Columns
Spirituality



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In these days of the Easter season, we often read about the manifestations of our Lord Jesus to his disciples, apostles and friends. At first, he showed himself to them (Luke 24:35-48, John 20:19-31). Later, he just spoke to them (Acts 8: 26-40, 9:1-20).

The Acts of the Apostles is full of stories of apostles who were impelled to action by the spirit.

The apostle Philip was inspired by the spirit of God to go out and walk on the path to Gaza (Acts 8: 26-40).

Something jolted within me as I was reading the story of Philip (Acts 8:27) for my meditation. I was very much touched by Philip's response. I do not know exactly what was on his mind that morning after having experienced harsh situations post-resurrection. However, I am certain that he kept close to Jesus through his prayers and was eager to listen and obey whatever the Lord might be saying to him. Hence as soon as he heard the message of the angel to move out, he acted as directed by the heavenly messenger.

He was then able to strike up a conversation with the Ethiopian man in the chariot and speak to him about Jesus, gradually leading him to faith in Jesus.

Reading this set me in a reflective mood. How often do I respond to the promptings of the Spirit? How often do I allow such promptings to bypass me because I feel they are just passing thoughts?

Don't the angels speak to us now? Is not the Lord prompting us to action? Do we hear the "still, small voice" of the Holy Spirit while at work or engaged in something? Do we not hear these gentle promptings and pass them by as just a feeling or a dream?

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As I reflected, an incident that happened a few months ago flashed across my mind.

It was a Sunday morning. As it was the second Sunday, we had the liberty to rise and participate in the Eucharist at the parish at our convenience. Being the cook for the day, I woke up as usual and thought I would do some reading in the room. As I was organizing the day in my mind — prayer, breakfast, Mass at the parish, cooking

— it occurred to me if I were to keep the meat on the fire, it would be cooked while I prayed. I took it seriously as an "inner voice" helping me.

Yes, I liked the suggestion. It would save me some time, too.

So I got out of my room to find the sitting room in darkness, which was unusual. Then I realized those who went out for the early Mass had turned off the lights. In the dim light, I saw the piles of books that were to be loaded in the vehicle for an exhibition at a parish on the same day. As I moved towards the familiar switch to turn on the lights, I saw something crawling ahead. I stood looking at it in disbelief. A snake! I went closer, though afraid, to take a look at what kind of snake it was. Fear was all over me.

In desperation I whispered, "Thank you God" for showing the reptile to me.

The unwanted guest had entered through the closed door and crawled past the stacks of books! It was moving towards the wardrobe, and I had to stop it before it entered the next room — the book stockroom.

Measuring its pace, I ran to the kitchen to get some garlic petals smashed, as I had heard the smell of garlic makes snakes turn around or stop. It was important that I knew where it went. Quickly, I returned with the garlic, and the snake had gone under the second cupboard.

I screamed desperately to the person in the next room, alerting her to the danger in the house. She screamed back, saying she was afraid to come out.

Again, I exclaimed with the psalmist, "I called on the Lord in my distress … The Lord is at my side; I do not fear … The Lord is at my side as my helper … It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes" (Psalm 118).

Gathering courage, I spread the garlic petals after the third cupboard, just before the entrance to the next room. I waited with bated breath, overcome with fear. The snake emerged from under the second wardrobe and crawled towards the bottom of the third cupboard, vanishing from my sight.

Desperate, I went to the kitchen to ask our cook for help. Looking at my face, she asked, "Is there a snake in the house?"

I asked her to keep watch over the snake and went to work in the kitchen.

I called the snake catcher, who was already catching one at another place. He arrived after an hour. Thinking the snake was hiding in the cupboard, we searched it, emptying it fully. However, he could not spot it. He left, suggesting we call the forest snake catcher, who came after another hour. After searching the cupboard, he turned his search among the pile of chairs standing nearby. As he picked the chairs one by one, he looked at us with a broad smile on his face. "It is here," he said.

After a bit of struggle, he caught the 2.5-foot snake — a python.

We all heaved a sigh of relief after the three-hour ordeal.

Amidst all this commotion, I had continued to whisper, "Thank you, God."

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning and your faithfulness by night (Psalm 92:2-3). The words of the psalmist came to me spontaneously.

I thanked him for inspiring me to go to the kitchen to keep the meat on the fire. I thanked myself for listening to that gentle voice, which was easy to ignore. If I had not come out at that moment, the snake would have hidden somewhere, and we do not know what would have happened. If it had gone into the book storeroom and hidden, no one would have known its hiding place, and who would have encountered it and gotten the shock of their life? Or would it have remained there and grown to its full size?

All these anxieties were avoided just because I listened and followed the Spirit's whisper within me.

How many times have I let go of such promptings?

We can be certain that God is still speaking to us, his people, and we can trust that he wants to guide us. We may have an inspiration or insight during prayer or in the course of the day. Let us not dismiss it as just our imagination. Stop and try to act on it. It might be the Holy Spirit leading us. The best way to learn to hear the Spirit's voice is to try responding when we feel a nudge. That is what the first believers did. Perhaps the Spirit is telling us to contact someone who could use our help or inspiring us to a different work of mercy.

It all starts with taking that first step.

That is what the entire Book of Acts is about. Because the first believers obeyed the voice of the Spirit, word spread about the transforming power of Jesus' death and resurrection throughout the known world.

It just goes to show, you never know what can happen, if like Philip, we listen and obey.

"The Lord is my shepherd … He leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:1-3).