

IMPRINT

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THE POWER OF LISTENING

We all long to be understood.



Listening

WITH THE EARS OF YOUR HEART



A Julliard violinist once told us that the most important thing she learned in her training was how to listen. Listening is more than just an auditory experience; it's an attentiveness to the whole of reality. As human persons, we are made to receive.

Jesus, Who came that we might receive His grace and salvation, cries to each of us, "'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened'" (Mk 7:34). It is in receiving His love that we find our flourishing, for, as acclaimed writer and Catholic convert Gertrud von le Fort wrote: "**Surrender to God is the only absolute power that the creature possesses.** Only the handmaid of the Lord is the Queen of Heaven."

We are all called to be open to God and to the one before us. As Sisters of Life, we strive to listen not just with our physical ears, but with the "ears of our hearts." Each of our missions — accompaniment of vulnerable pregnant women, retreats, evangelization, and inviting those wounded by abortion into the healing mercy of Jesus — are ultimately *listening* missions, where we have the great gift of being able to receive the human person, made in His image. We have found and experienced that, by God's grace, you can listen someone back into life.

When you — wherever you are in life — listen to God and cooperate with His plan, the world changes! God invites us daily to participate in His work of redemption. He entrusts particular missions to us that only we can fulfill, to bring about His good plan for the flourishing of human life on earth and ultimately in heaven.

If we look through the Bible, we see how listening to God shaped history. God called Abraham to leave his land, promising to make of him a great nation and to bless all the nations of the world through him and his descendants (cf. Gen 12; Heb 11). God revealed Himself

to Moses in the burning bush and called him to free His people from slavery in Egypt, leading them into the land He had vowed to give them (cf. Ex 3-20; Deut 1-4). The great prophet Samuel heard God calling him by name in the night and learned to say to Him, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (cf. 1 Sam 3, 8-10, 16). When King David sinned gravely, he listened to God calling him to conversion through the prophet Nathan, and he became a model of repentance and trust in God's mercy (cf. 1 Sam 17; 2 Sam 7, 12; Ps 51). St. Paul, a zealous Pharisee, hearing the voice of Jesus while he was persecuting Christians, was converted and baptized and became one of the most influential Apostles of the Lord (cf. Acts 9).

It was through the listening heart of the Virgin Mary that the Word became flesh. She heard God's invitation and responded with a generous "fiat" through all the circumstances of her life and the life of her Son. After Jesus' Ascension, she remained with the Apostles in prayer in the upper room, awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit. She is an icon of the Church at prayer, listening for the voice of God (cf. Lk 1-2; Jn 19; Act 1).

Like each of these saints, and in imitation of Our Lady, God desires you to play an indispensable part in bringing more of His love and mercy into the world. Give Him permission!

Know of our prayers as we offer a Novena of Christmas Masses for you and your loved ones.

In Christ, Our Life, and Mary, Our Mother,

Mother Mary Concepta, SV
Mother Mary Concepta, SV



RECEIVING yourself

by Sr. Mary Grace, SV



They were a young couple and this was their first ultrasound. The technician was having trouble getting a clear picture of their daughter. She was all curled up, hands clenched over her face. The couple was afraid this little girl would not see the light of day, as they had already suffered two miscarriages.

The technician tried several times to help the baby to move her position, encouraging the mother to drink water, eat candy, and walk around. But nothing made this little one move an inch.

Trying to help, Sister and I pulled out our rosary beads, sang songs, and prayed our favorite litanies. Nothing happened. No motion, only a dark, still screen. We made a prayer of trustful surrender to Jesus, hoping something would change.

And what happened next, I'll never forget.

The young father who, up until this point had been sitting in the corner, got up. Without a word, he came over and placed his hands on the tummy of his wife. Leaning in, he began to whisper in his native dialect.

I don't know what he said — whether it was a prayer or a story — but what I do know is that his daughter heard and knew the sound of her father's voice.

Small flickers of light began to dance over the black screen. His daughter slowly lifted her head, unraveled her clenched fists, unfolded her legs, and with her little arms reached out, right to the spot where her father was speaking! We could even see her eyelids open and flutter as she looked up towards her dad's voice.

We all fell into tearful, silent awe, and then laughter ensued as we delighted in this little girl who knew the sound of her father's voice and could no longer stay still.

One of the first things that the Risen Christ told the Apostles after the Resurrection was the good news that God is "my Father and your Father" (*Jn 20:17*).

You have a Father who called you into life and continues to speak His word of love over you (cf. Gen 1:26). He loved us when He

first created us, and He has not stopped. God's creative love isn't simply a historical happening — it's an eternal moment and it's the story of your reality now.

We are not satisfied with temporary encounters with God's love. God created us to live in constant encounters — endlessly inviting you and me to respond to Him who never ceases to speak life into us.

The Father thought of you, named you, and has not ceased speaking your name. It's why you are here and why you are where you are right now. Your identity is not up for grabs because you are not up for grabs. You are good, and your life is good. We can forget this, or assign a greater power to our sins or the sins of others than is real. But the truth is, "we are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love

for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son Jesus" (*St. John Paul II*).

God has been, is now, and always will be more intricately involved in our lives than we can conceive. And He knows there is a battle for our hearts' attention. The evil one, whom St. John Paul II called "the anti-Word", tries to drown out the Father's voice by sowing lies or thoughts in our minds

that frighten us, discourage us, bring us down, or cause us to doubt who we are.

Jesus is constantly fighting for you, seeking to rescue, restore, and heal you with His true Word. His love and truth causes us to come alive, to become ourselves, and to be set free in the knowledge that we are His beloved sons and daughters. The Father tells us, in Scripture, to listen to His Son, Who will show us who we are: "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him" (*Lk 9:35*).

Life is a gift. Your life is a gift. Do not be afraid to receive the gift of yourself — your own good, unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable identity, body and soul — expressly fashioned by Love Himself to live with Him forever.

Do not be afraid to hear the reality of God's love and concern for you. It's the reality you were created to receive.

The Father
thought of
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Listening Brings

Freedom

Damalis' story



by Sr. Miriam Bethel, SV

When Damalis first stepped through the doorway of our humble little Manhattan convent and made her way up the squeaky metal stairs to the parlor to meet us, she didn't know what to expect. She was pregnant with her first child and in a difficult situation — what could these Sisters possibly have to offer? A plate of cookies and a cup of tea wouldn't pay the bills or take away the pressure she felt from every side. Unsure at first, she gathered up her courage, made an act of faith, and began to share her story. It wasn't as if her trials disappeared or her doubts vanished, but through her experience that day, something changed.

As Damalis journeyed through her pregnancy, she came to see that when the Sisters sat with her and allowed her to share from her heart, a weight was lifted. The Sisters weren't just hearing the things she was saying and giving her practical aid — they were deeply listening with their own hearts to her questions, worries, dreams, and fears beneath the surface and responding with intentional, personal support. This experience made a lasting impression on Damalis.

When, a few years later, she became pregnant with her second child, she knew she needed more of what she had experienced before. **Facing many trials and doubts, she courageously reached out once again.** She thought, "If anybody is going to get me through this, they're going to."

Each week, Damalis would arrive at the convent in her classic style — a sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers — knowing that she was safe to share, that she was in a place where she could be at ease. At first, the conversation was light, but over time, she revealed layer after layer of her heart, bringing to light the deeper fears and questions that would otherwise have no place to be received. The gift of listening allowed Damalis to embark on a journey of discovering the depths of her own heart: **"When you have the freedom to speak and be heard, it gives a different power to your thoughts."**

The gift of listening that Damalis experienced during her pregnancy continued to grow and flourish, becoming a gift not just for herself, but for all those God placed in her path. Damalis' deep

empathy and strong maternal instinct came to life in new and graced ways.

After she gave birth to her daughter, Josephine, Damalis shared her story with a group of our volunteers. After her testimony, she noticed that the next part of the day involved a presentation on listening. Intrigued, she hung around and stayed in the back to hear what the presenter had to say. After the training, Damalis was filled with an eager excitement: "This is what you do. I want to do that!" Knowing that this gift was meant to be shared, Damalis put her listening skills to the test. She reflected, "When listening to others now, I take my time with responding — waiting for the other person to ask if they actually want my opinion. I now know about being a good listener and how people don't really want a solution 80 percent of the time — and if they do want a solution, they will stop talking!"

When a close friend confided in her that she was pregnant and in crisis, Damalis received her with the utmost love and patience, reflecting back to her friend what she had shared, and inviting her to uncover the hidden fears beneath the crisis. Eventually, Damalis brought her friend in to meet the Sisters, and her friend made a heroic choice for her own life and that of her child!

As she'd seen time and time again in her own life and in the lives of those around her, **Damalis realized that listening is about "giving the other person a place to unfold, to express themselves. It's not about solving the problem."** Listening is humbling. "You have to accept that the conversation isn't about proving yourself or showing off what you know. It's about being open to another person's perspective, even if it challenges you." Convicted by the freeing power of listening, and with a heart ready to encourage any mom in crisis, she shared, "There is someone to listen to you, and your freedom, your expression, isn't going to be stifled. And we don't have a solution—God has a solution!"

Listening is about being open to another's perspective, even if it challenges you.

Damalis lives in New York City with her three children.



FOLLOW MY VOICE

By John Cardinal O'Connor

Our founder, John Cardinal O'Connor, was a Navy chaplain for 27 years before becoming Archbishop of New York. He would often recount this powerful experience he had of flying with a young naval officer:

“He was a young pilot. He was in front and I was behind. He was, of course, flying the plane, but all the instruments were in my cockpit as well. We took off towards the evening with no sign of difficulty.

“We had only a couple of hours to fly, but we had hardly gone more than an hour when suddenly, complete blackness fell. Tremendous turbulence began to shake the airplane. The rains began to beat upon us, and then a total fog enveloped us.

“It was an extraordinarily eerie feeling, alone in the sky, unable to see anything with this fog curling right through the plexiglass into the cockpit — only the glow of the instrument panel made anything visible at all.

“And then suddenly perhaps 50, maybe 75 miles from our destination, the warning light began to flash on the instrument panel that we were running low on fuel, and then shortly thereafter a second warning light flashed that we were virtually out of fuel.

“I called through the intercom system to the pilot. I said, ‘Do you see the instrument panel?’ And he said, ‘Yes, but I think we can make it.’ It came to be shortly obvious that we couldn’t make it.

“So he called by radio to Washington National Airport just a little bit closer to ask if they could receive us, but they said no, they were completely banked in by fog. He called into Dulles Airport outside of Washington. No, nothing could land there because of fog. He called the Baltimore Airport to ask if we could land there; no, we could not get in there because of fog.

“I said to him, ‘You will have to radio the international distress signal so that some airfield will take a chance, otherwise we can crash and not only will both of us be killed, but far worse, we don’t know what’s below us; we could kill a great number of people.’

“He said, ‘I can’t do that.’ I said, ‘Why can’t you do that?’ He said, ‘It would be a black mark on my record because I took off without enough fuel.’ ‘Black mark on your record!?’ So, much senior to him, I pulled rank, and I said, ‘You will call out the international distress signal, the SOS, or there will be far worse than a black mark on your record.’ So he did.

“And this is the part I will never forget. No sooner did he call the international SOS then a voice came on the radio: ‘SX395, I hear you.’ The pilot said, ‘We are out of fuel and we have no place to land.’ The voice was that of a chief warrant officer in the United States Navy in a place called Pituxie River Naval Command, also close to Washington, and he simply said, ‘Follow my voice.’

“And then minute by minute, ‘Lower your right wing. Lower your left wing... Just follow my voice.’ So calm, so steady. Then he said, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ He knew he was dealing with a young pilot. ‘Just follow my voice. Just follow my voice.’

“Suddenly we looked down. We couldn’t have been more than a hundred feet off the ground when we saw the first lights — they were the landing lights of the field and we glided in to a perfect landing.

“I could never forget that voice, the quality of the voice, the kindness of the voice, the experience of the voice, the calmness of the voice... ‘Follow my voice.’ **That is what the Lord says: ‘Follow Me. Follow My voice. Don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. I will bring you home.’”**



Alive in His Love

by Sr. Maria Laetitia of the Glory of the Resurrection, SV

I attended a state university in Southern California. I was encouraged by good friends from my parish to attend daily Mass and take time to listen to Jesus in silent prayer. One gorgeous day at school, during my lunch break, I sat basking under the sun and blue sky dotted with white, puffy clouds. In that moment of solitude, I became aware He looked upon me with a deeper love, a spousal love. Then in the silence of my heart, I heard a gentle voice say, “Will you let Me be the one to love you?” I responded with a “yes,” but I kept this close to my heart.

After I graduated from college, I made a pilgrimage to World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. As part of the pilgrimage we visited Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. As I walked along the train tracks that day, I felt the word “Life” embedded in my heart. I knew then I was called to give my life for Life.

A few years later I heard about the Sisters of Life through friends. I entered in 2008 and professed my final vows in 2016. I am living out the question that He proposed to me when I was in college — letting Him be the One to love me. I have come alive in His love.

God speaks in the silence of the heart, and we listen. And then we speak to God from the fullness of our heart, and God listens. And this listening and this speaking is what prayer is meant to be.

- St. Teresa of Calcutta

HOW CAN I HEAR GOD'S VOICE?

by Sr. Lucia Christi, SV



“At every time and in every place, God draws close to man” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 1*). God doesn’t just give the gift of life and then walk away — He holds each human person in existence at every moment, and He desires to have a deep and personal relationship with us. He is constantly speaking to each of us uniquely, intimately, personally. He has a word for you, today, and He desires you to know of His presence and love again and again, all throughout your life. But what does it look like to listen to God? There are many ways that we can learn to hear His voice: creation, Scripture, reality, prayer, and silence.

Creation

“The world was created to show forth and communicate the glory of God; God has no other reason for creating than His love and goodness” (CCC 293). Every aspect of the created world — its beauty, order, and richness — speaks to us of the radiant, abundant life of God. We can “listen” with the ears of our hearts to the proclamation of God’s goodness and love in everything around us. “Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, Whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: ‘God made me!’” (St. Augustine).

Scripture

God talks to you, personally and directly, through Scripture. “In the sacred books, the Father Who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet His children and talks with them” (*Dei Verbum 21*). When we read Scripture, we have the most concrete expression of what God wants to speak to us — He desired it to be written down so that there could be no doubt! As we spend time reading and praying with the Bible, we more deeply come to know Who God is, how He reveals Himself, and how He longs to be with His people. If you are new to Scripture, it’s helpful to start with the Gospels. Ask Jesus to speak to your heart, and you will not be disappointed.



Reality

God speaks to us in and through our real, everyday circumstances. His Providence is active, and He is constantly drawing near to you, trying to tell you that He loves you in a thousand different ways. “God makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him” (*Rm 8:28*). Wherever we find ourselves at any given moment, that is exactly the place that God wants to meet us and draw us closer to Himself. Even in difficult situations or times of suffering, God is speaking to us and offering us grace to deepen our relationship with Him and with others. As we grow in prayer, we start to learn the way He speaks particularly to us, and we can come to notice His presence and voice in the midst of our daily lives.

Prayer & Silence

Every form of listening to God is prayer, but prayer is also a dialogue. Prayer involves us sharing our thoughts, feelings, and desires with the Lord and awaiting His response. It also means listening to His Word and offering our reply in return. Prayer is a relationship, and relationships cannot survive or thrive if those in the relationship don’t listen to one another! Because the noise of the world, and even of our own thoughts, can drown out the voice of God, making intentional time and space each day for silence opens us to hear Him gently whispering to our hearts. “God is the friend of silence” (St. Teresa of Calcutta). When He revealed Himself to Elijah on Mount Horeb, God was not in the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but He was in a “tiny whispering sound” (*cf. 1 Kgs 19:9-18*).

How do I know if I’m hearing God’s voice?

God, who is Truth, cannot contradict Himself. So when we take the time to listen, we can be sure that God will not say something to us that conflicts with what He has already spoken in Scripture or with what He has taught us by the teachings of the Church for the last 2,000 years. The more we read the Bible and learn the faith, the more we will come to know His voice as He speaks to us in our hearts — it will always resonate with and reinforce what He has already revealed of Himself throughout history. Our listening to God calls us to respond with a generous “yes” to His invitation to become who we were created to be — men and women totally transformed by His love and mercy and reflecting the glory of Jesus to the world. Be not afraid. He is with you.

when hearing God

gets difficult.

Trusting when it's tough.

by Sr. Mary Grace, SV

“I’ve never heard God’s voice,” a faithful, devout woman said to me between tears. “I’ve said my prayers all my life, but I’ve never heard Him.” Then pausing, moving between doubt and hope, she asked, “Will I ever hear God?”

We can all have moments, or even years, in the desert, when God’s voice seems turned down or turned off in our lives.

We all have times when we feel more forsaken than chosen; when we lose our breath in sudden losses, or we’re awakened to the weaknesses in ourselves or those we love; when our trust is broken or we question the good left in us; when we’re discouraged by disappointments or exhausted by the busyness and tired of waiting. Sometimes God’s voice isn’t just hard to hear — it can feel nonexistent.

Leaning forward to this woman, I remarked, to her surprise, “I have never heard God’s audible voice, either.”

“What?” she said, in utter confusion. “But, you’re a nun!”

We can easily discount the desert when we’re lacking, alone, impoverished or in a phase of being tested or even feeling rejected. But for God, the desert does not mean desertion.

When the first generations of the Chosen People journeyed through the barren wilderness (*cf. Ex 16*), God reminds us that it was precisely the place He called them to closeness: “Remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness” (*Jer 2:2*).

The Jewish people, so precious to God, were led from their familiar slavery in Egypt to unknown foreign lands, where they could worship without fear. They came to a place where God-reliance and radical trust weren’t the strength of the pious, but the ordinary way of followers. **The desert is for the beloved and those He delivers.**

But life went wayward for the Israelites: water stopped flowing, the bread got boring, life got tough. It’s the same for us today: jobs get lost, family and friends pass away, life can seem pointless. But instead of trusting, the people of Israel resist, complaining and pining to return to the enslavement from which they’d been freed.

We can easily fall into the lie that tough times mean God has tapped out, as if God were disappointed in us, displeased, or



impatient with our failures. God reveals our temptation when our hearing gets hard: “They did not ask” (*Jer 2:6*). But sometimes, God can seem silent so that a space can open up for us to speak.

More fundamental than our need for food or shelter is our need for connection, and more dangerous than addictions is the experience of disconnection (*cf. Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, Matthew D. Lieberman). Sure — hearing God’s voice is hard, but not hearing Him is harder.

As I continued to talk with this woman, she shared about the heaviness on her heart in the morning and her desire to wake up without it. She said she’s not usually an emotional person, but the talks she heard and the homily that was preached moved her to tears. Gently smiling, I said to her, “Today, you have heard the voice of God.”

We may never hear an audible sound, but we can always tune into His voice hidden in the desert places of our lives. God never ceases speaking, and we’re called to never stop speaking to God and seeking His voice.

God’s reason for the wilderness is to entrust us with an invitation to intimacy. God never demands us to work through our miseries on our own, or pitch a life plan decades in advance; none of us are capable of self-satisfaction. We waste time walking around in desert spaces with self-saving strategies, waiting for the tough times to change before we try trusting.

God promised: “I will bring them back...the people will find favor in the wilderness; I will give them rest” (*Jer 31:2*). We can tap into the same secret that set them free from the first enslavement. **Let’s press into God’s promises and choose to trust no matter what. Because God isn’t expecting us to get it and get on with it, but to live life “together with Him” (*Eph 2:6*).**

Helpful Reading by Fr. Timothy Gallagher:

- *Overcoming Spiritual Discouragement*
- *Struggles in the Spiritual Life: Their Nature and Their Remedies*

You are body & soul.

what you
listen to

changes
you

by Sr. Fidelity Grace, SV

What we listen to is never neutral; it has a lasting impact on us. Because we tend to believe and repeat what we hear most often, even the “background noise” of our lives informs our thoughts about ourselves. Whether it’s the social media feed we’re subscribed to, the latest breaking news blasting on our screens, our regular playlist, or the loud chatter of our lives, we’re always listening to something. If most of what we see and hear is telling us that life is meaningless unless we have money, popularity, success, or pleasure, we can easily come to believe this. Similarly, a person who grows up receiving only obscenities, put-downs, gossip, vulgar jokes, and complaints will likely internalize and then regurgitate them.

Constant reception of “bad news” can only have one remedy: turning down the bad and choosing to turn up the volume on the “Good News” — the real news that keeps us in reality. While countless distractions can make us deaf to it, our Heavenly Father is constantly speaking truth over us: “You are very good” (cf. *Gen 1:31*); “You are seen, known, and wonderfully made” (cf. *Ps 139*); “You are beautiful, my beloved” (cf. *Song 1:16*). In fact, the Latin word “to bless” — *benedicere* — means “to speak a good word.” We’re created inherently good, but we all suffer from the

effects of the Fall and can hear negativity on the outside and inside at times. A person who receives and stakes themselves in truth, gratitude, encouragement, and mercy from God and others will face life with a resilience no bad news can defeat. Listening to truth, goodness, and beauty forms us to know that we are good, unique, unrepeatable, and that our worth is immeasurable.

We can choose what we listen to and what we take in. While technology and artificial intelligence can feed us instant answers, they can never replace our God-given ability to live in divine likeness. The human person is the only creature with the capacity to reflect, discern, ponder, wonder, and love, with our own reason and free will. What we listen to forms us, and what we say forms others. We have the power to remove ourselves from negative conversation and unplug from technology that leads to discouragement, despair, unhealthy dependency, or substitution of our own thought. We can choose to take in content — like uplifting podcasts, good literature, and beautiful music — that can give us a steady diet of hope. While we live in a broken world, we have a Savior Who desires to fill us with His love and healing. No technology or tool can replace our humanity, or our need to receive grace and salvation. No device can supersede your kind word to a stressed-out cashier, or your choice to resist the temptation to use foul language. We can ask Jesus to help us receive and radiate an atmosphere of heaven in hearts and in our sphere of influence. And we can ask Him to change us by His word.

Jesus wants you to hear the truth about yourself. Take time today to ask the Father: *What is Your word for me? How can my words bless others and call them higher?* At the end of the day, we can give God permission to speak to us in the quiet of prayer, so that we can hear the truth about our own goodness and His mercy, directly from Him.

Words change hearts. Listening to truth, goodness, and beauty forms us to know that we are good, unique, unrepeatable, and that our worth is immeasurable.

1 *J Integr Complement Med.* 2024 Jan;30(1):37-46. doi: 10.1089/jicm.2022.0803.

2 *Front Psychol.* 2011 Apr 5;2:58. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00058

3 *Front Plant Sci.* 2018 Jan 30;9:25. doi: 10.3389/fpls.2018.00025

4 <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/bullied-plants-project-bullying-samantha-petraglia-long-island-coalition-against-bullying/>

Amazing facts about listening:

- On average, we hear **20,000-30,000 words each day**.
- **One of the first sounds a baby hears** is its mother's heartbeat (which might sound as loud as a washing machine to those tiny ears). After 23 weeks, babies can hear sounds from the outside world, starting with low-pitched noises. They can eavesdrop on mom's conversations (since her voice reverberates through her body) and even enjoy music from the womb. After birth, hearing these familiar songs and recognizing mom's voice can calm the little one!
- **Listening to music can cause the body to release feel-good chemicals** like dopamine, which decrease anxiety. Patients who listened to music before surgery saw their cortisol levels (a stress hormone) decrease and were thus more relaxed than those given medication.^{1, 2}
- On the flip side, **chronic negativity can increase cortisol levels** — shrinking the part of the brain needed for memory and problem-solving. Just as overexposure to loud noises can damage your eardrums, constant exposure to whining, sarcasm, or criticism actually turns your brain to mush!^{1, 2}
- Research has shown that **even plants are impacted by noise**. While they cannot "hear" as humans can, exposure to the vibrations of low-frequency sound waves (like classical music) have shown increased growth rates. Some plants physically lean toward the source of the music.³
- A middle schooler conducted a fascinating experiment with two plants. Given the same amount of water and sunlight, one plant was complimented while another was harshly yelled at and called "stupid" and "ugly." **While the praised plant continued growing, the bullied plant wilted and died** after six days. This is a stunning image of the power of sounds to build up or destroy. Even the "silent treatment" has a deafening effect; the intentional withdrawal of acknowledgment and affection can make a person feel dead inside. But the sharing of truth causes one to flourish!⁴



(Back L-R): Mary, Monika, Maria, Grace; (Front L-R): Mariana, Gabriella, Lauren

Mary

Hometown: Niles, MI

Studies: Theology

Fun Fact: I am an identical twin.

Favorite sounds: The first strums of a song on the guitar

Gabriella

Hometown: Pittsburgh, PA

Studies: Nursing

Fun Fact: I have 8 siblings.

Favorite sounds: The sound of birds chirping in the morning

Grace

Hometown: Downingtown, PA

Studies: Graphic Design and Theology

Fun Fact: My middle name is America.

Favorite sounds: Deep rolling thunder and any kind of live music (especially the cello)

Maria

Hometown: Rapid City, SD

Studies: Psychology and Theology

Fun Fact: I play the harp.

Favorite sounds: The flowing of a gentle stream and birds chirping

Monika

Hometown: Mississauga, ON, Canada

Studies: Nursing

Fun Fact: I was part of a Polish Folklore dance group for 17 years!

Favorite sounds: Laughter, especially baby giggles, and the rustling of leaves in the wind

Lauren

Hometown: Bentonville, AR

Studies: Elementary and Special Education

Fun Fact: One of my favorite road trips was to visit the world's largest porch swing.

Favorite sounds: My favorite piece of music I've ever heard is a violin piece called *On The Nature of Daylight!*

Mariana

Hometown: Birmingham, AL

Studies: Business Administration

Fun Fact: Spanish is my first language! My family and I moved from Colombia to the USA when I was seven.

Favorite sounds: I love the sound of my family at a gathering: loud, lots of laughter, and salsa music in the back!

GOD LISTENS TO YOU

by Sr. Noëlle Marie Bethlehem, SV

As Sisters, we often hear, “Oh, Sister, you have a direct line to God.” But the truth is, so do you.

A steady stream of specialists came to visit Lorenzo in the hospital. For eight weeks, Lorenzo’s father had remained at his newborn son’s side, watching the doctors test, listen to, and talk about Lorenzo’s vulnerable heart. One day, Lorenzo’s father finally turned to a doctor holding a stethoscope to his son’s chest and asked, “May I listen?”

God longs to listen to your heart. In your joy and delight, sorrow and confusion, desire and discouragement, rejoicing and resignation, a loving Father remains wholly present to your every circumstance, asking, “Let Me see your face. Let Me hear your voice,” (*Song 2:14*). As Sisters, we often hear, “Oh, Sister, you have a direct line to God.” But the truth is, as one created and unconditionally loved by God, so do you.

God listens to you because He loves you, and nothing can change this reality. Listening is more than an essential element of what love “does”; it is essential to Who Love is. When St. John says “God is love,” he uses the Greek word “agape” (*1 Jn 4:8*). This word used to describe God’s love finds roots in words meaning “to speak or babble like a child”; “welcome, accept with love”; “dad”; and “guide, support, impel.” Listening to the “babbles” of your heart is etched into God’s very essence. Our hearts ache for this affection — to be heard, understood, and responded to with love — because our hearts were made by God, for God, and in the image of His perfect communion of love within the Blessed Trinity.

Recently, a Sister sat down to pray the rosary with five-year-old David. Preferring to bypass all the prayers he had memorized, David proceeded to use each bead to thank God for something he loved. “Thank You, God, for my Mom. Thank You, God, for my Dad. Thank You for my Lego donut truck. And my Lego race car. And my Lego convertible...” The litany of toy cars continued, each one bringing a bigger smile to the Sister’s face. How much more must God delight in the simple, sincere babbles of His children? Often, “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” but nothing is too small or large, too simple or complicated to present to God’s affectionate and ever-listening love (*Rom 8:26*).

But doesn’t God know everything about us already?

A Polish nun named St. Faustina addressed this question to Jesus, who replied, “Yes, I do know; but you should not excuse yourself with the fact that I know, but with childlike simplicity talk to Me about everything, for My ears and heart are inclined towards you, and your words are dear to Me” (*Diary of St. Faustina, 276*).

All of salvation history tells the story of God revealing Himself as One who lovingly listens and responds to His people.

“I have seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry...I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them” (*Ex 3:7-8*). As Abraham asks God six times if He will spare the city of Sodom, we behold One who does not grow weary of our questions (*cf. Gen 18:16-33*). As Gideon questions the angel, we see God’s receptivity to our honest doubts: “Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all His wonderful deeds...?” (*Judg 6:13*). As Mary brings to her Son the need for wine at the wedding at Cana, we behold One who lets His heart be moved by our simple intercession: “They have no wine” (*Jn 2:3*). As Bartimaeus in his physical blindness cries out to Jesus for mercy, we see One who hears, stops, and invites us into deeper conversation: “What do you want Me to do for you?” (*Mk 10:51*).

Yet, salvation history also reveals that God's people weave in and out of this divine dialogue as they struggle with impatience, confusion, disobedience, and distrust. Songs of praise for God's deliverance quickly yield to grumbles of distrust and despair. Waiting on God's reply turns into the construction and worship of false gods. And the experience of suffering so often prompts fear, confusion, and a choice to hide, reject, or distance themselves from the source of their salvation.

Salvation history continues to unfold in each of our hearts as we engage the dynamic journey of learning to know and trust that God, as a loving father, hears and responds to us, His children.

We may wish our prayer requests were fulfilled like our latest online order — 48-hour deliveries to the doorstep of our hearts. While God does not always respond this way, we see throughout Scripture that He is certainly able! "You are the God who performs miracles; You display Your power among the peoples" (Ps 77:14). We can therefore be tempted to make any number of conclusions when we communicate our needs and desires to God and do not see or understand His response: *God doesn't listen to me. God doesn't love me. God isn't present to me. God can't help me. God is withholding good things from me. God isn't who I thought He was...*

As God's children, we have access to the fullness of His love, but we lack the fullness of His wisdom, understanding, and eternal perspective.

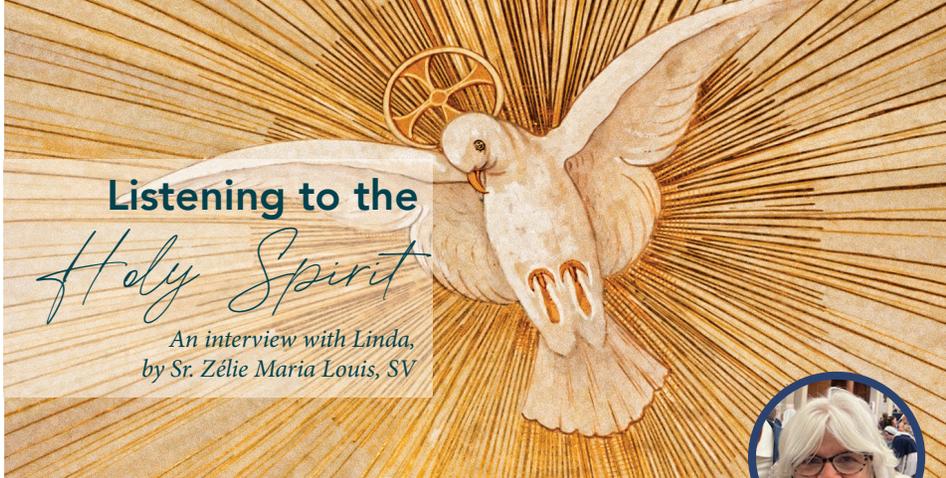
Our capacity to truly know and communicate the deepest needs, thoughts, and desires of our hearts is limited, and, like every child, our immediate desires can blind us from our ultimate, eternal good that God is always seeking to safeguard for us in love.

As we seek gifts from God's hands, so often He is seeking to hold our own and lead us in love on a journey into deeper relationship with Him, which will not simply satisfy our desires but far surpass them.

In the context of salvation history and in our own lives, one of the most loving responses God gives to the needs and desires of His children is: "I will be with you" (Is 43:2). God desires to be with us and hear from us at every moment, but especially in the places of our deepest suffering, discouragement, doubt, and fear. When Jesus freely embraced His Passion — taking upon Himself every experience that confounds and compels us to cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46) — and proceeded to rise from the dead in the power of His Father's Love, God revealed most plainly that He compassionately listens to the cries of our hearts. He understands them intimately, and He responds with the power of His love in ways beyond our imagining.

When we wonder, "Does God listen to me?" we are invited to gaze upon the Heart of Jesus opened to receive us in every circumstance, glorified by the Father's Love, and abiding with us in every tabernacle as God's unending Word to our hearts: "I will be with you until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Be not afraid to speak simply to God. He is listening to you with love.



Linda has been a friend of our community for over 20 years. Born and raised in New York City, she ran a pregnancy center in Brooklyn for 17 years. Her fierce love for Mary and her deep listening to the Holy Spirit has blessed countless lives.

Can you share a little of your story?

My mother and father were raised in orphanages because my immigrant grandparents couldn't speak English, and there was no food. They were starving. My mother and father went from house to house nine days before I was born. They got a two-bedroom cold water flat on the fifth floor. I was born, and I felt wanted and loved. I became a big shot in Fifth Avenue textiles. I was in magazines there. But I wasn't happy. I prayed every day for ten years to be in pro-life work. I said, "Blessed Mother, please, can I work for you and your Son?" When I first got to the pregnancy center, I got on my knees and I said, "Jesus and Blessed Mother, this is your place. Anything you want, I'll do for you." And the women just kept coming to our door; eventually they called it "Linda's Place." We opened up a prenatal clinic with doctors and nurses, too, because so many kept coming back, even though there was a *Planned Parenthood* in the same building.

What did you learn about being present to another person?

Everyone is starving for love, and love comes from God. The [women] knew that, when they came, they would get undivided attention. They weren't privileged. They came from broken homes. They had no fathers. The boyfriends didn't want the baby. And you just reach this all with love. It's love. I'd say, "Hello, how are you, sweetheart? Sit down — I'm Linda. What's your name?" Then I'd ask them if they'd like to fill out a paper, or just talk. Some of them would just get in line for an ultrasound, some would be excited... a lot of them would just burst into tears. Some didn't know what to do; they were confused. And you have to take your time, like there is nothing else in the universe: it's just you and her. The girl is lost and needs to be found, and Jesus wants to find her. I learned a lot. I also worked with the boys and the gangs — they wanted love, [too]. One mother had seven sons, and five of them were in the gang. She came and cried to me, "Linda, four of my sons went into the Navy because of you." I said, "No, no, because of Jesus."

Why is listening to the Holy Spirit so important in working with women who are pregnant and in crisis?

Because they are lost and have no one to love, no one to love them. In the initial encounter, you have to look into her eyes and see her soul and her heart. You can see in her soul that she wants to be loved. It all comes down to love. The love comes from God, and if they feel that love coming from you, they will come back.

What happens when you listen with your heart?

You need to know what's going on deep in her heart to reach her, to love her. I remember one girl who came in and said, "I have to get an abortion; I'm fine, I just have to know how many weeks along I am." I didn't know what to do, so I went behind the ultrasound [machine] and prayed. I said, "Jesus, I don't know what to do." Then into my mind's eye came a picture of the most beautiful young man — Jesus. I asked the mother, "Would you like to hold your baby's hand? She said, "You're crazy! You're insane! I'm out of here." I said, "Please, please." She put her hand on her belly, and we watched the ultrasound. Little by little, the baby's hand reached up to her, and touched her through her womb. That baby girl was born on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and baptized — now she is a teenager and her mom is a designer. It was so beautiful. The mothers, the babies — they came back. Some of them are older now and big, and they came back.

Essential Elements of Listening

There are four elements essential to truly effective listening: attending, following, reflecting, and silence.



ATTENDING

Attending helps the other person to know that we are really paying attention

to what they are saying. The external things are important when we attend to another: our posture, making eye contact, our facial expressions. These things communicate, “I’m with you.” Listening is about journeying with the other, not about fixing them or any problem they are bringing to you. Putting away phones or computers and not multi-tasking can help the other know that you are with them.



FOLLOWING

Following shows, through non-verbal and verbal cues, that we are *with* the other person in

the conversation, that we have taken in the conversation. This gives them permission to keep going. Revealing that we are following the conversation is based primarily on what we

say to them and what questions we ask. As we follow the other person while they are sharing their thoughts, feelings, and desires, we get to earn the trust of even those we know well by letting them share what is most meaningful to their heart and by staying with them.



REFLECTING

Reflecting allows us to show the other person that we’ve truly heard and understood what they were saying. Reflecting

means to restate briefly in our own words the other’s thoughts or feelings without judgment. Through our words, we are a mirror to them. This happens by responding to them with

statements such as: “You think…” or “It sounds like you feel…” These statements can help to define and narrow down what the other is actually experiencing, both for our own understanding and theirs, as well. We don’t have to understand everything perfectly the first time; reflecting leads us to a better understanding of where the other person is. Often, when we’ve reflected to them what we’ve heard, they will say something like, “Yes, that’s exactly it” or “No, I think what I mean is…” Either way, reflecting gives the other a space to share more if they desire.



SILENCE

Silence is the final key to effective listening, and one that many fear. But silence is

important! If someone is sharing a part of their heart, we don’t want to rush a response — silence can unlock both our hearts and theirs, and gives us time to respond in a meaningful way by taking the time to process what has

been said. In the long run, learning to incorporate silence into our conversations can help us to be more effective listeners.



Listening can be healing for others and bring them to life again. It reveals their dignity, that they are worth listening to. *But how do we really listen to others? And what are some of the barriers to effective listening?*

Effective listening is a set of skills that demonstrate we understand another’s thoughts and feelings from the other person’s point of view. It’s a work of stepping into the other person’s shoes and seeking to understand how they see the world around them. By expressing our understanding, others feel known and heard. They know that we understand what their experience is because we are focused on them and what they are sharing, and this opens up the pathway to trust. We aren’t necessarily born with the capacity to effectively listen, but it is something that all of us can practice and develop. Persevering in listening to those around us can transform our lives and relationships. Here are some tips:

- 1 Make the intentional choice** to listen to someone. It can be hard, at times, to be interested in what the other is saying; we might be more easily distracted by other things. Deepening relationships depend on my willingness to listen to the other. Do not be afraid to choose it!
- 2 Don’t give up due to distractions.** We all know what it feels like to be distracted in conversations, even when we want to

Learn more about listening

by watching the INTO LIFE series (La Esencia de la Vida), developed by the Sisters of Life, the McGrath Institute of Notre Dame University, and CampCampo Films.



TIPS ON HOW TO LISTEN

It's a skill and an art.

By Sr. Lumen Glorise, SV

listen and learn. Refusing to give up on listening when distractions are frequent is a brave move towards communion.

3 Surrender the response. We can often be so concerned about what we'll say next that we can lose track of what the other person is actually saying. Take the bold step of surrender and refocus on the other person and their experience as they're speaking.

4 Seek their story. We're hardwired for stories. We love listening to them and making sense of them, especially our own. Listening is an incredible opportunity to learn and deepen our understanding of the world by hearing the human experience of another. It may not always relate to our story, but it will always help us learn.

5 Believe in your ability to listen others into life. Authentic listening is powerful, and it changes lives, including our own. One of the greatest gifts we can give another is an authentic and empathetic ear. We're created for communion, and listening is reviving a core strength we each have for the sake of each other. It's about spending time listening and understanding. When you reveal to another that you have heard and understood what they've said, you have just given them the experience of real friendship and the encouragement we all desire.



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Barriers to Good Listening

When we listen to others, we want to give them space to “empty the bucket” — to share everything on their heart they were hoping to express. We also want them to experience that we understand them. But there are some common barriers to communication that, while not bad in and of themselves, can be detrimental to the conversation when used too often or too soon.

The first is **giving advice.**

GIVING ADVICE

It's important not to jump in with advice too soon, because it can make others feel dependent, or incapable, or that we are taking control when it isn't our place. We might also miss what is actually at the heart of what someone is sharing with us. Letting them share completely, and then listening and reflecting to them what we've heard is necessary before we ask if they are open to hearing our advice.



The second

barrier is **agreeing or disagreeing.**

AGREEING/DISAGREEING

It's okay to let the other know that we are following the conversation. But if we agree or disagree right away, we can shut down fruitful communication. This can turn the conversation's focus back on ourselves when we want to be focused on the other person.



Another barrier is **assurance.**

ASSURANCE

It can demonstrate that we haven't understood, especially when the other person is sharing something difficult. Trying to paint a silver lining around a situation too soon can be hurtful, since the one sharing with us may still be struggling in some way and may just need us to listen and be present in the difficulties.



Adding our own story

is another barrier to

ADDING OUR OWN STORY

communication. While someone is speaking to us, we want to let them share without turning the focus onto us. To share our story, even when it seems related, prevents others from being able to share their experience with us.



One final barrier to communication

UNNECESSARY QUESTIONS

is **asking questions that lead people off course.** Meaningful questions that help us to clarify what they are saying and demonstrate that we are following the conversation can help communication. But we can derail a conversation and stop the other from emptying the bucket if we ask too many questions, or questions that don't help them to share what they need to share with us.



HOW LISTENING IS

healing



An interview with Elizabeth*, by Sr. Léonie Thérèse, SV

Can you tell us your story?

Growing up, my parents fought a lot. My best friend across the street came from a similar environment, and so I assumed that's how everybody grew up. I had no concept of what a loving family was. My mom started leaving for periods of time. She would come and go, and I got used to no one ever being there for me. My older sister and I had to take care of ourselves. By the time I was eight, I knew how to do everything that a child really shouldn't know how to do.

At the first opportunity to get out of my house, I ran. I went to college and met a man who was five years older than me. He had a volatile disposition similar to my mom's. Because I thought he was responsible and settled, I moved in with him. I got pregnant, and he forced me into having an abortion.

I was 20 years old, and I had nobody to even talk to. I think that's the moment I shut down and became numb. I ended up marrying him, and three years later I had my son. My husband was physically and emotionally abusive. That was the first time I remember God intervening in my life. I thought, "My son will never experience the abuse I've experienced!" I got up in the middle of the night, packed up, and left. The only thing I wanted was my son.

I started from scratch with my sister, in a studio apartment, with a baby. I just built my way up and kept going. Then my sister was diagnosed with a very rare cancer. I had the opportunity to take care of her for a year and a half. We regularly had deep conversations that we had never been able to have before, because as kids we were just numb to everything in life. After my sister passed, I grieved, but I felt as though I was grieving something deeper. God laid it on my heart in a dream: I had shut out from my mind the abortion and that whole period of my life.

How did you first meet the Sisters of Life?

I heard about the Sisters when I met a Franciscan friar who was giving a talk at my church. I went to confession — which was my first time confessing my abortion — and he recommended I reach out and speak with the Sisters, so I did. The rest is history!

What was your experience of being listened to?

In the beginning, it was very hard for me to wrap my head around [the experience]. I think one of my core wounds from growing up was never being heard or listened to. I guess part of me didn't want to think for one moment that I was being heard, because then, if it wasn't so, wouldn't that break my heart? It took me a bit to get comfortable with it.

What impact has being listened to had on your journey of healing?

I was shut down for a really long time; being listened to made me more open to healing. [Talking with the Sisters] was the first time that someone actually understood what I was going through and the depth of the pain that comes with abortion. You just don't know when you're 20 that 30 years later it's going to surface and you're going to have to face it and actually heal from it. It's a long journey. I have been able, with Jesus, to heal from some painful times in my life, and I know it started with the forgiveness for my abortion. I've been walking with the Sisters for almost six years. I am a Co-Worker of Life, and I volunteer for the Days of Prayer & Healing. This allows me to give back, which is why I love it so much. I've come to realize that every person is entitled to being heard. Listening is not just for certain people; it's for everybody.

Do you have any words of encouragement for someone who desires to listen well to a loved one?

I think it's so important to give all of your energy and listen to that person, because it could be the one thing that makes that person feel valued and loved. It's the intention. You intend to hear fully what someone is saying and to not be in your own head or ten steps ahead trying to think about what to say. It's about quieting down and letting the Holy Spirit in. That brings peace and calm so that you can focus on them and not on yourself. Once you realize that, you live from a different heart. Every day I say this prayer: "Take the blindness from my eyes, the deafness from my ears, the darkness from my mind, and the hardness from my heart, and give me the grace and the wisdom that You think I need for today."

We all need TO BE LISTENED TO

An interview with Fr. Joseph Martin Hagan, O.P.,
by Sr. Maria Frassati, SV

Why is listening important?

I think sometimes people can think that if they need someone to listen to them, it's because they're weak. I once came across a painting of the Presentation where Mary, after receiving the prophecy about her heart being pierced by a sword, had a look on her face that said, "I can do this, but I really would like to talk to someone." When people come to meet with a priest or talk to a Sister, often it's because of sin or shame. But even Mary herself, the Immaculate Conception, still wanted someone to listen. Joseph would have had a very important role in receiving Mary's heart. He probably didn't need to say much. Mary knows her own heart better than we can imagine. She knows the whole Scripture. But she has to talk it out as a human. And this is a privilege given to St. Joseph, to listen to her heart. The rosary is a continuation of this sharing, where, for our sake, Mary shares her memories with us. The rosary is a sign of how open her heart is to us. It's an echo of when John is given the Blessed Mother at the foot of the Cross, and takes her into his home — he becomes a little Joseph. In listening to the mysteries of Mary's heart, we, too, take her into our home.

Why do you think listening is so powerful?

There's no replacement for love. Listening comes from reverence for others, especially when they are revealing their shame, where they haven't lived as a son or daughter. But you treat them as a daughter or as a son by the way you listen. This is powerful. And people know whether you're listening or not. There's a difference between approaching listening from task-mode or from enjoyment-mode. Task-mode is when I'm working with an email or another task, I'm scanning to see: "What is the crux of this?" and, "What's the quickest response I can give?" The danger is bringing this mentality to listening. As much as you can, try not to think about your response yet. That means being okay with an awkward silence. It's about listening with empty hands, letting someone speak and even go off on tangents. It always makes me a little bit sad when people will apologize for being hard to follow or going on too many tangents. It's almost like they're saying, "I'm probably unlovable." They need someone willing to grab their surfboard, conversationally speaking, and just ride those waves with them.

How do you avoid looking at others with a task-oriented mentality when you're listening?

The deepest thing is knowing that I am not a "task" to Jesus. Because often, if I'm treating other people like that it's because I treat myself like that, right? I need to be grounded in the reality that Jesus chose me. And then when I'm receiving someone else, I make an act of faith that, in the depths of their soul, Jesus Christ is there, and



His Providence is moving in all the events in their life. I ask, "Jesus, help me to see in the depths of who they are." But I also ask, "Jesus, within me, help me to see them as You see them." The goal of listening is friendship — it's to love, to build up a communion of persons. This isn't about "getting the job done" but about enjoying another person. It's an art of enjoyment.

How can we learn to listen better?

One skill is "patient listening." Sometimes people begin a sentence and then pause, implying that they want you to finish that sentence for them. But we have to learn how to lovingly not finish sentences. Another situation is what I call "The Hidden Paragraph," when someone shares a two-paragraph version of their story, and then you give them a five-second pause, and all of a sudden they say, "Well, I've never shared this with anyone..." It's a hidden paragraph. They weren't even thinking about sharing this; people are used to being interrupted, being forced to summarize. But now that you're not interrupting them, they share what they haven't shared before. Don't be afraid of pauses or awkwardness. Silence is an important part of this: it's a receptivity to the other. It's focusing your thoughts on them and letting other things rest within you, so that you're only listening to the one in front of you. Also, to be a good listener, you have to know how to be detached from your phone. While listening, it's important to turn off your phone, or put it in a mode where you're not going to be worried about it. That's a big thing, because the first cue for someone as to whether or not you're listening is if you're checking it or fidgeting with it.

What words of encouragement would you offer to someone who thinks they aren't good at listening?

You have so many chances to try. People desperately want to be listened to, so much so that if you try and fail, there will be more people who will let you try again. People are hungry to be heard, and if they know you're genuinely trying your best, they're pretty compassionate. And you don't have to wait for someone to be in crisis to practice. At the dinner table, ask, "How was your day?" Let them talk for as long as they want. It's difficult, but there are a lot of chances to try, and the consequences of failing are small. Everyone has their own story. The basic recipe of love comes from reverence and humble gratitude for them. Through listening, you move from isolation, which is like hell — the most isolating place possible — to fellowship, which is as close to heaven as we can get.



Fr. Joseph Martin Hagan, O.P., is a Dominican Friar of the Province of St. Joseph. He currently resides in Virginia, and is a chaplain for the University of Virginia Catholic Hoos at St. Thomas Aquinas University Parish.

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We are offering a Novena of Christmas Masses for you and your loved ones.

“When you become overcome by the Light that is Christ, you see everyone as made in the image and likeness of God.”

- John Cardinal O'Connor

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