

*A powerful article by an American Jesuit priest reflecting on how we might discover God 'speaking' to us through our everyday experiences*

## **WILLIAM BARRY SJ – DOES GOD COMMUNICATE WITH ME?**

*'You say that God wants to engage in a relationship of mutuality with each of us, and you indicate that God communicates with us. But I don't hear God speaking to me.'* I can imagine someone responding in this way to my article *'Why Do You Pray?'* I would like to answer the question of the title as best I can.

In the earlier article I argued that God creates the world in order to invite each one of us into a relationship of intimacy, friendship or mutuality. If this is true, then God is always making overtures to each of us, is always communicating with each of us. So, the answer to the question of the title is yes, and the real question should be, *'How do I pay attention to God's communication?'* God, the creator of the universe, is not the god of the deists, one who created the world and then left it to carry on by itself, much as a clockmaker makes a watch. As Ignatius of Loyola wrote in the Spiritual Exercises, **God is always at work in this universe, calling us to intimacy and friendship with God and with one another.**

So, the questions is: *'How does God communicate with me or with anyone?'*

When we are attracted to anyone or anything, we are attracted by the existing beauty of that person or thing. But we do not exist until God desires us into existence. In so desiring us, God makes us desirable to God and others and desirous of God. God's action of desiring us into existence is not a once-for-all act in the past; it is ongoing, ever present. At every moment of our existence, we are being created by God's desire for us.

Do we experience this creative desire of God? I believe so. Every so often we are almost overcome by a desire for 'we know not what' and, at the same time, are filled with a sense of well-being. At these moments we are experiencing God's creative desire for us and our own corresponding desire for God. God is the object of this desire for 'we know not what,' for the all, for what we cannot even name. In Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, we find a description of such an experience. An old woman, Pearl Tull, asks her son to read from her childhood diary. It seems that before she dies, Pearl wants to remember an experience she had written about long ago:

*Early this morning I went out behind the house to weed. Was kneeling in the dirt by the stable with my pinafore a mess and perspiration rolling down my back, wiped my face on my sleeve, reached for the trowel, and all at once thought, Why I believe that at just this moment I am absolutely happy. The Bedloe girl's piano scales were floating out her window...and a bottle fly was buzzing in the grass, and I saw that I was kneeling on such a beautiful green little planet. I don't care what else might come about, I have had this moment. It belongs to me.*

Over and over again I have found that people respond positively when I ask whether they have had experiences like this. These are experiences of God's communication to us.

Once when I was discussing such experiences with a class of graduate students, an Australian nun spoke up. She had had such experiences, but she had also had experiences that were different. She had worked in the inner city of one of Australia's large cities. Often in the evening, after an exhausting day, she would take time for prayer and would be overcome by sobs of deep sorrow. In the quiet that followed I asked her whether she would want to have more such experiences. She said, *'Yes, but not only those.'* In the class there was a deep silence. I believed then, and still believe now, that she had experienced God's sorrow at what we have done to this *'beautiful green little planet.'* **I have come to believe that when we spontaneously experience great sorrow and compassion for another human being, we are experiencing God's own compassion.**

The prophet Hosea fell hopelessly in love with a prostitute and continued to love her in spite of her continued infidelity. As he pondered his own passion, he realized that he was experiencing God's own pathos over faithless Israel.

When we really love and forgive someone who has done us wrong, I believe we are experiencing God's love and forgiveness. David Fleming, SJ, maintains that when we pray in the First Week of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises for shame and confusion because of our sins and the sinful nature of our world, we are asking to experience Jesus' shame and confusion as a human being for what human beings have done to other human beings, to the planet and to God. In other words, we are asking to experience God's shame and confusion over us sinners. The prophet Micah puts these poignant words of complaint in God's mouth: *'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me.'* (6:3) The creator of the universe begs his people for an answer, almost as if puzzled and ashamed at what they have done. This sounds like the shame and confusion for which Ignatius asks the retreatant to pray. Perhaps when we experience such shame and confusion at our own sins and at the horrors perpetrated by our fellow human beings, we are experiencing God's communication to us.

I have met people who show tremendous compassion for others. One is a pastoral care worker in a hospital, who is often moved to tears of compassion for suffering patients. Her heart is nearly broken by the suffering of these strangers who become her family. Another is a man whose wife is suffering from a brain disease that has changed her personality. He told me how he loved her so much and how his heart was broken that she no longer knew he loved her. When I hear of experiences like these, tears well up in my eyes; I feel an awe and warmth that convinces me that I am in the presence of God, a God who loves others through the hearts of these people. When we experience compassion for others who are suffering, we are experiencing God's compassion. God is communicating to us and through us to the other.

Recently I acted generously without premeditation. In fact, as I described it later, it was an act of spontaneous generosity for which I could not take credit. I had been planning to use a gift certificate for some books for myself, when, at lunch, I asked an elderly Jesuit if he could use some classical CD's. I do not know where this idea came from, but when he said he would like some of Beethoven's symphonies, I just went out and used the gift certificate for them. While I was doing this I never thought of myself as generous; in fact, I did not think of myself at all. This is not my usual way of acting, as you can tell by the fact that I was surprised by it. In this situation, I believe I experienced God's generosity poured out in me. It reminded me of an experience recorded by Frederick Buechner in his memoir, *The Sacred Journey*. He had just signed the contract for his first novel. As he left the publisher's office, he ran into a college classmate who was working as a messenger boy. Instead of feeling some pride that he had succeeded while this classmate had not, he felt sadness, even shame, and realized, as he writes, *'that, in the long run, there can be no real joy for anybody until there is joy finally for us all'*. He says that he can take no credit for this insight or his feeling. *'What I felt was something better and truer than I was, or than I am, and it happened, as perhaps all such things do, as a gift.'* When we are surprised by feelings, desires and insights that are *'something better and truer'* than we are, I maintain, we are experiencing God's presence drawing us into union with God and with all others.

**What I am suggesting is that we pay attention to our experience as the privileged place where God communicates to us.** Our God is actively involved in this world and with each of us. God has a purpose in creating the universe and each of us; that purpose never rests nor grows weary. If this is true, then we are the objects of God's communication at every moment of our existence. God is always knocking at our door, as it were. We are just not aware enough at the time. But we can grow in awareness if we wish. **When we begin to pay more attention, we will discover, I believe, that God's communication often shows itself in those times when we forget ourselves and are concerned with the other, whether that other is something in nature or another human being.**

While Jesus was explaining the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, their hearts were burning, but they did not pay attention to this fact until after the breaking of bread. Even though they did not notice the burning of their hearts, they were caught up in the words of this 'stranger' and thus were experiencing God's communication. When they recalled the experience, they recognized what had been happening on the road. We need to take time to look back over our day to see where our hearts were burning. We may well find that we have been touched often during a day by God.

Yes, God does communicate to each of us.