

Ten ways to deepen our relationship with God

By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap. • Posted February 12, 2014

Over the years I've heard from many good people who want a closer relationship with God. But they're stymied by what they perceive as God's silence. What they often mean, without knowing it, is that they'd like God to do something dramatic in their lives; something with a hint of Mt. Sinai that proves his credentials.

But God typically doesn't work that way. He's not in the theater business. God wants to be loved and even in a sense "courted" – which means that we can't be passive partners in the relationship. We need to pursue God as we would the persons we love.

So as we make our way through these last weeks of ordinary time before Lent, here a few steps – in no particular order – that can help us draw closer to God.

First, start by listening to him. Faith isn't a 12-step action program. Nor is it an algebra problem that needs to be "solved." It's a love affair. As with a spouse, the most important thing we can do is to be present and listen. This requires the investment of time and focus. If a spirit of impatience or pretending to listen doesn't work with your spouse, why would it work with God?

Second, cultivate silence. We can't listen when our world is filled with noise and toys. C.S. Lewis often said that noise is the music of hell. Our toys – those things we choose to distract us – keep us diverted from focusing on the main questions of life: Why are we here? What does my life mean? Is there a God, and if so, who is he, and what does he ask of me?

Third, seek humility. Humility is to the spirit what material poverty is to the senses: the great purifier. Humility is the beginning of sanity. We can't really see – much less love – anyone or anything else when the self is in the way. When we finally, really believe in our own sinfulness and unimportance, many other things become possible: repentance; mercy, patience, forgiveness of others. These virtues are the foundation stones of that other great Christian virtue: justice. No justice is ever possible in a spider's web of mutual anger, recrimination and hurt pride.

Fourth, cultivate honesty. Complete honesty is only possible for a humble person. The reason is simple. The most painful but important honesty is telling the truth to ourselves about our own motives and our own actions. The reason honesty is such a powerful magnet is because it's so rare.

Modern life is too often built on the marketing of half-truths and lies about who we are and what we deserve. Many of the lies are well-intentioned and not even very harmful

— but they're still lies. Scripture praises the honest woman and man because they're like clean air in a room full of smoke. Honesty allows the mind to breathe and think clearly.

Fifth, seek to be holy. Holy does not mean nice or even good, although truly holy people are always good and often — though not always — nice. Holiness means “other than.” It's what Scripture means when it tells us to be “in the world, but not of the world.” And this doesn't just miraculously happen. We need to choose and seek holiness.

God's ways are not our ways. Holiness is the habit of seeking to conform all of our thoughts and actions to God's ways. There's no cookie-cutter model of holiness, just as piety can't be reduced to one particular kind of prayer or posture. What's important is to love the world because God loves it and sent his Son to redeem it, but not to be captured by its habits and values, which are not godly.

Sixth, pray. Prayer is more than just that portion of the day when we advise God about what we need and what he should do. Real prayer is much closer to listening, and it's intimately tied to obedience. God certainly wants to hear what we need and love and fear, because these things are part of our daily lives, and he loves us. But if we're doing the talking, we can't listen. Note too, that we can't really pray without humility. Why? Because prayer requires us to lift up who we are and everything we experience and possess to God. Pride is too heavy to lift.

Seventh, read. Scripture is the living Word of God. When we read God's Word, we encounter God himself. But there's more: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Georges Bernanos and so many others — these were deeply intelligent and powerful writers whose work nourishes the Christian mind and soul, while also inspiring the imagination. Reading also serves another, simpler purpose: It shuts out the noise that distracts us from fertile reflection. We can't read *The Screwtape Letters* and take network television seriously at the same time. And that's a very good thing.

By the way, if you do nothing else in 2014, read Tolkien's wonderful short story, *Leaf by Niggle*. It will take you less than an hour, but it will stay with you for a lifetime. And then read C.S. Lewis' great religious science-fiction trilogy — *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. You'll never look at our world in quite the same way again.

Eighth, believe and act. Nobody “earns” faith. It's a free gift from God. But we do need to be willing and ready to receive it. We can discipline ourselves to be prepared. If we sincerely seek truth; if we desire things greater than this life has to offer; and if we leave our hearts open to the possibility of God — then one day we will believe, just as when we choose to love someone more deeply, and turn our hearts sincerely to the task, then sooner or later we usually will.

Feelings are fickle. They're often misleading. They're not the substance of our faith. We need to be grateful for our emotions as God's gifts, but we also need to judge them in the light of common sense. Falling in love is only the first taste of love. Real love is both more beautiful and more demanding than the early days of a romance.

In like manner, a dramatic "road to Damascus" style conversion doesn't happen to most people, and not even St. Paul stayed on the road very long. Why? Because in revealing himself to Paul, Jesus immediately gave him something to do. We know and more deeply love Jesus Christ by doing what he tells us to do.

In the real world, feelings that endure follow actions that have substance. The more sincere we are in our discipleship, the closer we will come to Jesus Christ. This is why the Emmaus disciples only recognized Jesus in "the breaking of the bread." Only in acting in and on our faith, does our faith become fully real.

Ninth, nobody makes it to heaven alone. We all need friendship and community. A friend of mine who's been married more than 40 years likes to say that the heart of a good marriage is friendship. Every successful marriage is finally about a deep and particular kind of friendship that involves honesty, intimacy, fidelity, mutual sacrifice, hope and shared beliefs.

Every successful marriage is also a form of community. Even Jesus needed these two things: friendship and community. The Apostles were not simply Christ's followers; they were also his brothers and friends, people who knew and supported him in an intimate way. All of us as Christians need the same two things. It doesn't matter whether we're a religious, layperson, deacon or priest, single or married. Friends are vital. Community is vital. Our friends both express and shape who we are. Good friends sustain us. Bad friends undermine us. And that's why they're so decisive to the success or failure of a Christian life.

Tenth and finally, nothing is more powerful than the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist in leading us to the God we seek. God makes himself available to us every week in the confessional, and every day in the sacrifice of the Mass. It makes little sense to talk about the "silence of God" when our churches are made silent by our own absence and indifference. We're the ones with the cold hearts – not God.

He's never outdone in his generosity. He waits for us in the quiet of the tabernacle. And he loves us and wants to be loved wholeheartedly in return.

If we're willing to give that love, these steps will lead us to him.