

# Listening

*Words of Spirituality*

by ENZO BIANCHI

Our own listening leads us to recognize God's listening as a dimension that precedes us and in which we are immersed

"Incapable of listening and speaking": this is humanity, according to a fragment of Heraclitus. Christians are fully aware that their ability to speak to their God, whom they cannot see, depends on listening to him. Faith comes from what is heard - *fides ex auditu* (Romans 10:17), and prayer is first and foremost an act of listening: listening to God through the sacrament of his Word, Scripture, and listening to him in the world and in daily life, which becomes possible when prolonged contact with the Gospel educates the believer's discernment. It is by listening, in fact, that the Christian learns to see. It should not surprise us, then, that Christianity is above all a discipline of listening, an art of listening. The New Testament asks us to pay attention to whom we listen to, to how we listen, and to what we listen to. This implies a continuous process of discernment between words and the Word, the difficult task of recognizing God's word in human words and his will in historical events, and the attentiveness and availability of the entire human person. We grow in the spiritual life to the extent that we descend into the depths of listening.

Listening means not only confessing that another is present, but making space in ourselves for this presence to the point that we become the dwelling place of the Other. The experience of the indwelling of the divine presence (the 'visits of the Word' that St. Bernard acknowledged he had received several times following his biblical *lectio*) cannot be disassociated from our ability to 'offer hospitality' to others by listening to them. This tells us that someone who listens, and who defines his or her identity on the basis of the paradigm of listening, is someone who loves - love also comes from what is heard, *amor ex auditu*. Our listening to God, with all of the dimensions this listening implies - silence, attention, interiorization, the spiritual effort of retaining what we have heard, the effort of de-centering our attention from ourselves in order to re-center it on Another - leads us to welcome within ourselves a presence that is closer to us than our own 'I'; or better, our listening leads to this presence being revealed in us. We find ourselves re-living the experience of the patriarch Jacob, who exclaimed, "Truly, the Lord is in this spot, although I did not know it! (Genesis 28:16). The place where God is found is no other than the human being. In the Bible, God is not simply 'the One who is;' he is also, and more significantly, 'the One who speaks.' By speaking, God seeks a relationship with each person and awakens our freedom, because if the Word is a gift, it can always be welcomed or refused. This is why reading is also an important spiritual discipline in Christian life: when we read, we meet the One who speaks through the Biblical page.

One of the terms used to designate the Bible in the Jewish tradition, *Miqra'*, indicates a 'call' to go out 'from' and to travel 'toward.' From the perspective of faith, every act of reading the Bible is the beginning of an exodus in which we leave ourselves in order to meet Another - and this exodus takes place as we listen! Significantly, the biblical account of the exodus tells us that the great obstacle the people of Israel faced during their journey from Egypt toward freedom was their own 'hardness of heart': they were a 'stiff-necked' people who persisted in listening not to God but to themselves. But it is also true that in the biblical experience of God and in the believer's own experience, there is the discovery that God is 'the One who listens to prayer.' Our own listening leads us to recognize God's listening as a dimension that precedes us and in which we are immersed. Paul writes, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Listening is the contemplative, anti-idolatrous attitude par excellence. It is by listening that we seek to live consciously in the presence of God, the Other who is the origin of the irreducible mystery of all otherness. For Christians, listening is the source of life.

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