

Listening With Love

The Art of Christian Listening

by Thomas N. Hart

Paulist Press; 128 Pages

by Dan Keusal

I have a habit of glancing at the display window of the bookstore as I go in and out. That display represents an hour or so of creative effort on the part of a bookstore employee; the least I can do is take the time to glance. Last May I glanced long enough to see a book whose title intrigued me: *The Art of Christian Listening* by Thomas N. Hart. "How can listening be an art," I thought to myself, "and what distinguishes 'Christian' listening from 'non-Christian' listening"? I decided to advance myself five dollars of my summer earnings and buy the book. The five dollars were well spent.

The opening point of the book falls into the "simple but profound" category: to listen with an open and receptive heart is to bestow a gift of great value. Listening takes patience and can mean inconvenience. The opportunity to listen may coincide with the time you set aside to study for a test. But so many people yearn to be heard — to be someone who is willing to listen with love is not only giving one's self to another, it is bringing the presence of God into that person's life.

In chapter one, Hart writes, "God may well be believed in, but there is not real experience of him. He is a notion, not a reality perceived. And then comes incarnation. At the hands of someone in a helping role, a person sees flesh and blood on a lot of faith notions. . . . Through the experience of being ministered to by one who shows a genuine personal concern, an acceptance which goes beyond one's deserts, and an affirmation of all that is good in one's life, a person can believe, perhaps for the first time, that God is love and what he is said to have said is true."

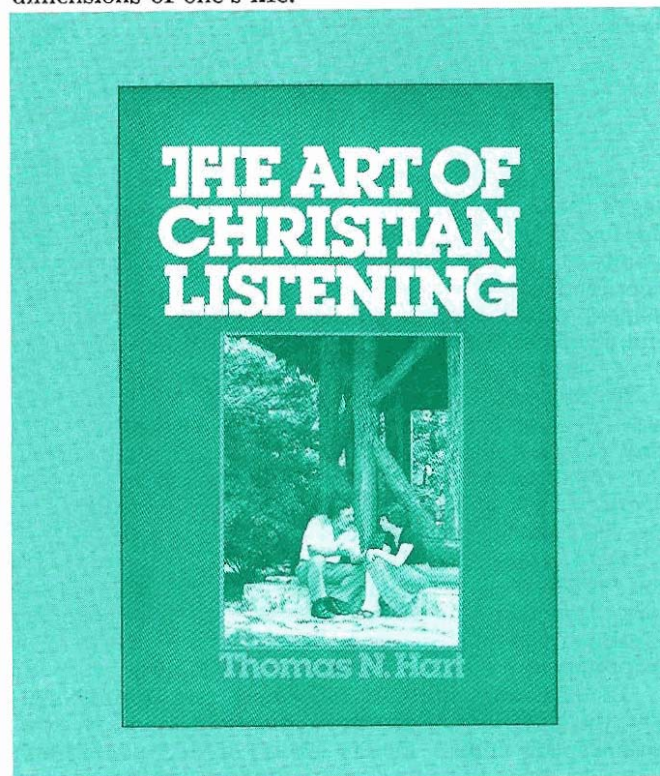
A person who implicitly or explicitly seeks out our attentive ear may simply be looking for a place to unload what is on his or her mind. More often, they want some type of response, and this is where most of us begin to fidget a bit. We may feel we lack the experience, wisdom and holiness to respond to another's problems. It is at this point that we must realize that God can work through our weaknesses. "We often do our best work," Hart writes, "when we operate from weakness and totally empty hands, passing on something we do not possess, producing effects we can in no way explain out of who or how we are."

Hart shows that this idea has a sound scriptural basis, citing 1 Cor. 2:1-5 and 2 Cor. 12:7-9. In fact, Hart's prudent use of scripture to lend support to his thoughts is one of the book's outstanding features. Each of the author's thoughts are backed by several scriptural citations used in proper context.

The extensive use of scripture as a reference is indicative of the informed and insightful, but humble and sincere style in which the book is written. Hart

writes that "the willingness to enter into a helping relationship is essentially the willingness to be a companion." It is just such a relationship that Hart enters into with the reader. He draws on his experience as a theology professor at Seattle University and a counselor at the Catholic Counseling Center of Seattle to provide the reader with a basic guide to improving his or her own capacity as a Christian listener.

The first three chapters of the book deal with Christian listening as defined for the "helper" — a broadly conceived function which includes all relationships. The discussion of the difference between counselor and "spiritual director" which begins chapter three is the point of departure for a more detailed look at the functions and limitations of spiritual direction in the classical sense. This is the focus of the rest of the book. It is to Hart's credit, however, that one need not be called to be a spiritual director to benefit from chapters three to thirteen; the entire book presents a thought-provoking view of Christian spirituality. Hart says that "religion is not a distinct area of life, but a dimension of all life." The role of the spiritual director, then, is to help one see where God fits into any one or all dimensions of one's life.



After a brief but admirably successful summary of what it means to grow in the Christian life, Hart spends several chapters discussing the role of prayer in Christian decision-making. He then lists and explains a few pitfalls the spiritual director must be careful to avoid and includes chapters intended to help someone discern if he or she does indeed have the gifts to be an effective spiritual director, and to "say something about the typical sorts of interaction that arise as one deals with persons of any age or circumstances who wish to grow in the Christian life."

It is fitting that Hart ends the work with a chapter entitled "The Gift of the Needy," which tells of the benefits the helper reaps from a helping relationship. The explicit theme of this chapter and of the entire book is that it is truly in giving of ourselves that we receive, and each of us can give in a profound, significant way just by taking the time to listen with love. □