

Christian Initiation of Adults

Discernment

Diocese of San José

“Receive the sign of the cross on your ears,
that you may hear the voice of the Lord.”
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 56

Listening to God’s Voice

Hearing and Responding

A big part of becoming and being Catholic is learning to hear God’s voice and responding. Our Scriptures tell us many stories of people hearing God and responding.

Abraham heard God’s voice from an angel, a “messenger” of God, asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Confused and probably afraid, Abraham responds by trusting God’s voice (Gn 22). Moses heard God’s voice coming from a surprising and unusual source—a burning bush. He responded to this unexpected encounter with the Divine by taking off his shoes and accepting God’s call to set his people free (Ex 3). The Samaritan woman at the well heard God’s voice in the midst of her everyday chores, in an ordinary conversation with a stranger. She responded to Jesus by becoming the first evangelist proclaiming the Good News to her village (Jn 4). And Mary heard God’s voice in an angel with unbelievable and perhaps terrifying news for one so young—she would bear God’s child. She responded in faith with amen, “let it be done” (Lk 1).

Perhaps Adam and Eve’s sin was not just disobeying God but not responding when he called, for when they heard his voice after eating the apple, they hid themselves (Gn 3).

We pray for these your servants who have opened their ears and hearts to your word. Grant that they may grasp your moment of grace (RCIA, 102).

Voices in My Head?

Unlike some of the Scripture stories, however, we will probably hear God’s voice in much more ordinary ways. Most of us will never have an angel appear to us with a divine message from God. Nor will many of us encounter a burning bush or other supernatural revelation of God. More than likely, we’ll hear God the way the woman at the well did—in a simple conversation with another person while doing the simple things we do everyday—or the way Mary did—in an unexpected turn of events.

As Catholics, we believe that God is constantly trying to reveal God’s self to each person, using the ordinary things we experience in our lives to be the “messengers” for God’s word. In our family, friends, and the familiar events of our life, through the stranger and the new experience, and most especially in

the poor, the outcast, and those events that shake us to the core, God is trying to say, “Here I am. Listen.”

At critical moments in our lives, God’s voice may be very strong: at the birth of a new family member or at the death of a loved one; when we fall in love, or when we break up; when tragedy happens or when we are overwhelmed by goodness; when we are deciding on a career, a vocation, a life-long partner; when we are hurt, or when we cannot forgive; when we need to choose a new way of life.

When we hear God’s voice, we might feel unsettled or out of sorts. We might feel that we need to do *something*, to make a change or be more resolved. Discovering who God intends us to be (our truest self), what God is asking of us at this moment in our life, and making a decision to act is called discernment.

(continued on next page)

Words to know

assembly: the baptized and catechumens gathered together in prayer, especially for the sacraments

catechumen: Greek, meaning “one in whom word echoes”; one who celebrated the Rite of Acceptance

discernment: from Latin, *discernere*, meaning “to cut away;” a lifelong process for listening and responding to God and being the person God intends us to be

conversion: a lifelong process of seeing and choosing a new path in light of God’s call; an internal process revealed in external practice

dismissal: a sending; catechumens are sent after homily to reflect on God’s Word; the baptized are sent at Mass to “go, love and serve the Lord;” not meant to separate but to enable one’s mission

RCIA: stands for “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults;” process for becoming Christian

sponsor: a person given as a gift from the Church to catechumens, to serve as their companions who help them discern God’s will for them, share their own faith and discernment, and support them with prayer, guidance, and presence at the rites

Do you remember a time when you heard God’s voice and knew it was God speaking? Where or who did it come from? What did you feel when you heard God’s message for you? How did you respond?

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☞ When was the last time something critical or significant happened in your life? What was God communicating to you at that moment?

Discerning God's Call

For Catholics, there are four honored places we listen for God's voice: in Scripture, in our Catholic tradition and teaching, in the Church community, and in our own conscience. Those who are preparing to become Catholics—the catechumens—participate in an on-going process of discernment throughout their preparation, learning to listen for God's voice in these four principle ways. They do this to continue growing in their new faith in Christ and to know when they are ready to take the next step toward initiation into the Church. We who are already baptized serve as models for the catechumens, teaching them by our example how to listen for God's voice each day, especially when we need to make an important decision.

Scripture

The Scriptures reveal who God is and how God relates with his people. The Scriptures project God's voice most clearly when it is proclaimed in the assembly within the liturgy and connected to the real-life stories of that assembly in the homily. In the Gospel, especially, we believe that Christ is speaking directly to us, calling us again to listen and respond.

In a special way, the catechumens listen and respond to God in the Scriptures by "breaking open" the Word. They are dismissed from the Mass with a catechist to "feast" on the Scriptures and homily they just heard—to chew on them, in a sense—and to discover together what God is calling them to do at that moment in their faith journey.

Church Tradition and Teaching

You can't find answers in the Scriptures to every one of life's problems. But you can find Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit will remain with us always, guiding us, instructing us in everything (Jn 14:26). That Spirit has led our Church through the ages, inspiring saints and holy women and men to hear and

respond to God's voice in their own time and situation. Church tradition is the collective wisdom and presence of that Spirit, showing us how our ancestors interpreted not only Scripture but also the signs of the times through which God was acting.

Church Community

The apostles didn't receive the Spirit as individuals but as a community. We believe that in the faithful, there is a "sense" of what God is calling us to be. When two or three are gathered, God is there. And so learning to hear God's voice is a group exercise. Together we listen for God with those we trust and who know us best—our companions, literally, those we share bread with. Our companions help us to hear and see the things we may be missing. They do this not just by what they say but also by how they live. Catechumens are given special companions called sponsors to help them discern God's voice throughout their journey to initiation.

☞ Who are your companions? Who is looking to you be their companion in faith? How can your own actions model for the catechumens a life of listening and responding to God?

Our Conscience

For those with faith, God's word is not far from them—"it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts" (Dt 30:14). God's Spirit is in us, guiding our conscience into knowing the path God wants us to take. If after consulting all the other areas of discernment, we still feel uneasy, it may be because our conscience, God's Spirit in us, knows it is not satisfied. But if after true discernment, we feel at peace, even with a hard decision, we can trust that we have listened and responded well to God's voice.

Helped by the example and support of sponsors...and the entire Christian community, the catechumens learn to turn more readily to God (RCIA, 75).

A Process for Discernment

When faced with a difficult decision or turning-point in your life, or you just need to know better where God is leading you at this time, try this process.

Pray daily

Praying is less about saying things to God and more about being still to listen to God. Find a quiet place, and just be still and open to what God is trying to reveal to you. Making the sign of the cross, reading the Bible, or praying the Lord's Prayer may help you focus on being attentive to God.

Participate at Mass

Keep your eyes, ears, mouth, and hands open to encountering God when you participate at Sunday Mass. Read the Sunday readings before you come to Mass. Be present to those around you, especially the stranger. Bring your concerns to prayer in the community. Reflect with others after Mass.

Look to the saints and other holy people

Read about the saints and their writings. Read Scripture stories about our ancestors in faith. Pay attention to people in your church or in your life whom you admire because of their life of faith. Share your faith with them, and let them be your companion and sounding board.

Return to prayer

Be still again in prayer, and listen to the small voice within you. Imagine making your decision, and notice your feelings. Journal about them if it helps. Which decision gives you a sense of peace? Which choice feels right with who God intends you to be? When this peace comes, give thanks to God.