

Learning to Trust in God
A Memoir by Sister Serena



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Hearing God as a Child

I don't know that I really thought so much that it was God speaking to me. I guess it was more my listening to what was being said or how it was being directed. When people ask, "How did you know you wanted to be a BVM?" I say, "Well, I just always thought I did." I'm sure it was God talking to me in those days, but I was not conscious of the fact I wanted to be a sister, and I wanted to be a BVM.

Of course I was very selfish. When I would pray and ask God to help me with my vocation, I would say, "Please tell me that I want to be a BVM." So, that's exactly what I did. I was sort of trying to make God do what I wanted to do.

I feel that God was talking to me during that time, and I was listening to him. He wasn't coming down in a big cloud, or knocking me off a horse or anything like that at all. I felt very comfortable talking to God, and saying, "Yes, this is what I want to do. This is what I believe I want to do." I've never had any doubts about what I wanted to do.

I owe a lot to my parents for my prayer life. We used to go to mass together. My mother was very good about teaching us how to pray, such as the Hail Mary, before we went to school. My mother had great devotion to St. Joseph. In fact, she always used to say that she prayed to St. Joseph for a good husband. My father's name was Joseph, and when she first met him, she thought, "No, that wasn't the one for her," but it worked out that way. So we had a statue of St. Joseph in our home. Even when we went out to play, we would kiss St. Joseph and ask him to bring us back home safely. Poor St. Joseph finally never had a face. We kissed his face away. Then we'd bless ourselves with Holy Water.

I filled out a questionnaire not too long ago that asked if there were there any devotional practices that we carried over into our lives. I have a statue of St. Joseph on my nightstand. When I get up in the morning and when I leave, I kiss St. Joseph. Of course I think of my mother and father when I do that. We had certain practices that we kept, and those are some of them.

Prayer in Difficult Times

The men were taken to war, the mothers had to go to work, and it was very difficult for mothers at that time, very difficult. Those were very hard times, and they were so hard on the wives, who all of the sudden, with their husbands going to war, became single parents for a long time. It certainly encouraged people to pray. The parishes had prayer during the day because people didn't really go out at night, because of the air raids that we had and the blackouts. And often times we went to mass in the morning, where the priests just used a little vigil light to read the prayer book, the missal. The rest of us in the church were in complete darkness. It brought people closer to God, there's no doubt about that. It brought all of us closer to God. I would say

that in the schools too we prayed, but we always prayed before classes every morning; perhaps we talked more about God and God's will then. We got through that okay.

I guess through all this, I think my relationship with God has been just a very friendly one. Some children grew up being sort of afraid of God because we saw those pictures, you know, like He was an old man in a big cloud, and that's not... I just consider Him a friend.

Living with the BVMs

We went to prayer several times a day, but during those times, we were also taught how to mediate. Meditation is very difficult. It takes a long time to discipline yourself to do that as soon as you get up in the morning and when you're tired for a half hour, but our postulant mistress helped us to do it.

We made retreats according to St. Ignatius all the time, so we followed the Ignatius method of meditation. It is when you place yourself in the presence of God and you talk to Him. You read a passage from Scripture or from a regular book, and then as Ignatius says, you try to put yourself in the place of that and see what you experience. At the end of the half hour, you keep looking at it so you don't wander away. You don't take a book and just read it; instead, you read a passage and then you meditate on that. At the end you talk with God or you talk with a saint and mediate on the life of the saint. But mostly you talk directly to God, or to Jesus, or Mary or Joseph, and say a prayer—an Our Father or a Hail Mary, whatever best suits your personal life. That was a real learning process because I don't know that I ever really meditated before that time. When we (the sisters and I) said the Rosary, we thought about the mysteries, but not in deep meditation. Sometimes you become discouraged with that, because your mind wanders.

I often recall a story of St. Frances. St. Frances said to a young man, "Meditation is very difficult," and the young man said, "Oh, no it's not." St. Frances said to him "Well, if you can mediate on the 'Our Father' without being distracted, I will give you my horse." So the young man starts saying the "Our Father" and meditating on the phrases, and in the middle of it he said to St. Frances "Do I get the saddle too?" St. Frances said, "You see, we have to learn how to meditate." I'd say that was probably one of the most difficult things.

Teaching

All this time we're growing in spirituality and we're listening to God and talking to God and sometimes saying, "Where are you? I need you badly," especially when we step into a classroom. One day, I told my principal, "Oh, I'm having so much trouble with this little boy. He doesn't want to sit in his desk." The principal told me to take a picture of St. John Bosco, who was a great disciplinarian. I took the picture and put it in this little boy's book. One day he found it and tore it up. So I told the principle she said, "Well, paste it under his desk," and I pasted it under there. I prayed to John Bosco every day for Patrick. Finally, Patrick settled down. I was always grateful to John Bosco for doing this for me.

Hearing God and Giving Thanks

Even when I could not hear God's voice, I always felt that God was with me. I don't think I ever said "no" to Him. Of course, when you commit offenses against Him you're really saying "no," but I don't think I've said "no" to him in a radical way. Today when I want something, or think I need something, I just talk to him. I say, "Oh God, please help us." Prayer doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be formal, or that you have to say "Our Father" or anything like that. It just means that you're talking. Prayer is actually talking to God. For the most part, we are asking God for things, but we have to say "Thank you" to God too, you know. Say "Thank you" for the beauty of that rose or people around us, and for all the things that happen in our lives. And sometimes we say, "Where are you God? Are you listening?" I think he listens. We might not, but he always listens. But he doesn't want give us what we want because it's not good for us at that time. That's where faith comes in, when he says "No, that's not what you're supposed to be doing at this point." We all have prayers of petition, and God likes to hear those too because He likes to be called upon.

Struggles

I think He challenges our faith, and sometimes we say, "Why God? Why God does this happen? Why did Haiti have to happen?" but I think sometimes things like that do happen because it brings a lot of good out of people who may not have thought of doing any good for those poor people.

So God has strange ways in working with us. Sometimes he tries a lot of people in their family lives, or their personal lives, and that's how we answer God's call. We may say, "Well we do have some money, we do have some money to spare for other people." That's where He's talking to us. I think we have to respond too, because He's talking to us personally, and you need to do this, too.