NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Don't discount Pope Benedict's possible conversation with God

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 4, 2013 A small c catholic

When an Italian news source last month quoted former Pope Benedict XVI as saying that God told him to resign [1], the social media world and similar unreliable sources lit up.

Much of the commentary -- to call it analysis would attribute to it far too much gravitas -- was just silliness about whether God speaks audibly to folks.

And the Zenit news agency was quick to note that right after Benedict allegedly said he resigned because "God told me to," he immediately clarified "that it was not any kind of apparition or phenomenon of that kind, but rather 'a mystical experience' in which the Lord gave rise in his heart to an 'absolute desire' to remain alone with him in prayer."

If you ask, "What exactly is a mystical experience?" you set off down the wrong path in that Christian mysticism almost by definition defies being "exactly" anything. Mysticism refers to a deep, personal experience of and/or with God and, thus, is nearly impossible to quantify in the way 21st-century scientific minds would like.

And because mystical experiences are so personal, they are difficult to share with others. They lose a lot in translation because they run up against the limits of language. (And it pains me as a writer to acknowledge that language has limits.)

Several years ago, I was reading Jacques Barzun's wonderful book, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* *[2]*, and found him suggesting that Catholics have precious little experience with mysticism. He went beyond that, in fact, to say that "Catholic dogma frowns on mysticism." I thought it an odd, and almost certainly wrong, conclusion.

So I asked Kansas City, Mo., Catholic Bishop Robert Finn about it. (This was long before Finn was convicted in court of the misdemeanor crime of failure to report to government authorities a priest suspected of child sex abuse.)

Finn agreed with me, adding, among much else, this: "Catholicism certainly embraces an authentic mysticism. It would be difficult to compile any list of saints that does not include mystics, both from contemplative and active life. Indeed, the universal call to holiness emphasized by the Second Vatican Council was a reminder that we are all called to a deep intimate prayer which urges us, by the action of God's grace in us, to transforming union."

So mysticism is serious stuff, but because so many deranged people say God speaks to them directly and even audibly, often guiding them to commit violence, many people immediately dismiss the idea that God could communicate directly with an individual.

In fact, it's a subject we all should approach with caution. And yet to foreclose the possibility that God could speak to one of us in any way God wants to is to proscribe God's glorious freedom. Our business as humans is

not to disallow any action of God. It is, rather, to listen for the voice of God and respond to it.

I am neither a mystic nor a contemplative (probably overlapping categories), but I certainly am aware of the Christian tradition that affirms that God speaks to us in many ways. Indeed, this tradition's deep roots in Judaism came to full flower at the incarnation of the one we call the Word of God, Christ Jesus.

One of the hymns [3] the congregation of my childhood often sang, in fact, begged God to speak to us. It began: "Lord, speak to me, that I may speak/In living echoes of thy tone;/As thou hast sought, so let me seek/Thy erring children lost and lone."

And as a child, I recall a deep longing to hear God's voice in a way that wouldn't make me die of fright. So perhaps instead of rolling our eyes at Benedict's reported declaration that God spoke to him, we might well wish for a similarly moving experience for ourselves.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [5]*. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com [6].]

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