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לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ (1 KGS 3:9): RECEIVING AND FORMING TOWARDS A LISTENING HEART

ABSTRACT

This reflection article studies the request made by King Solomon to God for “a listening heart” (1 Kgs 3:9) at the beginning of his reign. It shows that this request entails a deliberate and conscious openness of the whole person to God as well as an attentiveness to the demands of the people whom he is called to govern. In Christianity, the “contemplative listening” is intimately linked with the theological tradition of the spiritual senses, which are referred to as the human capacity to know God. This capacity ought to be discovered and developed through formation and self-commitment. In the Christian tradition Spiritual Direction is highly esteemed as a most useful tool for the achievement of this ability, which would then help the person to be transformed into Christ.

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening is a central element of discernment both for the person doing the discernment and for anyone who is accompanying the person in this process. This reflection article starts from Solomon’s request to God for “a listening heart” at the beginning of his reign (1 Kgs 3:9) and analyses the importance of listening in one’s relationship with God and, subsequently, in one’s living a life of discipleship. However, the art of listening, especially with one’s “heart”, needs formation so as to learn to live consistently on a deeper level and receive one’s energy of life and direction from the Source of life itself.

This article begins by analysing the biblical concept of לֵב, especially in its relation to the verb שֹׁמֵעַ. The biblical data is particularly enriching both to help us understand the human being and to indicate the way forward for a life of integration and coherence. One particular aspect

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to which Sacred Scripture alludes and which is basic in one's life as a disciple is the theological tradition of the spiritual senses. The awakening to this truth about the human being helps us seek an important venue for understanding the nature of spiritual companionship and points to what becomes essential in the formation of a disciple.

Reflecting on Solomon's request for "a hearing heart", chosen as the theme for the annual retreat preached to him in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the centrality of this prayer in understanding the human being from a Christian point of view:

It really seems to me that this sums up the whole of the Christian vision of the human being. In himself man is not perfect; he is a relational being. It is not his *cogito* that can *cogitare* of the whole of reality. He needs listening, he needs to listen to the other and especially to the Other with a capital 'O', to God. Only in this way does he know himself, only in this way does he become himself (2010).

2. BIBLICAL TEXTS

2.1 לֵב שִׁמְעַע (1 Kgs 3:9)

We are presented with King Solomon at the beginning of his reign, taking over from his deceased father, David. We are told that Solomon "loved the Lord", although (it seems that the adverb קָרַב carries some form of judgement with it!) he used to offer sacrifices on the high places (בְּמִקְוֵה), among which Gibeon is mentioned (see 1 Kgs 3: 3-4).³ Based on the textual material, S.

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- 1 Jerome T. Walsh (1996:72) states that this use of קָרַב suggests that "Solomon's worship on the high places, legitimate as it was, tarnished his love for Yahweh".
 - 2 The word occurs only twice in the Torah as an object of divine displeasure (Lev 26:30; Num 33:52), with the second of these suggesting that the בְּמִקְוֵה was a feature of the worship system of the Canaanites. See Victor P. Hamilton (2001:388). According to Schunck (1977:144), "the predominantly negative estimation of the *bamoth* found in the present form of the OT is due to prophetic criticism of the establishment of these cult places and of the type of cult practiced there, and to the Deuteronomistic movement which advocated the centralization of the cult at Jerusalem". The first redactor of the Book of Kings used this idea "as a criterion for determining whether the people and the individual kings of the kingdom of Judah conducted themselves as the commands of Yahweh required".
 - 3 In 2 Chron 1:3, Solomon is said to be accompanied by the whole congregation in the worship at Gibeon. 1 Kings 3 tells us that the Temple was still not built

Shalom Brooks argues that “Gibeon played an important role in Israelite cultic life before Solomon – that is, since the time of Saul” (Shalom Brooks 2005:332-333). She mentions that its cultic popularity witnesses to “a long history behind it” (Shalom Brooks 2005:333). On the basis of Gibeon being mentioned as one of the cities assigned to the Levites (Josh 21:17), she claims that both Saul (1 Sam 14:33) and David (2 Sam 21:1) might have visited this high place to offer sacrifices. Thus, although Deut 12:2-18 establishes that these high places are to be destroyed and their non-removal by later kings was considered a grievous offence,⁴ King Solomon’s act of worship, in this instance, seems to be acceptable and commended.⁵ As a matter of fact, God grants the king a vision in a dream which, according to the tradition of the Ancient Near East, followed also by the Bible (Num 12:6), is one of the principal means chosen by God to communicate with human beings.

This context sets the scene for the dialogue between God and Solomon. It is a religious setting wherein the king is presented as being submissive to God, fully conscious of his new grave responsibilities,⁶ and his inadequacy to fulfil such a huge task – “I am but a little child” (1 Kgs 3:7).⁷

God asks Solomon what he would like to receive from him (1 Kgs 3:5), to which he answers not by requesting long life or riches or the life of his enemies, but “a listening heart”: “Give your servant a listening heart

(verse 2), while 2 Chronicles 1:3 attempts to sanctify Gibeon by appealing to hallowed memory (“which Moses the servant of the Lord had made in the wilderness”).

4 1 Kings 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35.

5 This view is not shared by Marvin A. Sweeney (2007:73-74) who argues that “the present form of this unit, particularly 1 Kgs 3, is the product of redactional activity in which earlier traditions that lauded Solomon’s wisdom and power were reread and rewritten to provide a critique of the king’s actions consistent with the goals of the various editions posited for the Deuteronomistic History”. He further elaborates that “these observations are based upon a reading of the Gibeon narrative in relation to the larger literary context of the DtrH; the narrative in and of itself is not overtly or inherently critical of Solomon. It is only when the narrative context is considered that the critique against Solomon becomes clear” (Sweeney 2007:80). See also Jerome T. Walsh (1996:70).

6 See Hens-Piazza (2006:34-35) who states that 1 Kings 3 “sketches the portrait of the ‘ideal’ king ... portrayed as the Lord’s servant”.

7 “Such references to young age were characteristic expressions on the part of those called to tasks much grander than they are able to accomplish” (Hens-Piazza 2006:38). See also Brueggemann (2000:47). According to Gene Rice (1990:32), even the expression “to go out and to come in” expresses the King’s “inexperience and incompetence in the duties and responsibilities of a king”.

(לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ) to judge your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge your people that is so great?" (v. 9).

Many different translations interpret this request by Solomon as being "a heart to understand" (JB), "an understanding mind" (NRSV, ESV), "an understanding heart" (KJV, NABO),⁸ "a discerning heart" (NIV). Although they somehow render the thought, these phrases miss the nuances that such a phrase has in relation to the biblical understanding of the human being and one's relationship with God.

According to Deuteronomistic Theology, this prayer manifests that "the ideal of monarchy in Israel had the same ethical core as the rule" of the Lord himself (Wright 2005:261). The emphasis is on "your servant" and "your people" and on the need to receive from God the knowledge of how to govern, so as to administer in justice the people entrusted to the King's care.

Syntactically, the expression לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ is related to what immediately follows in verse 9 by the preposition לְ: "to judge/govern (לְשַׁפֵּט) your people" and "to discern (לְהַבִּיחַ) between good and evil". Gene Rice (1990:35) states that

the choice of *shaphat* means that 'justice' should be heard echoing in the translation 'govern' – that 'govern' in this context is the exercise of authority that makes for justice.

Verses 11-12, where we have God's answer to Solomon's request, contain all four keywords found in the request – "heart", "listen", "discern" and "judge" – as well as two new qualities: "wise" and "discriminating". Jerome T. Walsh (1996:76) states that "the implication is that God grants even the gift Solomon asked for in greater depth and breadth than he requested".

The expression לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ has given rise to some speculation as to its origins.⁹ Siegfried Herrmann saw the prayer for a "listening heart" as issuing from the very core of the Israelite spirit. Hellmut Brunner, on the contrary, cited the Egyptian Instruction of Ptah-hotep, which deems the human heart to be the organ that heeds the will of God and where God can even dwell personally;¹⁰ according to him, the notion of the "listening

8 This is also how it is translated by Cogan (2001:187).

9 See Fabry (1995:422).

10 According to Fabry (1995:402), "this represents an early stage in the idea of conscience. The heart is the locus of an individual's ethical competence". "The significance of hearing in Egypt goes beyond education and character formation: hearing as a vehicle for understanding is a precondition for civilization" (Rüterswörden 2006:257).

heart” is probably of Egyptian origin.¹¹ Of much greater importance is the significance that these two words, especially when they are associated with each other, acquire in Sacred Scripture.

2.2 לֵב in the Bible

In several cultures of the Ancient Near East, the heart is always considered central to the human being. In Egypt, the heart is

the focus of the individual – body, spirit, soul, and will – the center of the entire personality and its relationship with God ... God speaks to mortals through the heart, but the heart is also where God can be known and God's will recognized (Fabry 1995:401-402).¹²

In Mesopotamia, the *libbu* is “the locus of the emotions that are more subject to the will ..., of consciousness, wisdom, and understanding” (Fabry 1995:403). However, in the Ugarit culture, “the heart is the locus of motherly instinct and desire for the beloved” (Fabry 1995:405). Finally, with the Aramaics, the *lb/lbb* “represents the individual and the center of his being; it is the seat of emotion, reflection, purpose, and will” (Fabry 1995:406).

Hans Walter Wolff (1974:40) considers לֵב to be “the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology”. Following his examination of the use of the word in the Hebrew Scriptures, he comes to the conclusion that “the Bible primarily views the heart as the centre of the consciously living man. The essential characteristic that, broadly speaking, dominates the concept is that the heart is called to reason, and especially to hear the word of God” (Wolff 1974:55).

According to Rütterswörden (2006:258), the verb שָׁמַע

usually means ‘hear’ in the sense of ‘hear favourably, accede’. This type of figurative language ... appears to be an example of a widespread anthropological phenomenon, in which ... verbs of hearing can be used in the sense of ‘hearken, obey’.

11 In the Instruction of Ptah-hotep, we find these verses which are very instructive: “Hearing is profitable for a son who hears, / for hearing penetrates into the hearer, / making the hearer obedient. ... / One whom God loves can hear, / but one whom God rejects cannot hear. It is the heart that makes its possessor one who hears or who does not hear. ... / As to the fool who refuses to hear, / for him nothing is done. ... / He lives on what brings death, / and his food is perverse speech”. In: H. Brunner, *Altägyptischer Weisheit*, Zurich, 1988:129-130, as quoted in Rütterswörden (2006:256).

12 See also Cogan (2001:187).

For the intent of this study, I believe that paying attention to some verses where לֵב and the verb שָׁמַע are used together could be very instructive. Wolff (1974:47) states that “it is highly significant that לֵב occurs by far the most frequently in the wisdom literature”. According to Proverbs (15: 14): “The wise heart seeks knowledge” and the heart is for understanding, as the eyes are for seeing and the ears for hearing (see Deut 29, 3).

It is God who puts this wisdom into one’s heart (see 1 Kgs 10: 24; 2 Chron 9: 23). Thus, wisdom writings, acknowledging that hearing is the fundamental pre-requisite for acquiring this wisdom, call on the human being to be ready to receive and to be taught: “Incline your ear and hear my words, and apply your mind to my teaching” (Prov 22: 17); “Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way” (Prov 23: 19). This is precisely God’s desire for his people: “Oh that my people would listen (שָׁמַע) to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” (Ps 81, 13). The one who listens to the Lord is called blessed: “Happy is the person who listens (שָׁמַע) to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors” (Prov 8:34).

According to the prophets, lack of receptivity translates into lack of understanding and, thus also, of salvation:

Make the heart of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed (Is 6:10; see Jer 5:21; Ezk 3:7; Zech 7:12).

For this reason, God cries out to his people to be attentive to him: “Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance” (Is 46:12). Instead, they preferred to be self-centered and listened to themselves rather than to God:

But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward (Jer 7: 24; also 11:8; 13:10; 16:12).

Those who are receptive of God’s word become righteous and have his law in their hearts: “Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts” (Isa 51:7). This listening needs to be attentive as the Lord exhorts the son of man to attend to his word:

And the Lord said to me, Son of man, attend with your heart (הִקַּל מִיֶּשֶׁת), and see with your eyes, and hear with your ears all that I say to thee (Ezk 44:5; also 40:4).

This listening entails, thus, laying God’s word to one’s heart:

If ye will not hearken, and if ye will not lay it to heart (תשימו על־לב), to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts (Mal 2:2).

Valid as it is for everyone, it becomes more so for those called to the prophetic ministry. By calling, the prophet is a carrier of God's word. The people are thus urged not to heed those who "speak from their own heart, and not from the mouth of the Lord" (Jer 23:16). Samuel, from his youth, is presented as making himself completely available to God's word: "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears (שמע)".

The Israelites were constantly exhorted to follow the Torah and let their לב be moulded by their obedience of God's word (Deut 30: 14,17; Jer 31:33; Ezk 36:26-27). "The לב as the organ of knowledge notes deviations from God's will" (Fabry 1995:426); thus it functions as, what we would currently call, the conscience of the person. For this reason, it was important for the human being to always be conscious of God's word. Thus, Deut 6:6 charges that: "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart." The author of Proverbs (7:3) puts this graphically in referring to the words of wisdom: "Bind them on your fingers, write them on the tablet of your heart". One needs constantly to remember them as to live by this word of wisdom.

Wolff (1974:51) correctly remarks: (1 Sam 3: 9,10).

The Israelite finds it difficult to distinguish linguistically between 'perceiving' and 'choosing', between 'hearing' and 'obeying'. The linguistic difficulty that ensues for our more differentiating mode of thought comes from the factual impossibility of dividing theory from practice. Thus the heart is at once the organ of understanding and of will.

An expression commonly used in the Hebrew Scripture is דבר על־לב, "to speak to the heart". It is, in the first instance, part of the language of love; but it is ultimately an attempt at a change of will (Wolff 1974:52).¹³ According to Fabry, the *locus classicus* for the use of this expression is Hos 2:16 (14): "Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak to her heart". The Lord will make a final effort to entice Israel to come back to him. "But this approach, aiming to restore the unbroken bond between Israel and Yahweh, demonstrates that Yahweh's unconditional love is the only requirement for the healing of faithlessness and shows his punishment to be an act of love" (Fabry 1995:418). In Isaiah 40:2, the Lord is offering comfort to his people as he proclaims to them the

13 See also Fabry (1995:417).

deliverance from exile, “using the most effective means” (Fabry 1995:418): “Console my people, console them ... speak to the heart of Jerusalem”.

Thus, “a listening heart”, which Solomon requests from God, entails a deliberate and conscious openness of the whole person to God from the very core of one’s being as to let God fashion one’s will, reason, feelings and way of life. What Solomon is asking of God is not to be understood merely on the cognitive, deliberative level, which is certainly to be included. It should truly involve all the dimensions of the human being who willingly chooses to be a disciple and to fully obey God’s word. Is not this the essence of the Torah: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ), and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6, 5)? And as David’s son, Solomon aims to have his heart “wholly with the Lord” (לִבְּךָ שְׁלֵם עִם יְהוָה), as he exhorts his people when he prays over them at the consecration of the temple (1 Kgs 8:61). This was the measure with which the Deuteronomist judged Solomon and his descendants (11:4; 15:3,14; 2 Kgs 20:3). With this expression, the Deuteronomist understands complete and unconditional obedience.¹⁴

However, this remains only one dimension of Solomon’s prayer, according to 1 Kings 3: 9. I believe that there is another dimension to his prayer: the “listening heart”, attentive to God’s word, is also attentive to the demands of other human beings as well as to the circumstances of the time. If Solomon wants to be righteous and just, if he wants to govern his people well, he needs to listen attentively to what the people and circumstances are saying in a way that he can serve his people in justice and righteousness. Rütterswörden (2006:268) states that:

the prayer for a לב שמע reveals a sense of responsibility for the people of Yahweh. The king does not desire to be a ‘hearer’ for his own justification; in his role of judge (שפוט), he undertakes before God an obligation that involves not just himself but the people.

He then contrasts this with the Instruction of Ptah-hotep wherein the prayer remains “primarily introverted and subjective”. This altruistic, people-oriented aspect of the prayer is further emphasised when one considers the insistence in God’s answer (1 Kgs 3:11) that Solomon was not requesting something for his own gain, (לְךָ [for yourself] used twice in

14 “The prayer for ‘a listening heart’ is not simply that he should be made clever or discerning, but that he be attuned to Yahweh’s guidance and purpose for justice” (Brueggemann 2000:47-48).

this sense – referring to long life and riches), but to be better equipped to serve the people (אָנִי is used once, in this instance).¹⁵

3. “HEARING WITH THE HEART”

Building on this rich biblical tradition, I would like to continue to reflect on the meaning of “hearing with the heart”. This is not something that could be taken for granted. We need to discover and develop this ability through formation, self-discipline and commitment.

A Jewish author, Barbara Breitman (2006), understands this as an openness to God and his Word:

The central statement of the Jewish faith, the *Shema* ... declares that hearing is the quintessentially sacred act for Jews. Paradoxically, the name for God used in the *Shema* is precisely the one Name that cannot be spoken; it is ineffable. Since YHWH is an impossible declension of the verb to be — collapsing past, present, and future tenses into one unpronounceable Name — it is as if Jews are being exhorted to listen for the Presence of Being through infinite forms in time and space, to perceive the Oneness that underlies the diversity of life; to know that alone deserves to be called God; and that Oneness can somehow be ‘heard’, in silence. This is not only *hearing* as we hear sounds with our ears. It is hearing with the heart, with the *lev shomea*, the ‘hearing heart’ (1 Kings 3: 9). But what kind of hearing is this?

God’s creative word never ceases to be communicated to us out of his infinite love. Commenting on a phrase found in Deuteronomy 5:22,¹⁶ which reads in Hebrew: וְלֹא־אָמַר, Breitman (2006) remarks that over the centuries the translation of these words differed:

Do the words mean ‘and God added no more’, as the phrase is often translated? Or do they mean ‘and God did not cease’?

She mentions a classical commentator, Rashi, who interprets the verse to mean “for his voice is strong and goes on forever, God did not pause between words”. She also quotes the Sefat Emet who states:

15 This *dativus commodi* expresses the advantage of something for someone. “The preposition אָנִי, ‘for yourself’, conveys the potential benefit one might receive; cf. Deut 7,25; 1 Sam 12:17,19 ... Only the third item, ‘did not ask for the life of your enemies’, does not use this preposition; to have included it would have changed the meaning of the clause to asking for the persons of his enemies, i.e., taking them to be his slaves” (Cogan 2001:187).

16 In her article, she refers to this verse as Deuteronomy 5: 19.

Now Torah has already been given to Israel by ‘a great voice that did not cease.’ It has never stopped. Each day we say: Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH is One, this is the voice saying: I am YHWH your God; it has never stopped. But we have to prepare ourselves to truly hear the Sh’ma without any distracting thought.

If the Lord continues to speak, then we need to learn to listen to him, attentive to his loving word. How are we to do this? Speaking of what she calls “contemplative listening”, Breitman (2006) again tells us:

It is by descending to a place of deep interiority and silence that we create a context for holy listening. This is a place from which we can listen for intimations of the Holy, or *kedushah*.

George Aschenbrenner speaks of “the hidden self” that needs to grow strong, which can be easily identified with “the place of deep interiority and silence” of which Breitman speaks. Aschenbrenner says that

our deepest, truest center is relational: it is our identity in Christ, daily developing and urging us forth in a whole way of living and choosing for others (1995:228).

He continues by saying that

a profoundly personal inner world is gradually revealed, acknowledged and then laid claim to, though this whole process is much more one of receiving than of making. It is the receiving and welcoming of an enormously valuable gift (Aschenbrenner 1995:231).

4. SPIRITUAL SENSES

In Christianity, “contemplative listening” is intimately linked with the theological tradition of the spiritual senses which is rich in the Fathers of the Church as well as among mystical writers. Because of God’s condescension (see Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 13), the Fathers, such as Origen, speak of the spiritual sense as the human capacity to know God; this spiritual sense is of another order than the physical senses. For Origen, this singular faculty of the soul is ultimately divided into five senses of the soul analogous to the senses of the body.¹⁷

17 See Canévet (1990:599). While it is unanimously agreed that faith can capture what the physical senses cannot, this agreement fails in the elaboration of this theology. For example, there is a certain hesitation in acknowledging one

A linguistic note is in place at this point, since we normally speak of the senses of *the soul*. According to Johannes Behm (1965:609-610), *καρδία* which normally translates לֵב in the LXX, “is often interchangeable with *ψυχή*, *διάνοια*, *πνεῦμα*, *νοῦς* etc”. This interchangeability continues down the years into the patristic era. Origen, for instance, mentions that the human being knows God through “the spirit”, the *nou/j*. Only a few phrases later, he mentions that a pure “heart”, *καρδία* sees God:

Knowledge of God does not depend on the eye of the body, but on the spirit, which sees the image of the Creator and which receives, by the providence of God, the power to know God. And who sees God is the pure heart (*Contra Celsum* VII.33).¹⁸

Commenting on Origen’s discussion of the spiritual senses in *Contra Celsum* I, 48, Blaise Arminjon (1988:147) states that these senses

are properly spiritual and through which the soul has a certain experimental knowledge, diversified according to each sense, of divine things.

Origen (*Contra Celsum* I.48) explains:

Thus, the soul has a sense of sight to contemplate supernatural objects; ... a hearing capable of distinguishing voices that do not resound in the air; a taste to savor the living bread come down from heaven ...; in the same way, smell, leading Paul to speak of the perfume of Jesus; and also a sense of touch, which John had since he told us that he touched with his own hands the Word of God.¹⁹

St. Augustine affirms that all the senses of the soul can contribute equally to unite us to God. In a passage from the *Confessions* which, according to Arminjon (1988:149), has

the great merit of stressing very precisely what separates the experience of the carnal senses ... from the experience of the spiritual senses,

spiritual sense or many in the manner of the corporal senses. See Canévet (1990:600). See also Gavriljuk and Coakley (2012:1-19).

18 *Origène. Contre Celse*. Vol. IV (Livres VII et VIII). Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Marcel Borret, *Sources Chrétiennes* 150, Du Cerf, Paris, 1969:88-89.

19 *Origène. Contre Celse*. Vol. I (Livres I et II). Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Marcel Borret, *Sources Chrétiennes* 132, Du Cerf, Paris, 1967:204-205. For the translation of the text into English, I have followed Arminjon (1988:147).

Augustine (*Confessiones* X.6) asks:

Thou hast smitten my heart with thy Word, and I have loved thee ... But what is it that I love in loving thee? Not physical beauty, nor the splendor of time, nor the radiance of the light – so pleasant to our eyes – nor the sweet melodies of the various kinds of songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna and honey, not the limbs embraced in physical love – it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet it is true that I love a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God, who is the light and sound and fragrance and food and embracement of my inner man – where that light shines into my soul which no place can contain, where time does not snatch away the lovely sound, where no breeze disperses the sweet fragrance, where no eating diminishes the food there provided, and where there is an embrace that no satiety comes to sunder. This is what I love when I love my God.²⁰

Commenting on the Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas*, Pope Benedict XVI (1986:56), then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, spoke about the spirituality involving the senses which, in terms of the encyclical,

is essentially a spirituality of the heart, since the heart is the hub of all the senses, the place where sense and spirit meet, interpenetrate and unite. Spirituality of the senses is spirituality in the sense of Cardinal Newman's motto: *Cor ad cor loquitur* (heart speaks to heart).

5. HUMILITY AND RECEPTIVITY

When speaking of spiritual matters, we are naturally aware of the pitfalls we could fall into on the way. Thomas Dubay (1997:81) tells us:

Even when God does speak, the recipient may either not hear or distort what he did hear or conclude invalidly from it.

He then affirms a great truth about God's desire to communicate to us, notwithstanding the possibility of some misunderstanding or distorting the message:

God loves us so much that he allows some to distort his word so that he may communicate intimately with those who will not (Dubay 1997:82).

20 Translated by Albert C. Outler, 1994 [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/confessions-bod.asp> [16 May 2012].

Dubay (1997:81-96) mentions some possible sources for these distortions or misunderstandings: illusions of subjectivity, admixture of truth and error, faulty expressions of genuine experience, diverse origins of “inner lights”, and depreciation of intellect and objectivity.

St. Benedict speaks of the basic attitude a human being should take before God:

If we do not venture to approach men who are in power, except with humility and reverence (*cum humilitate et reverentia*), when we wish to ask a favor, how much must we beseech the Lord God of all things with all humility and purity of devotion (*cum omni humilitate et puritatis devotionem*)? (*Regula* 20.1),²¹

Thomas Dubay (1988:124) insists that “receptivity and readiness are crucial” in our listening to God who communicates with us: “Only one who is rightly disposed can detect the gentle motions of God working in his heart and mind”. Dubay (1988:125, 127-128) posits a question which he then answers:

Who is ready to listen to the whisper of the Lord? ... It is a general principle in the biblical revelation that God offers the humble a special access to his gifts (Prov 3:34). He listens to their wants, brings strength to their hearts, grants them a hearing (Ps 10:17). The greater one is, the more he should behave humbly, for then he finds favour with the Lord ... This makes explicit that humility is a condition for getting to the divine mind.

Learning receptivity in humility is central in our relation to God and in the discovery of ourselves. Jean Corbon (1969:147-148) reflects on God’s constant willingness to give and our choice to be open and available:

The fact is that God *always* wants to give himself. He is always present. But as his presence is essentially a free presence of grace, it is we who have to ask ourselves: are we open and available to grace? Are we tuned in to his wavelength or are we searching for ourselves elsewhere? ... We are never so truly ourselves as when we become receptive to God, mustering the whole of our being in the act of giving him welcome ... Our ultimate liberation is to open ourselves to a new presence, and the peak of our activity, therefore,

21 English translation by Boniface Verheyen (1949) [Online.] Retrieved from: [http://rule.kansasmonks.org/index.php?option=com_content &view=article&id=68&Itemid=75](http://rule.kansasmonks.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68&Itemid=75). Latin Version: http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0011/_PL.HTM [16 May 2012].

is to relax in the gratuitousness of receiving. The more he frees us the more he gives himself.

In a later work, he expresses this in this manner: “The most fruitful activity of the human person is to be ‘able to receive’ God” (Corbon 2005:37).²²

Referring this to prayer, Corbon (1969:89) speaks about:

the truth that lies at the heart of our dialogue with God ... It is far more important, first, to listen in prayer. Before we can reply with love we must be loved, and the first gesture of our faith is to give a welcome to him who loves us.

6. DEVELOPING A LISTENING HEART

6.1 Within spiritual direction

Barry and Connolly (2009:8) define spiritual direction as

help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.

They specify that

the basic concern of this kind of help is ... with the inner life, the ‘heart’, the personal core out of which come out the good and evil that people think and do (Barry & Connolly 2009:11).

Barry and Connolly (2009:48) consider two fundamental tasks of the spiritual director:

First, helping directees pay attention to our self-revealing God; second, helping directees recognize their reactions and decide on their responses to this God.

This means that spiritual direction should aim at helping directees grow in a contemplative attitude which is the result of contemplative prayer and which

²² In the French original, this phrase is rendered in this way: “L’activité la plus féconde de l’homme est d’être ‘capable’ de son Dieu” (Corbon 1980:28).

allows one to find some ease and spontaneity in paying attention to God as revealed in Scripture, creation, one's own life, and the life of the world (Barry & Connolly 2009:49).

Within the context of spiritual direction, as Nemeck and Coombs (1985:56) affirm, "the director-directee relationship has to be centered on God in such a way that each is listening to God in the other". They describe listening as follows:

Listening denotes interpersonal communion. ... Listening is that attitude of heart whereby that which is deepest and most mysterious in us remains in loving attentiveness to that which is deepest and most mysterious in God. By listening, we abide in the simplicity of being in love with our God. ... Listening is unconditional surrender ... of our whole being to God (Nemeck & Coombs 1985:62).

Listening aims at uncovering the spiritual dimensions of people's lives. According to Jean Stairs (2000:34), this may be made explicit through what is said, but it may remain hidden "in the silent texts of their lives, including the body's own strange way of speaking". Thus Stairs (2000:34) refers to "evocative listening":

listening for the soul is an intentional act, we listen foremost in order to hear the other into speech. We form a habit of soul inquiry and guide the telling so that the focus does not drift toward external realities but remains on the grist of the interior life of the one sitting before us. Such intentional listening is not passive but is evocative and actively responsive. It is all so that weary, troubled, or hungry souls may discover a place that is safe enough for them to name the truth of their lives. And there is no place like home in God.

6.2 Baring one's heart

In this light, St. Basil speaks of the need for the young monk to reveal the secrets of his heart to his superior:

Every subject, if he intends to make any progress ... ought not conceal within himself any movement of his soul ... but he should reveal the secrets of his heart to those of his brethren whose office it is to exercise a compassionate and sympathetic solicitude for the weak. In this way, that which is laudable will be ratified and that which is worthy of rebuke will receive the correction it deserves, and

by the practice of such co-operative discipline, we shall by a gradual advance attain to perfection (*The Long Rules* 26).²³

St. Francis de Sales gives similar advice regarding one's dealing with the spiritual director:

Deal with him in all sincerity and faithfulness, and with open heart; manifesting alike your good and your evil, without pretence or dissimulation. Thus your good will be examined and confirmed, and your evil corrected and remedied;—you will be soothed and strengthened in trouble, moderated and regulated in prosperity (*Introduction to the Devout Life* I.4).²⁴

As Nemeck and Coombs (1985:70) state:

Within each human heart there exists this paradox: Christ lives in us, in our spiritual selves; and sin lives in us, in our fleshy selves (Gal 2:20; Rom 7:14-17).

Thus the listening needs to be done on two levels: to listen to what the Lord is saying to the human being at the present moment of his/her life, but also to discover ever more the selfish self which continually seeks attention and satisfaction. For this reason, the author of 1 John (3:24-4: 1) tells us:

By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God.

Similarly, St. Paul (2 Cor 13:5) tells the Corinthians:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

6.3 Towards transformation

The listening should thus lead to the formation of the heart according to the Word: "He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6). St. Paul saw this transformation of

23 *Saint Basil. Ascetical works.* Translated by Sr Monica Wagner, The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation, Catholic University of America, 1950:288-289. [Online.] Retrieved from: [http://www.scribd.com/doc/39117668/ St-Basil-the-Great-Ascetical-works](http://www.scribd.com/doc/39117668/St-Basil-the-Great-Ascetical-works) [18 May 2012].

24 English translation. [Online.] Retrieved from: [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_ life.iii.iv.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life.iii.iv.html) [18 May 2012].

the person in Christ as the way for the Christian: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Again: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19).

From her point of view as a Jewish believer, Breitman (2006) makes a very valid point regarding this process of transformation happening in and through spiritual direction:

Spiritual direction is grounded in the belief that as we expand our awareness of the Holy, deepen our connection with *Mekor HaChayyim*, the Source of Life, we will be changed, not only by taking time to pause and to *be*, but by dwelling consciously within the living Mystery itself. We know that flashes of illumination eventually fade, no matter how meaningful or profound. The purpose of engaging in spiritual practice is to transform flashes of illumination into abiding light.

In an address to US Bishops, Pope Benedict XVI (2012) stated that

the essential task of authentic education at every level is not simply that of passing on knowledge, essential as this is, but also of shaping hearts.

Spiritual direction is among the privileged means that exist for this formation towards “a listening heart”, which then becomes the source of this transformation into Christ. The spiritual sense of listening, which is the fruit of an ascetical process of entering into oneself, opens up the human being to the beauty of God’s loving and condescending self-gift and to the mystery of the other person, of history and of nature. The discovery and the development of this majestic potential within would help the human being in the process of self-transcendence and fulfilment. In the words of St. Ignatius, in the concluding contemplation to attain the Love of God of the *Spiritual Exercises*, this would help the person to attain “an interior knowledge [*cognoscimiento interno*] of all the great good [one has] received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, [one] may become able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things” (Par. 233).²⁵

Hailed in the Hebrew Scriptures as the wisest (see 1 Kgs 10:23-24; also Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31), Solomon asked the Lord to grant him “a listening heart” that he may be “wholly with the Lord” and that he may lead his people in righteousness and justice. This prayer and disposition also need to be at the centre of the spiritual direction process. It will help both director and directee to be open to the Word that God communicates

²⁵ English translation: St Ignatius of Loyola, *The spiritual exercises of St Ignatius. A translation and commentary* by George E. Ganss SJ, Loyola Press, Chicago, 1992.

to them and it will thus help shape the heart, overflowing into one's life and actions.

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Keywords

1 Kings 3:9

Listening heart

Discernment

Spiritual senses

Spiritual direction

Spirituality

Trefwoorde

1 Konings 3:9

Luisterende hart

Onderskeiding

Spirituele sintuie

Spirituele begeleiding

Spiritualiteit