

6 Ways to Think with God's Wisdom

by John J. Boucher

During frustrating moments as the parent of seven, my father would holler, "For God's sake, use your head for more than a hat rack!" He valued human thinking. As a creature made in God's image, we have been gifted with a mind, heart and soul. God expects us to function through a balanced use of these gifts. We can walk in confidence knowing that the Lord will guide and shape the gift of human thinking, bringing us ever more fully into the light.

To hear God speak through both human and divine wisdom means to learn how to "think in the Spirit." You must assume an active, yet yielded position before God. The desire to grasp the wisdom that God offers is crucial. An appreciation of human thinking and the desire to understand God are treasures that Christians have inherited from our Jewish ancestors in faith. That is why St. Paul exhorts us:

"I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:1-2).

There are six steps that you might take if you wish to learn how to think with the wisdom of God.

1. Confront Your Thinking with God's Revelation.

Confront your thinking regularly with God's revelation in Scripture, Tradition and Church teaching. Seek the aid of a good spiritual director or a religious educator to develop a daily plan for study. The computer industry has a wise saying: "Garbage in, garbage out." If all that enters your mind and heart is an incorrect or incomplete theology, then your thinking will be less than clear or wise. You need the "Bread of Life" in order to thrive intellectually, too.

2. Welcome God's Personal Voice in All Its Forms.

Be open to all the ways the Lord may speak. Once upon a time, a great flood struck the Mississippi Valley. Maurice clung to the chimney on the roof of his house. As the turbulent bronze-green waters inched past the second story, he cried, "Oh God! Please help me!" A rowboat came by, but Maurice refused to let go. A Red Cross motorboat stopped. "No, thanks," he gasped. "God is going to help me." The waters churned around his waist, then his shoulders. A helicopter took one last run over the devastated neighborhood. The pilot hovered over the doomed and desperate straggler, pleading with him to grab the rope ladder. "No, thanks! I believe God is going to save me."

Finally a nearby levee collapsed and deeper, more violent waters rushed forth and drowned Maurice. He came before the Lord in heaven. "Hey, God," he complained, "How come you didn't help me when I prayed to you?" God leaned toward him and replied, "Maurice, Maurice. I sent you a rowboat, a motorboat, and a helicopter. What more did you expect?"

3. God's Word Overrides Conflicting Secular Conclusions.

Let God's Word in Scripture, Tradition and Church teaching override natural and secular conclusions you may feel drawn to. Rose Hawthorne Lathrop (1851-1926) was a convert to Catholicism. When alcoholism incapacitated her husband, George, she was forced to seek a legal separation. Later, her friend Emma Lazarus, who wrote the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, died of cancer. Rose was forced to face the horror and helplessness of yet another disease.

Society shunned the cancerous poor at that time. No hospital would care for them. Relatives would not take them in for fear of catching cancer. The city of New York where Rose and Emma lived consigned these people to Blackwell's Island.

Rose laid aside her natural aversion to the disfigurement and stench and disregarded the medical opinions of the society around her. Recognizing the dignity of each human person, she insisted that these patients be treated in a warm, cheerful, homelike atmosphere with the little comforts they needed. Her work led to the establishment of the hospice movement. As Mother M. Alphonsa Lathrop, O.P., she founded the Dominican Servants of Relief, who are still active in six American dioceses. She wrote:

"I will see things only through the presence of God, thus freeing myself of personality and forgetting my existence. I will regard creatures in the spirit of Jesus Christ."

4. Take Regular Time to Think in a Prayerful Way.

On a regular basis, take each situation, each worry and anxiety to God, surrendering the needs, feelings and people involved to Him. Say, "God, you've got a problem. Show me what you want to do about it." St. John Vianney said, "God commands you to pray, but He forbids you to worry."

5. Take Time for Reflection.

Take time away from the crush of daily events. If you want to cultivate wisdom and reflection, it is necessary to step back for a broader look. I try to take a day away for personal reflection once every three or four months. An annual retreat is something many people enjoy for the same reason.

One year, I decided on a four-day private retreat. There were no special readings or agenda, other than my spiritual journal and a Bible. After a day of rest, I realized a deep loneliness within me, caused by my mother's death during the previous year.

Later that day I passed a bookcase, and a volume about apparitions of the Blessed Virgin caught my eye. Reading and praying with this book reminded me of the Blessed Mother's constant care for believers down through the centuries. I left the retreat with one consoling thought. I am not a motherless orphan as a result of my mom's death. Mary, Jesus' mother, is my mother still.

6. Lead a Disciplined Thought Life

Discipline your thoughts so that you will be more sensitive to God's ways, and less likely to proceed on the basis of impulse or habit. Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard, O.C.S.O., described this discipline in his book, "The Soul of the Apostolate," as developing "custody of the heart":

"This custody of the heart means nothing else but the habitual, or at least frequent solicitude to preserve all our acts, as we form them, from everything that might corrupt their motive or their accomplishment."

What would Jesus do; how would He act in my place? What would He advise? What does He ask of me at this moment? Such are the questions that will come spontaneously to my mind, hungry for interior life.

Father Adrian van Kaam suggests a method for disciplining your thoughts in his book, "On Being Involved: The Rhythm of Involvement and Detachment in Human Life." He suggests a way of stepping back from situations in order to learn how to respond as Jesus would.

A. Choose a particular reaction that is not at the Lord's disposal. For example, when you see a dirty, homeless person, are your first thoughts condemnation and blame or compassion? If your first response is not, "What would Jesus do?", then you may need to discipline your mind in this kind of situation.

B. Live in relaxed vigilance with regard to your reaction and thought pattern. Catch yourself as quickly as possible when you discover such a prejudice toward another. When the next homeless person comes to your attention, be aware of your reaction, smile and watch yourself: Notice similar reactions in other people.

C. As you grow in awareness of your reaction, make a decision to delay your usual response. Instead of immediately passing judgment, dwell on Chautard's "custody of the heart" questions: What would Jesus do? What would He advise? What does He ask of me at this moment?

D. By patient interruption of the chain of thoughts in your old reaction, you will develop a new response. Over a period of time you will find yourself thinking with God's wisdom first, and reacting less.

E. If you find that you have fallen into the same old pattern again, do something

concrete to detach yourself from this thinking. Approach the Sacrament of Penance or ask a friend to pray with you. Make some kind of restitution for thoughts and actions (e.g. donate to a shelter for the homeless, help out in a soup kitchen, visit a poor, elderly neighbor).

By working through the six steps suggested above, you can learn how to think with God's wisdom. Understanding and wisdom will become familiar pathways for the Lord's Word to you.

Thinking is not an optional gift for scholars or saints, but a foundation for everyday spiritual life. It readies you to be an active, yet yielded disciple of Jesus. Anthony Blooms sums it up by saying: "If you can't obey in little things, it is impossible to obey a Gospel that is contrary to all common sense and logic. God's ways are above ours. Whatever He asks is always absurd by the standards of human wisdom."

This article is adapted from John J. Boucher's new book, "Following Jesus: A Disciple's Guide to Discerning God's Will" (Dove Publications).

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