

GO AND...

Spiritual Practice: 'Walkie-Talkie' Prayers



Written by Bishop Scott Johnson

Scene: a young seminarian sits with his Clinical Pastoral Education cohort for his first verbatim, a report about a visit with a patient who was not doing well. Believing he had left the room with brilliant words of comfort to a struggling person, he is surprised when his supervisor asks, “How could you have listened better?” The supervisor goes on to explain that, while comforting words had been spoken, there had been a missed opportunity to go deeper with the patient. “She wanted you to go all the way into the depths of her fear, but when you redirected her to address your own discomfort, you also told her you wouldn’t go all the way into the dark with her. Your people need to know that you’ll listen to understand before you speak to comfort.”

You guessed it: that young seminarian was me. Truth be told, good listening is a discipline I’ve had to develop in my years as a pastor, and it still isn’t always a thing that comes naturally for me. When encountering conversations or situations with intense emotional content, most of us listen to defend ourselves or resolve our own internal discomfort. Good listening, also known as active listening in some circles, involves putting your own fears, hopes, and needs aside, listening intently to the Other to hear their words and understand things from their point of view. This type of listening also involves refraining from interrupting, keeping one’s face and body stance calm and non-threatening, and putting all of one’s energy into the perspective of the Other.

One Christmas my parents gave us boys a set of walkie-talkies as a gift. We quickly discovered that the best way to be sure we were heard was to use the word “OVER” to close every conversation, something more experienced radio users have known for decades. Take some time this month to practice Listening Prayer: lift your petitions to God, but at the end of each petition, say or think the word “OVER” and imagine you’re releasing the button on a prayer walkie-talkie, creating space for God to speak to you. Listen at least as long as you’ve spoken, and see if you can’t stretch that time longer and longer. What is God saying to you? How can you listen in order to understand?

Mother Teresa once said, “Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at God’s disposition, and listening to God’s voice in the depth of our hearts.” Let your heart be filled with God’s voice, and may your listening be deep and active.