

BODY LANGUAGE BEFORE THE FACE OF GOD

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HOW FAR IS IT POSSIBLE to experience God? The saints assume that such an experience is within reach in the life of prayer, at the same time remaining aware that God is an ineffable mystery. One line of thought in the long Christian tradition sees prayer as verbal communication, a conversation of the heart; but there is also a tradition based on prayer as body language. One example is St Dominic's Nine Ways of Prayer.¹ Since views of the human person, the life of the Church and also society in general have moved in the direction of disembodiment in recent centuries, the physical dimension of prayer life needs to be rediscovered.

Prayer as Verbal Communication

What is prayer? An intimate conversation between friends—this is how several spiritual figures describe prayer life. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and others proceed from a close relationship in which the human person and God engage in a personal dialogue. There are also many examples in Holy Scripture of prayer as conversation. The prophets give voice to what they have heard God say, and Jesus himself converses with God the Father. The conditions of ordinary human communication can indeed serve as a model for the dialogue between God and human beings. Many people in our time testify to a mutual exchange in conversation with God, although probably the believer more often addresses God than clearly manages to hear God's response to his or her prayer.

At the same time, every experienced believer knows that prayer, as a rule, has a character different from the mode of human conversation. The German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–1984) discussed this in his article 'Colloquy with God?'² Rahner suggests that the dialogue between the

¹ *The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic*, in *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, edited and translated by Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist, 1982).

² Karl Rahner, 'Colloquy with God?' in *Spiritual Writings*, edited and translated by Philip Endean (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 84–91.

human person and God should not necessarily—or at least not only—be considered as a conversation between two parties. One likes to expect God to say something, deliver lines like a character in a play, but it does not always turn out that way. Moreover, the difficulty of distinguishing between God's voice and one's own can cause frustration. Is it just my own thoughts buzzing? Rahner is, of course, convinced that ordinary people are not identical with God: that there is a difference between the Creator and created beings. But in prayer viewed as conversation, we humans are in some sense God's word, an extension of God's message or God's expression through us, if you will. Instead of clear replies from God's side, God's presence can be picked up in a mood, in a sensation of depth, Rahner proposes. God communicates Godself as a gift.

The value of verbal conversation in human encounters is usually overestimated. Around 80 per cent of communication between people consists of body language. This corporal reality should affect the contact with God in prayer life during individual devotion as well as the common devotion in church. You can use gestures to speak to and listen to God, aware that God's response is different from that of a human being. Of course, you can sit as stiff as a poker and worship the Holy One in that way, but reverence can be expressed more clearly by actually bowing, kneeling or even lying prostrate on the floor.

Body Fixation and Disembodiment in Our Time

The lifestyle of many people today has become increasingly sedentary, especially in the West, and in many Christian contexts hardly any body parts below the neck are involved in religious practice. This *Zeitgeist* is characterized at once by fixation on the body and by a lack of physical means of expression, in what can be called *disembodiment*.

Obsession with the human physical dimension can be seen in unattainable ideals of beauty and an excessive exercise culture where fitness and well-being have almost become a religion. Taking reasonable care of your appearance and exercising regularly are of course to be recommended. What is meant by body fixation is an almost fanatical preoccupation that collapses into vanity and self-absorption. Few people are ashamed that they are prejudiced and judgmental in their minds, for example, but do feel embarrassed if they are overweight or otherwise physically imperfect. Corporeality is a sensitive issue.

At the other extreme there is something we could call being *disembodied*, which is possibly a greater problem than being obsessed with

the corporeal. Disembodiment is manifested in the sedentary lifestyle and a virtualisation of human interactions by which physical experience is being lost. A lot of time spent in front of a screen and constant connection to a mobile phone engages limited and mostly primitive parts of the brain, but hardly any other parts of the body. Historically, the dualistic tendency of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) must also be mentioned here as it has shaped the understanding of the human person in the West. In his philosophy, the human being is identified with the intellect, the consciousness (Latin: *res cogitans*), which is perceived as separate from the body and from the rest of the world (*res extensa*). The immaterial intellect is disconnected from everything else.

The introduction of pews in churches after the Reformation is another aspect of the drama of lost corporality. Sitting still reinforces the role of listener and spectator, promoting an intellectualisation of the practice of faith. The great spiritual traditions of the Middle Ages already distinguished between the active and the contemplative life; the former was often physically burdensome, with the result that prayer (contemplation) was often characterized by rest, including physical recovery. The Swedish author Alva Dahl aptly comments on the matter:



When people laboured with their bodies, it was more natural that prayer took place when seated. But nowadays, most people work sitting in chairs. Then to sit even more when we need to pray is perhaps not what our bodies long for. Maybe I should be more understanding of those who choose football training with their children on Sunday mornings?³

Another and perhaps simpler reason why the physical dimension has come to be overlooked in Christian contexts is that our increasingly sedentary bodies are prone to stiffness and various ailments, especially as we age.

If we go even further back in history, we can claim that the transition from oral to written culture in and of itself brought about a new type of

³ Alva Dahl, 'Kroppen talar med Gud', *Pilgrim*, 1 (2023), 59.

civilisation, something that the professor of church history Joel Halldorf lucidly describes in his latest work, *Bokens folk* ('People of the Book').⁴ Although Halldorf expresses a preference for written culture, he begins his presentation by pointing to the advantages of oral culture, which include a more direct and concrete form of address. To this can be added that an oral culture does more justice to the human person's whole existence as a soul-body creature.

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It is therefore worth highlighting the importance of physicality in spiritual life: what can be described as body language before the face of God. The weightiest argument to justify focusing on the body and physicality in Christian spirituality is the incarnation—that God became man. The Word has taken on flesh; God has become corporeal. Lack of interest in the body, or even a contempt for it, entails a denial of the incarnation. When corporeality is emphasized in Christian spirituality, the ultimate goal is to become less self-centred and more focused on the Triune God. It is important for this reason to avoid the two unhealthy extremes of obsession and disembodiment.

Dominic's Nine Ways of Prayer

The Dominican tradition of prayer and theological reflection can be helpful here. The founder of the Order of Preachers, St Dominic (c. 1170–1221), liked to pray in different physical positions, and the same order's foremost theologian, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) contributed with a systematic explanation of the human being as a spiritual and bodily creature. Dominic shows in practice what Thomas explains theoretically.

De modo orandi ('On the Way to Pray') is the name of a short anonymous text with coloured illustrations from the second half of the thirteenth century. It describes how Saint Dominic prayed in the chapel of the convent as well as outdoors when he was walking. He stands humbly bowed before the altar (the first way of praying); he lies with his face to the ground (second); he chastises his body with an iron chain (third); he makes repeated genuflections with his eyes fixed on the crucifix (fourth); he raises his hands in various ways (fifth); he stands with his arms extended in the form of a cross (sixth); he stretches his whole length towards the sky like an arrow shot from a bow (seventh); he makes the sign of the cross, discusses and makes gestures as he reads

⁴ (Stockholm: Fri tanke, 2023).

spiritual texts (eighth); he walks about while contemplating (ninth). One can read about the fifth way, for example:

Sometimes, when he was in a convent, our holy father Dominic would stand upright before the altar, not leaning on anything or supported by anything, but with his whole body standing straight up on his feet. Sometimes he would hold his hands out, open, before his breast, like an open book, and then he would stand with great reverence and devotion, as if he were reading in the presence of God. Then in his prayer he would appear to be pondering the words of God and, as it were, enjoying reciting them to himself At other times, he joined his hands and held them tightly fastened together in front of his eyes, hunching himself up. At other times he raised his hands to his shoulders, in the manner of a priest saying Mass, as if he wanted to fix his ears more attentively on something that was being said to him by somebody else.⁵

I will come back to the Nine Ways of Prayer and relate them to my own experiences of praying with the hands, but first some background. The original text is written in Latin, but a Spanish translation was also made very early on which is preserved by the Dominican sisters in Madrid. The Dominicans themselves don't make a big thing of it; there seems to be some uncertainty about what to do with the material. Lay Franciscan and stage magician Angelo Stagnaro expresses a certain perplexity among people, even confusion over the matter:

Most people (Dominicans included), when they come across the medieval manuscript *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic*, with the miniature illuminated illustrations of the prayer postures that St Dominic used, tend to be impressed and edified by the postures that our saint used, but they see no practical applications of these to their lives. The curious would find them quaint, but even serious seekers and believing Christians, though impressed by the use our holy Father made of these common medieval postures, would tend to shy away from trying them out in their own prayer life.⁶

In 2022 I published a book on the Nine Ways of Prayer, *Låt kroppen tala. Dominikus nio sätt att be* ('Let the Body Speak: Dominic's Nine Ways of Prayer').⁷ My contribution in this context is to show creatively how

⁵ *Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic*, 30.

⁶ Angelo Stagnaro, *How to Pray the Dominican Way* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2012), 1.

⁷ (Skelleteå: Artos and Norma, 2022). I initially translated the entire text from the high medieval Spanish version into Swedish, only then to be gently persuaded by both the experts in the field, the

these forms of prayer can be applied to the conditions of our own time, in a kind of modern version of these old prayer positions that date back at least 800 years (some go back to Old Testament times). Students from the Catholic Chaplaincy at Uppsala University and some Dominican sisters shared their experience anonymously, and I have included their responses in the book. The rediscovery of physically orientated prayer needs to be anchored in a robust theology: God must be at the centre to avoid body fixation and thus, indirectly, self-absorption. I also try to contribute some historical context to explain how the dualism between body and soul has increased since the sixteenth century. As one student said to me, ‘Now I understand why we have become cephalopods!’

Dominic and Ignatius

How does the body language of prayer fit into Ignatian spirituality? In his Additions to make the Spiritual Exercises better (Exx 73–86), Ignatius gives concrete instructions for posture and for a careful attention to the body. He recommends that before each spiritual exercise you stand next to the place where you are going to meditate or contemplate, and there make a bow or some other sign of reverence (Exx 75). In this way, you express respect, and do not rush into the exercise but show reverence in your body language. Ignatius then suggests entering into contemplation ‘now kneeling, now prostrate on the floor, or lying face upward, or seated, or standing’ (Exx 76).

It is conceivable that Ignatius was influenced by Dominic’s nine ways of prayer through his contact with Dominicans in Manresa, in Paris and in other cities. He also read the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The parallels are obvious between the Dominican and Ignatian traditions in this respect. For Ignatius’ early Jesuit companion Pierre Favre (1506–1546) it was natural to pray with the body, something of which we see several examples in his spiritual diary entries. He speaks there of going through ‘the most significant parts of the body’ or ‘the main limbs of the whole body’ in his mind in order to collect himself.⁸

Although Ignatian spirituality definitely involves all the senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch—as well as the emotions, and indeed the

British Dominican friar Simon Tugwell, and the Swedish Dominican Anders Piltz, that there is really only one original text, the one in Latin. I therefore owe Anders Piltz a debt of gratitude for his translation from the Latin that appears in my book.

⁸ Pierre Favre, *Memoriale*, in *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, edited and translated by Edmond C. Murphy, John W. Padberg and Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), n. 22.

whole body, there has been a noticeable intellectualising tendency in the Ignatian literature of our time. The dominant view is to play down the physical and to be most interested in reason or ‘soul’. It is surely symptomatic that the Jesuit James Martin, in his book *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*, barely touches on the question of physicality.

Listening to Our Body and to God

The body can indeed be a meeting place between human beings and the triune God, but getting to know Jesus Christ through our body—through corporal prayer—can require time, practice and conversation with others who are also learning to pray this way. As with speaking a foreign language or playing a musical instrument, it is necessary to proceed step by step. One step might be to perform the prayer positions routinely, without much thought. The next step might be to note what thoughts and feelings they evoke. A third, significant, step could be to focus on God in two-way communication—something that for many people is not easy.

Since the publication of my book, I have set up a number of events at which people could share their experience of listening both to their own bodies and to God’s voice. These include a day with priests and deacons in the Church of Sweden, a three-day retreat for Catholic deacons, and three-day vocational retreats in the classical Ignatian form with bodily prayer for half an hour at morning prayer. Several participants testify that the physical method of prayer is unexpectedly powerful and goes very deep, but it is also playful and liberating.

Praying with the Hands

Consciously using one’s hands in prayer can be a simple way to sense God’s presence. The language of hands can evoke different associations. Prayer with joined hands can give the feeling that we humans cannot cope on our own, that we need help: someone to hold on to. It can become a reminder that we are dependent on God and on each other. Praying this way may help us remain in the emotional state that the prayer (or Godself) conveys and then express it verbally in some way to God. Our formulations are



less likely to be affected by either performance anxiety or a desire to control our verbal utterances. It is important to find a balance between body language and reason's attempt to clothe the experience in words and images. Otherwise, there is a risk that in attempting to find the right words we become too cerebral and start to think too much. Perhaps prayer is most authentic when we listen attentively and then speak without thinking about what to say, capturing the experience without inhibitions.

A closely related position of the hands is to bring the palms together at chest height or in front of the face. My experience is that this prayer with joined palms contributes to collectedness, calm and concentration. With a murmur, simplicity emerges. Everything is not as hopelessly complicated as we often find it to be in life. The Benedictine monk Anselm Grün (b.1945) has a fine description of the flowing energy that characterizes this prayer position and speaks of an experience of 'the cycle of divine love'.⁹

A variation on this way of praying is to stand with outstretched hands as though holding an open book. At first it can feel strange to stand like that, we stare at the palms of our hands and maybe even feel a little stupid. Eventually, however, this may change. We experience that we feel that we are being addressed. The open book speaks to the praying person. One retreatant said:

When I have prayed with my hands like an open book, close to my heart, it has awakened a feeling of being recollected and open, receptive, at the same time, of having a heart open to Christ, as he has his heart open to me. It has somehow strengthened my closeness to Him.

Another way to pray with the hands is to hold them cupped in a bowl shape, as beggars do. A Dominican sister once told me that the sisters in a convent in France like to pray with cupped hands, close to each other, like those receiving alms. It helps them to realise their dependence on God and be ready to receive a gift. This position can lead to a strong experience. Whoever begins the day in this prayer position may come to the realisation that we stand with two empty hands and that all human creativity is dependent on the resources God gives us. Initially, we may just experience that we have nothing at all to offer the world, nothing to give. A great need and a feeling of really wanting to receive with two empty hands can then arise.

⁹ Anselm Grün, *Gebetsgebärden* (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1988), part 2.

Finally, we can take our problems and conflicts with us into our prayer time and process these concretely by handing them over to God with a physical gesture and asking for God's help. At evening prayer, I usually thank God for the day that has passed, but also leave the difficulties and conflicts to God, particularly if my human efforts to take responsibility have proved to be insufficient. Tensions, problematic relationships and conflicts are part of life. I usually hold out my hands with open palms as if I were holding a tray and in that way hand over these things to God. Instead of dwelling on them and trying to solve the problems on my own, I leave them concretely to God, which is liberating, incredibly consoling and brings relief.

To Take Some Dance Steps

In the ninth way of prayer, Dominic begins to move, walking around and contemplating. From there to dancing in prayer might be perceived as a big step both culturally and religiously, at least in our latitudes. Dance is perceived as something completely different, that primarily belongs to the secular world. One thinks of Monty Python: *And now for something completely different*. But the systematic theologian and medievalist Laura Hellsten, among others, has shown that this division between religious and secular only emerged some time during the Enlightenment, while the sacred and profane were more intertwined in earlier times.¹⁰ Biblical references also exist. For example, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount:



Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap [*skirtēsate*] for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. (Luke 6:22–23)

Many bible versions translate *skirtēsate* as 'dance'.

¹⁰ Laura Hellsten, *Through the Bone and Marrow: Re-examining Theological Encounters with Dance in Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 108–135.

Today there is liturgical dance inside the church building in various Christian denominations; in the Church of Sweden this is called ‘sacred dance’. There is also dance among Catholic congregations during the offertory in the Mass, especially in countries such as Burundi, Uganda and Eritrea. Dance during the service inside the church may be a sensitive issue, and ideally needs to have developed organically and be an integral part of both the liturgy and local cultural customs.

Both during the retreat I organized for Catholic deacons and the day with Church of Sweden priests and deacons, I found it fruitful for participants to take at least a few small dance steps in prayer. The physical movement prompted them spontaneously to express gratitude or joy in relation to God. In some cases, it felt as though God was in them and moved them. In a way, the distinction between the human and divine dissolved, as bodily prayer reduced the distance between human person and God, a distance that cognitive prayer sometimes maintains.

The Seat of Faith

In conclusion, I would like to ask a question: ‘Where in the body is faith?’ Don’t think too much, just listen to what instinctively comes to you. For some, the answer may be the heart or the soul. For others, it is the hands that hold, the ears that listen, the eyes that see, the feet that walk or dance. Perhaps some of you think that faith encompasses the whole body. Of course, one does not have to choose between exclusive alternatives: faith resides in reason as well as in emotions, in thoughts as well as in the body. It might be worth doing this thought experiment—or, we might say, ‘body experiment’. Faith is, after all, in the whole person and in the whole church community.

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¹¹ Available from The Way Ignatian Book Service, www.theway.org.uk/bookservice.shtml.