

A couple of weeks ago, I decided to move a TV from one room of my house to another. There were cable outlets in both rooms, so I just unplugged the TV from one room, lugged the TV to the other room and plugged in the cable from that room. What could go wrong?! Of course, it didn't work. So I called customer service and endured an hour of well-meaning but fruitless attempts to find the elusive signal. Finally, they agreed to send out a technician. The next day a middle-aged man showed up at my door, introduced himself as Felix, and we went over to an indoor closet where we had a so-called smart panel setup for cable, television, and all things electronic in the house. I also had some things hung up in that closet, including an extra alb. Felix watched me remove the alb from the closet and surprised me by asking, "Oh, are you a priest?" I laughed and said, "No, I'm a Catholic Deacon at St. James in Solana Beach." Felix nodded a moment, then further surprised me by taking out his wallet and showing me a picture of Jesus Christ. "So," he said with a smile, "you must know this guy..."

Ever since Christmas Day, we've had one gospel after another with a common theme – who is this guy? The shepherds, the magi, John the Baptist, Simon, Andrew, James, and John all find themselves face to face with Jesus. Now we add two more witnesses, Simeon and Anna, who are even more impressive, because they do not have angels singing on high or a star to guide them. They see a Mom, a Dad, and a little baby in the temple and each independently recognizes the truth about this child. Also, notably, they don't just see the child and say to themselves, "Aha, Christ Child sighting!" No, they immediately stride forward and publicly proclaim the truth of their revelation, surprising everyone, especially the parents. How, you may ask, did they come to this stunning realization? How does anyone come to recognize the Christ?

There was a study done in 2018 by the Pew Research Center, one of the most respected survey organizations in America, on the topic "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?" Ninety percent of people in the United States believe in some manifestation of God, be it the God of the Bible, a higher power, or presumably The Force. Ten percent are die-hard atheists. When the researchers dug further, they asked some interesting follow-up questions. From those who believe in some sort of God, that is, the 90 percent:

- 77 percent state that God has protected them
- 67 percent state that God has rewarded them

- 61 percent state that God will judge all people on what they've done
- 40 percent state that God has punished them in this life

Again, for the believers in God, the question was do you pray or talk to God? Well, yes, as a matter of fact, but not everyone. 75 percent pray (or talk) to God on a regular basis. And how's that prayer life working out for you?

- Well over half of those that pray, 63 percent, say that they talk to God, but God doesn't talk back. Among Catholics, that number of people who experience prayer as a one-way street rises to 73 percent!
- Only 27 percent of Catholics who pray regularly experience prayer as a dialog, a two-way conversation with God. Among all of the Christian denominations, this is the lowest. Somehow, when it comes to communication with God, we're as good as anyone else at the talking part, but we're not very good at the hearing part.

What's the problem here? It's clearly not God, because in some denominations, over 60 percent experience prayer as a dialog, twice that of Catholics. The problem is that we are not trained how to listen. It's not all that surprising really. Most Catholics, when asked if they pray, readily say yes. When? Typically, at Mass on Sunday. What does that prayer look like? It is almost exclusively formal, a bit stilted, communal, and led by others. Virtually the only time made available for private prayer is during Communion, and how the heck does that work if you're moving around or squirming on uncomfortable kneelers?

To hear God, you need three things operating together:

1. Environment – ask yourself, where are you the most thoughtful, the most contemplative? In nature? A walk in the woods? Perhaps in the quiet before bed at night? Or, maybe indeed in a Church, before the Blessed Sacrament? Maybe in the car, crawling through traffic? The ideal environment for anyone is quiet and solitude. When and where do you get that?
2. Mechanism – when you're in that environment, what connects you with God? Maybe it's your Bible? Maybe it's music, either instrumental or worship praise? Maybe it is simply an inner quiet. Note that all of these mechanisms require you to be quiet, to not talk,

to not start running through your list of demands and requests. This is critical – listening to God is a *passive* activity!

3. Discernment – believe me, you’re going to hear all sorts of things enter your mind! How do you sift through it all to find the voice of God? This takes a little practice, but gets easier and easier. The key words here are *consolation* and *desolation*. This is Ignatius of Loyola’s great contribution to the prayer life.

Here’s how it works. Let’s say that you’ve found that nature is the perfect environment for your prayer, and furthermore, the best mechanism is a pair of earbuds playing some lovely soft music. As you walk along, it suddenly occurs to you that God wants you to work with the homeless. It’s just an idea. Is it a good idea? Seems like it is, but how do you know? You take the idea and you begin to research it – what can you do? When? You make a call or two, it feels awkward, but you finally decide to volunteer at a shelter, and step in. After two or three volunteer sessions, you realize that you absolutely hate it. You dread going, you don’t like the people, you don’t feel safe, whatever. This is called desolation. It does not mean you’re a bad person, it simply means that this is not how God wants to use you. So you stop. Take that walk again. This time it occurs to you that teaching children about God would be fun. So once again you do some research. This time, however, everything clicks. You find an open slot in the faith formation program, it’s an age group you really like, and to your surprise, you’re really good at it. The kids love you, the parents are pleased, and you find yourself getting more education, learning more skills, and getting to the classroom a half hour early to tidy things up. This is called consolation – you have found the perfect intersection of your talent and God’s need.

In thinking about these stories, note that the voice of God did not come as a trumpet blast or lightning bolt. It came as a still, small whisper. I find that God speaks to me in very short sentences, sort of like a two year old: Go Do This. Call Your Sister. Work in Prison. Feed My Lambs.

You want to know how Simeon and Anna recognized the Christ Child in the Temple that day? They were both prayerful people. They had years of practice listening to God. They were part of the family, the body of Christ. They both heard the same thing in their solitude and listening – There is the Messiah. They already knew that this kid would become “that guy”.