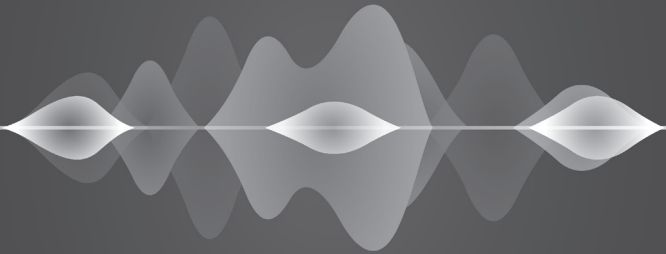
For church ministers, religion teachers, or those who wish to use this book for a faith-formation class, prayer group, youth or young-adult gathering, or any other small group, please visit CatholicSpiritualDirector.com, where you will find sample lesson plans for each chapter.

May this book help draw you closer to God, and may you be at peace knowing that God hears you and responds to every prayer in your heart!

With joy in Christ,
Carrell Jamilano

CHAPTER 1

God Wants to Hear from You



“Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst and ours.”

ST. AUGUSTINE

This was a first. I had never had a catechist take a group that I was part of outside of the classroom for a lesson. I was used to the same routine: start off in prayer, read through a dull book that didn’t relate to me, try to ignore my annoying classmates goofing off behind me, and then go home....uninspired. Today, however, we had no ordinary catechist. He was a friend, but he felt more like an older brother. We both sang and were part of the youth choir, and tonight he was our substitute teacher. I was curious to see how he would teach our class.

As we walked from the classroom to the church, my curiosity grew. *Where are we going?* I thought. *Is he taking us to the church to pray? What will he say? How did he come to so believe in God that he spends his free time being a catechist—or at least subbing for one?* As my thoughts wandered, we stopped at a statue of Christ, who was depicted dying on the cross, that was illuminated by two spotlights.

“Take some time to look at Christ Jesus on the cross,” he finally said. “What do you see? What do you feel? What thoughts come to mind when you gaze at this passionate scene?”

I thought to myself, *What do I see? I see sheer anguish, nails violently piercing his hands and feet, blood streaming down his body. Then I see his eyes. They look upward, at peace. What do I feel? Well, I guess I feel confused. His body says one*

thing, but his eyes say another. I feel disturbed by this horrific death—and afraid because I understand we're all capable of the kind of cruelty inflicted on our Lord. My thoughts? I don't understand why anyone would choose to die like this. I heard that Jesus willingly allowed himself to be whipped, stripped naked, mocked, spit upon, nailed to a cross, and die in seeming disgrace. All for us. How can he love us this much?

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* I looked up and saw my friend's hand lifted high, knocking on the cross as one would tap on a door. "Do you hear that?" he asked the class. "That is Christ, our God, knocking on your heart. He is always knocking on our hearts. Why? Because he loves us. He wants to be near us, heal us, transform us. He wants to speak to us. He doesn't want to barge in and force us to open our hearts to him. That's not his way. He is a God of peace, healing, and great love. So, he keeps knocking." *Knock. Knock. Knock.* "Will you answer his call? Will you let him enter? Will you open that door to him? Will you allow him to be a part of your life, let him live in your heart? It's your choice."

My friend was so impassioned and, until then, I had yet to meet someone who was truly on fire for God. He seemed to know and love him. That night I left inspired.

Weeks later, I was at the piano reflecting on that class. I started fiddling with the keys until I landed on a sweet, melancholic melody. I felt called to write everything I was feeling—thoughts, doubts, frustrations, and everything in between:

*How can I believe in you
if I can't see your face,
if I can't even feel you?
How do I know that you're always right beside me?*

*Help me to love you.
Help me to see.
Open up my eyes, Lord.
Open up my heart.*

As I finished pairing words with melody, I realized I had composed my first song. More significantly, I wrote and sung my very first prayer to God! Matthew 6:7 says, “In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words.” My prayer life had been babbling until now. I spewed memorized words without taking the time to really understand them.

That sung prayer was a catalyst that renewed my relationship with God because I meant every word of it. For the first time, I prayed with my whole heart. I consider it my first true prayer to God. Though it still pains me to sing this prayer, my pleas asking God to reveal himself to me were eventually answered. The more I prayed and laid bare my heart, the closer our relationship became. Had I not first sought God's help by honestly sharing what had been in my heart and mind, I might have continued in my lackluster, superficial faith.

God Wants an Intimate Relationship with You

A faulty image of God contributed to this tenuous relationship I had with him. As a child, I thought of God as a genie,