

## A Particular Difficulty Relating to God

*Please note: This article is located under the “New Testament” banner. Reason: there’s simply more room here even though it doesn’t pertain to the heading.*

Recently on a solemnity<sup>1</sup> I happened to attend the Divine Office which had two readings instead of the usual one. The first was from an epistle of St. Paul and the second (I forget the exact source, mostly like a Church Father) about the need to praise and worship God. Since it was the Easter season, the second text was loaded with passages from the Book of Revelation. All in all, the author attempted to describe what life in heaven is like. It was obvious he had no thoughts of his own but was stringing together a whole bunch of scriptural verses to bolster conventional ideas on this matter. As for both readings, certainly they are classical expressions of Christian spirituality when it comes to prayer, all very fine and on target.

Although there was nothing wrong with the readings (though the second obviously was boring in its repetition), I came away a bit uneasy, that something wasn’t quite right. Upon further reflection I discovered that I had this feeling in similar circumstances, reinforced in the context of public readings of scripture or excerpts from Christian classics. Such public reading as in a liturgical context presents the same material to everyone with the intent that they come away inspired as well as with a unified vision. In other words, we’re talking about a kind of catechesis, a collective educative process. This time, however, it was different. The two readings set off some kind of alarm bell...not loud but persistent. It turns out that this approach, unfortunately for modern readers, is still being used: the facts are correct but the approach leaves much to be desired. If I chose to let this warning slide, I’d be missing something important although I wasn’t quite sure what it was. So why not give it some attention in the form of this short, rambling article.

Briefly put, the two liturgical readings intimate two types of existence which on this occasion came into greater clarity: times when we’re at prayer and times when we are not, the latter not being mentioned but suggested as something to overcome. And that means effort on our part which can set us up automatically for failure. Often this state is characterized by sin, a favorite subject thrown around a lot because it’s a convenient way to present things. At the same time readings similar to the one I had mentioned exhort people to be at prayer all the time. This makes the listener wonder what “all the time” just might mean. Perhaps when life was simpler more people

---

<sup>1</sup> A liturgical celebration of the highest rank which is more important than any given Sunday.

were able to practice this, but nowadays in a highly secular and technical society it's something else.

As for prayer, most people have a general inkling of what it is and even more so, what life is without it, that being the realm where we hear a lot of talk about sin. Obviously this division is inaccurate because it splits life in an artificial manner. However, we'll let it go because such a division is familiar to many folks. To put it more bluntly, one is either a saint or a sinner. So we have a setup where we alternate between presence vs. absence, a situation which can go unquestioned for one's entire life. At first glance the division isn't as dreary it seems. Since it has been accepted for a long time, we've come to accept it without much further examination. As for the bulk of people in this category, they live fairly exemplary lives even though they bear resemblance to the prisoners chained to their seats in the cave of Plato's **Republic**. If everyone's behaving in the same way and facing the same direction without rocking the boat, what's the problem? The problem is that such behavior has gone unquestioned even though a feeling remains that something more is involved without knowing how to approach it.

A beloved, well-known quote which you hear thrown out to offer solace in such circumstances comes from St Augustine: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." True but, somewhere in the background lies a rather dismal assessment of the human condition. At least that how it hits me. While Augustine has a unique contemporary appeal, the quote reveals more of the author as though he were speaking directly to the reader. The way he presents this sentiment as well as other excerpts from his writings comes across in a catchy sort of way which precludes further inquiry, even discouraging it. And so the underlying premises is better to remain with the accepted status quo. This, of course, isn't the final word on the matter. Should anyone examine further into lesser known aspects of the Christian tradition—the Syriac one, for example—you will find the approach taken by Augustine to be quite alien or in a word, un-poetic.

A little interjection, if you will, to shed more light on the matter at hand. Sometimes an attitude towards things spiritual like the one just delineated gives tacit permission to go about life straddling two sides without further attention. While at times it may be awkward, at least it's a proven way as to how we should comport ourselves: an acknowledgment of the divine once in a while after which we return to daily life where it's pretty much absent. This way of approaching it, albeit adopted largely in unconscious fashion, allows us to live in a state of resignation. That becomes fertile

soil for adopting a superstitious attitude as our attention alternates between our understanding of what it means to be at prayer and what it means when we're not.

Often a superstitious attitude comes to the fore during a crisis, some type of competitive contest or on the throes of undertaking a journey fraught with difficulty. To succeed, instinctively we feel that we must consult the gods (and goddesses), and if we don't, trouble is headed our way. Actually trouble does come because we've disposed ourselves to being attracted to it even if it isn't on the horizon. The strange part is, should this trouble not come, we feel let down by an invisible force which is neglecting us. Fate may be one way of describing such a sentiment made all the worse by the adjective "blind" prefaced to it.

Whether it's in front of our awareness or not, this distinction between being-at-prayer and not-at-prayer is a major underlying factor as we seek for meaning in life. If the word "prayer" has too many connotations, we could substitute "transcendence" because it's more comprehensive. We struggle along between these two poles since we're hard-wired to act accordingly. The question is how do we rid ourselves of this conundrum? Perhaps it's better to ask, can we? Life is infinitely more complicated today than it was when St Paul wrote his epistles, not to mention the Church Fathers, this including traditions about prayer that had sprung from those sources. While their insights are spot-on, their contemporary presentations are less so.

If these holy people were alive today, the challenges they'd encounter would be totally beyond their comprehension. However, that's a futile thought to entertain. What they've left remains a potent force. So we might pause and observe how the forces in our lives are playing themselves out which is far different from being passive to hearing their writings. In other words, in one ear and out the other perhaps retaining a tiny bit for momentary inspiration. If we realize this passivity as our default state of mind, after a relatively short while we might be in a better position to expand our imaginative powers to consider if any alternatives exist. They do, but we might be blind to them momentarily. As for picking the right one, this is crucial, for it must fit the situation at hand. We wonder where to start since there are so many options, but that's okay. Being aware of this is the first step in acquiring an antidote.

Usually the alternatives for which we opt have been determined well beforehand; the same is applicable to our approach to things spiritual. Each of us has a reservoir of memories very much alive as they govern us, they being derived from our families and culture. Some repeat themselves more often than others, and rarely are they

new. In fact, they're characterized not so much by repetition but by monotony. No wonder that many of us get bored so easily. On the other hand, they are beneficial. Should they be new all the time, we'd wear ourselves out in short order, so there's some virtue in repetition. First, being aware of their presence is important before we narrow them down in order to see several overall patterns emerge. While doing this we become more cognizant that the embarrassingly limited supply of memories has more control over us than we're ready to admit. However, that shouldn't come as a shock but as an opportunity.

So instead of looking at the conventional approaches to prayer (fine in itself), some paths of an oblique nature might be worth considering. In this way we're forced to use our imagination rather than remaining passive to ideas coming to us. Putting this in another way, we're more aware of what comes from the outside and allow them to run roughshod over us instead of simply observing them as alien influences. As for being passive, it isn't necessarily bad but limits us, this being an unnatural state, not the one with which we had been born. It makes us more vulnerable to what we hear from Christian spiritual teaches, namely, that never can we search out God's nature but are to worship him instead. Obviously true, but where does that leave us practically speaking? Back at the dualism of time-for-prayer vs. time-not-for-prayer? It seems so by reason of the ways this is presented. Although we feel instinctively things aren't right, more often we succumb. It's especially true when we've gone through a rough patch which stresses us out. When it's over, we say "Where the hell did that come from?" It emerged from some deep, dark hole, assaulted us and then crept back into that hole. So there we are, bitten and wondering what the hell had just happened.

Another influence with the potential of making us unsure of ourselves us comes from observing older people—solid citizens indeed—who live quiet exemplary lives. They're retired now and are enjoying what little life has left for them. This they do mostly in a conventional, hum-drum way. We see satisfaction on their faces, the way they comport themselves, often talking fondly not much about their children (they've all grown up) but their grandchildren with whom they have a special relationship. It's nice to see the glow on their faces in such circumstances. However, once you get beyond this, they're pretty boring. Nothing much to talk about because their lives now are essentially the same as when they were much younger, bland through and through. End of life issues aren't on the horizon or aren't discussed. No need. The present contentment precludes this. While admirable by reason of their inherent goodness, we come away with an inkling that life must have more to offer. The challenge is where and how to discover it.

Such in a nutshell are two factors which can hinder our quest for transcendence.<sup>2</sup> Again, the focus here is upon times for prayer vs. times without prayer and the exemplary but ultimately prosaic lives of good people who make for a stable but bland society. While they represent exemplary lives, making a break and having the vision to find an alternative to this isn't easy. Yet we can be creative, for example, circumscribing our sphere of influence in order to behold deeper patterns. There comes to mind someone dear to a wide variety of people, namely, Henry Thoreau. In fact, he's as close to a secular saint as anyone else.

Yet Thoreau had a lesser known side, if you will, comprising two parts of his character. First, he was pretty much a homeboy, not straying from Lexington-Concord. He found much to explore in a limited area that others had overlooked. Furthermore, he was doing this at a time when people were migrating West, and the excitement was contagious. Everyone wanted to be part of it whereas Thoreau's view apparently is unrecorded. Nevertheless, it must have been a constant temptation for him Should I or shouldn't I? The second, even more evident aspect of Thoreau's character is that he comes across as a kind of moocher, living close to family and friends as well as on the property of friends such as the Emersons. Both these characteristics freed up Thoreau in a way he may or may not have been conscious of. Fortunately for us he had decided to make full use of both his inclinations..

Such is the confined sphere in which one of America's dearest authors had chosen to live. "Chosen" in that it was deliberate and went contrary to what most folks at the time were doing. He speaks often of trains nearby going back and forth, most likely a reminder of the restlessness of society swirling about him. To chose a sedentary lifestyle with this in the background, I think, is part of why Thoreau has such a wide appeal. In other words, he was a master at staying put by not going West and mooching off friends, two tactics used for a specific purpose which indeed remain a mystery even to us today. What's of special interest is that Thoreau did this right under the noses of his family and neighbors. They were completely oblivious of his strategy, thinking him to be a bit odd yet harmless, so they let him alone. Little did they know that they were pawns he was using in a grander scheme of things.

---

2 A caveat, if you will. Some Eastern (Buddhist) teachings say this is an illusion...there's no "quest" for transcendence because already we're born with it whole and entire. It'd be great developing that more, but for the moment we'll let it ride. As for "obstacles," surely there are more. The two at hand are singled out by reason of their familiarity, endurance and pervasiveness.

While following Thoreau's example may not be practical nowadays, the idea of setting up an environment within an environment may offer one insight into handling the conundrum of being at prayer and not being at prayer. As for the mooching part, that may not be everyone's cup of tea but admittedly has some appeal. How to do it is another matter, depending. The main point is that once you've decided to stay ensconced in a stable environment, you become aware of boundaries—we could call it a sandbox—or your personal space. The best part is that it doesn't infringe on how other people manage their own space, for it works right alongside them without them knowing it.

The layout of this environment may be envisioned as a square which conforms to the four cardinal points of the compass, an easy, natural way to orient oneself. From the north you move to the south and so forth fully aware of being confined, not negatively but freely chosen and I might add, enjoyed. So while moving around within a confined space defined by these cardinal points, you get a different perspective of what's around you. Things turn out to be more expansive than at first view. It's far from "doing time" in the prison sense. An easy way to verify this is to step outside the squared-off enclosure and experience the far larger world outside. Paradoxically that world is smaller. Again, we have Thoreau's fondness for Walden Pond and its surrounding area after he had taken several extended trips. Nevertheless, the constant rattle of trains in the background remained as a reminder of society's restlessness and westward migration.

So this talk about being ensconced may be one way of dealing with that alteration between time for prayer and time without prayer. By laying it out in geographical terms we can obtain a better handle on the two. Furthermore, it avoids the more typical mental or rational approach which can lead us high and dry. The same approach can be taken with regard to time, the two being inseparable. The experience of time is notably different from outside this enclosed space. Strange to say, it's marked by a distinct lack of boredom, so contrary to what one may think. While in it, conventional distinctions you entertain slip away; not at once but gradually until, in a sense, you step outside it. Just look at Thoreau's **Journal**, his largest but least explored work. It's chock full of observations about nature, society and everything else, the vast majority of which being written in a confined space.

Now consider this with people "outside" the square, the vast majority of us. For the most part they lead boring lives marked by an overall dissatisfaction and aimlessness. Simple observation brings home this fact. When they look at someone who has adopted the lifestyle just offered, they consider it frightfully confining. It turns out

that they are projecting their own lives onto something that superficially resembles their own. A closer look—provided one is courageous enough—reveals that life inside the squared-off enclosure is a far more happier one than those who are outside. Go explain if you can. It's impossible unless you go ahead and experiment. Referring to Thoreau once again, he left us an account in **Walden Pond**.

We can add another element with regard to the issue at hand. For example, consider the Greek noun *lethe*<sup>3</sup>. This word represents, a forgetfulness that envelops us like a fog with regard to more comprehensive realities. In fact, it is a cover acting as a protective device we erect subconsciously in order to revel in our own imagings. Nothing wrong, of course. However, it favors a life lived mostly on the surface with little opportunities to delve deeper. And this delving deeper makes us encounter layers so thick and gooey that they are close to impossible to cut through.

In contrast to this, the Greek noun for truth is *aletheia*, alpha privative meaning the lack of *lethe* or the lack of concealment implying what can be observed by anyone. While this insight into truth undoubtedly has appeal, how do you implement it? How do you uncover that which is concealed, layered over so thoroughly? Two elements responsible for this concealment aren't visible right away on anyone's radar screen by reason of their native respectability. This may be stretching it a bit, but I offer it to make a point. A concrete image of this comes to mind. Every once in a while I receive a slick magazine from a small, well known Catholic college I had attended way-back-when. Over the years their presentation hasn't changed much: building projects, new courses of study, professors and alumni often with focus upon the high achievers. What I come away with is a wholesome picture of the college which, objectively, is true. It remains a beacon of hope for higher education in the Catholic tradition. However, beneath the respectability which each issue presents touches upon what I've been trying to focus upon in the article at hand. My alma mater is a great place for middle class people, most of whom having gone on to live productive lives. And these are duly summarized in each magazine's edition Nevertheless, beneath the veneer the adjective "boring" is applicable...not negatively but as a kind of overlay.

So boring under the guise of respectability simply is one way to describe those influences giving rise to *lethe* or forgetfulness. It can be difficult to pin them down because of their pervasiveness. Besides, it presumes that *lethe* is the agent

---

3 *Lethe*: one of the five rivers flowing through Hades and is associated with the spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion. This symbol is found in the last section of Plato's **Republic**, where souls are required to drink from the River of Forgetfulness before returning to earthly life, i.e., reincarnation.

responsible for covering up a deeper reality. So we're faced with trying to discern something we don't quite have our fingers on, relying on a hunch that the way things present themselves essentially are shadows. Perhaps this is what Plato was trying to get at. However, he has been and remains largely misunderstood because a spirit of contemplative inquiry has been lacking for so long in our society, this quite different from our customary rationalistic approach. Such a lack puts us in a quandary as how to proceed. Actually we might take it as a state of immaturity from which we must grow without imposing ideas and concepts that are not so much harmful but simply misguided. This requires making a gesture unfamiliar to us, of standing outside our very own environment. There comes to mind the classic example of a fish which appreciates its watery habitat by being outside it and then returning.

As for the path open to us, it isn't something esoteric or magical. Actually it's right in front of us and consists in something we'd rather avoid, our experiences of being shamed or perhaps better, humbled. More often than not, it involves being exposed before other people. For the most part these are the people who whether they realize it or not, subscribe to that boring or prosaic environment described above. Compared with them, we find ourselves pushed out of it, involuntarily I might add. If you sit down and consider this closely, it's the only right path to freedom. Because so many people are fearful of it, they fiddle around with stopgap measures here and there and never get the task done.

As for getting acclimatized to our new situation, it may take some time, even longer than anticipated. We suffer from a lack of support simply because most people are reluctant to talk about it, of critiquing something essentially so stable and predictable. The fear consists in opening a cascade of continuous negative thoughts and emotions which will carry us away. Instead--and this may be putting it ideally--these fears should slide by us as quickly as possible without our latching on to them. Easier said than done, of course.

Should we resist the temptation to spring into action but forsake it in favor of remaining still, they pass more quickly than anticipated. Now there opens up a completely different realm, actually the one we've been born with. Call it our original nature, being fashioned in the divine image and likeness or whatever. This is what lays beneath all the levels of forgetfulness, of *lethe*, where we've substituted an agenda for reality. The durability which results is quite remarkable, an attribute which gives it legitimacy. If we were to question someone randomly about it, chances are we'd get a snap answer saying that to propose such an idea is delusional. The chief reason is that the state of affairs produced essentially is stable and all around



acceptable. There's nothing wrong or defective about it as vouched for by many good people.

We can get a better handle on one of the main obstacles here, seriousness, by considering the nature of boundaries—not the transgression of moral boundaries we hear about a lot—but along the line of how one territory differs from another. This, of course, is a refinement of that enclosed space discussed earlier, the ability to draw up a personal space being the first requirement which has both a magical and childlike air about it. So it appears that by fostering a sense of enclosure we can withdraw from that pesky dualism of time for prayer vs. time when we're not at prayer. And don't forget. The best part about this enclosure is that it's fully portable meaning we can take it anywhere.

+