



Of the five senses, hearing is most frequently referenced in Holy Scripture, and not without reason. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people of Israel to, “Hear... the statutes and the ordinances which I speak in your hearing this day” so that they “shall learn them and be careful to do them.” In the Psalms, God complains that “my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me”. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, declared, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” St. Paul tells us that hearing is so important because, “faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17) and faith is necessary for salvation.

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cacophony of sounds coming from a plethora of devices. Information floods us from every side. Not surprisingly, modern man finds himself lost on an ocean of distractions which inevitably affect his ability to pray and hear the voice of God. One spiritual master who addresses this issue is St. John of Avila in his masterpiece, *Audi, Filia* — “Listen, O Daughter.” A work as relevant today as it was 500 years ago.

Compared to other Spanish saints of the 16th Century, such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, St. John of Avila is far less known and an often overlooked doctor of the Church. He was born in 1499 in the city of Extremadura, Spain. An only child of wealthy parents, he enrolled at the Univer-

sity of Salamanca to study liberal arts and law but left before obtaining his degree, preferring to live a solitary life of prayer and penance instead. Later he resumed his studies in philosophy and theology and was ordained a priest in 1526. He planned to leave for the New World as a missionary but, by God's design, ended up becoming the "Apostle of Andalusia" in Southern Spain. It was during this time of preaching and teaching the Faith, that he wrote *Audi, Filia* for a young woman who wished to live a life dedicated to God. This wonderful work, which he spent the rest of his life editing and refining, takes for its starting point the words of Psalm 45 and uses them to expound on the spiritual life.

In the first part, St. John of Avila focuses on who to hear and who not to hear. Recalling that it was only after the Fall of our First Parents that a multitude of languages came about, where people could no longer understand one another, he reduces all the evil and disordered "languages" in the world to three: that of the world, the flesh and the devil. He adds, "As Saint Bernard says, the function of the first is to speak of vain things, that of the second to speak of pleasures, and that of the third to speak of evil and bitter things."

Regarding the "language of the world," St. John of Avila writes: "We must not listen to the language of the world because it is all lies, exceedingly harmful for those who believe them. They cause us to turn away from the truth that really is, to follow the lie that exists only in appearance and by convention. So deceived a person casts God and his holy will behind his back and orders his life by the blind guide of what pleases the world. Thus is engendered a heart desirous of honor and being esteemed by others." As a remedy to this evil he recommends meditating on the image of Christ on the Cross: "You

appreciate then how completely he fulfills what he had said when he was preaching: 'I do not seek my own honor' (John 8:50). You must act in the same way. If you directed the ears of your soul to hear attentively that sad edict against innocence itself, proclaiming through the streets of Jerusalem that Jesus Christ our Lord was a malefactor, then you would be embarrassed to see yourself honored or desiring to be honored." He further adds that the Christian "should see that, since the world dishonored the blessed Son of God, eternal truth and highest good, it makes no sense to esteem or believe it in anything."



As for the "language of the flesh" he writes: "The flesh speaks of delights and pleasures, at times clearly, and at other times, under the heading of necessity. The war waged against us by this enemy ... is more dangerous, because it fights with pleasures, the strongest weapons of all." He identifies some of these temptations against chastity as coming, not simply from the flesh, but from the devil. One sign he gives is

"that the struggle is more with thoughts and foul images than with impure feelings in the body." These thoughts then lead to feelings in the flesh. Another sign that such temptations are from the devil, is that "they come suddenly, when the person least wants them, and when there is least motive for them ... By the strength with which they come and by the things he hears within himself, the person experiences that they do not spring from himself, but that another says and does them." Whereas the first kind of temptation (solely from the flesh) is generally fought against by cutting down on food and sleep, the second is remedied by finding "some good occupation that requires attention and effort, by which one may forget such foul images." In all these temptations, however, prayer is always the

first and best weapon.

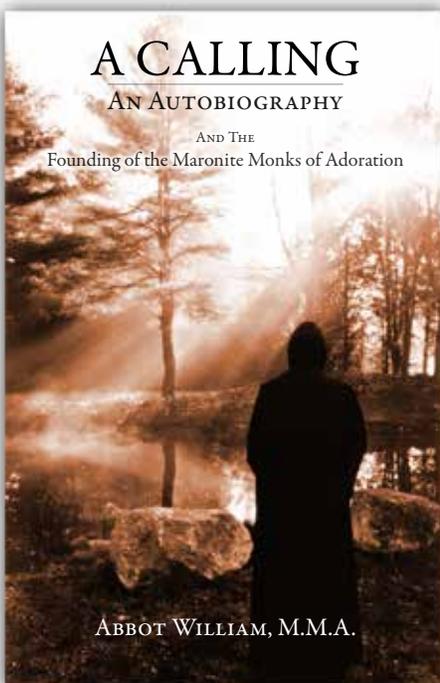
Finally, writing about the “language of the devil,” St. John of Avila says that, in fact, there are as many of his languages as there are types of his malice, which are beyond number. Therefore, he reduces them to two kinds of evil: those traps he lays secretly and those attacks he makes openly. In the first, the devil “exalts us with vanity and lies, and afterwards knocks us down in a truly miserable fall.” Using pride as his weapon, he “works very hard to sow this bad seed in the soul” even going so far as speaking words of truth and giving good advice and devout feelings so as to lead a soul into pride, knowing that pride “is enough to render useless everything else that a person may possess, however good it may appear.” In the second way, the devil “humiliates and discourages [the heart] to the point of driving it to despair. He recalls past sins, aggravating them as much as possible, so that the person ... is reduced to despair.” The remedy he gives for the first of these temptations

is that, when the devil exalts us in vanity, we should “cling fast to the earth, considering not our peacock feathers, but our feet covered with the mud of the sins we have committed — or would commit if it were not for God’s grace.” For the second, he recommends turning our eyes “away from our sins and to fix them on God’s mercy and on the good things that we have done by his grace.”

Though written centuries ago, St. John of Avila’s masterpiece, *Audi, Filia*, is as relevant today as it was then and can help us identify and combat the various thoughts and desires that enter our minds on a daily basis. As we learn what not to listen to, may we become more aware of the “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) of the Lord that is worthy of all our attention and, by His grace, may it become the predominant voice in our lives.



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