

A Waste of Time?

“If I thought of you as often as I had thought of others I’d be a saint by now.” Words uttered a number of years ago by a novice in religious life which had remained with me over the decades. They have a somewhat pious character but nonetheless contain an essential truth expressed right from the heart. Since that memorable statement the fellow who had uttered it has been married and divorced three times. Still, that doesn’t detract from what he had said. Often I wonder if in later years (and marriages) he had remembered that immortal sentence.

Every once in a while I’d recall his words and see how they applied to my current situation. The response was the same each and every time. I’d come away thoroughly embarrassed but on further reflection, I ended up more inspired instead of being discouraged. That’s the real lesson at hand. In essence I was confronted head on with a chastening experience at how little I think of God. As a friend remarked not long ago by reversing the words, I should be mindful of how much God thinks of me. A good point.

At issue is how we contact God which usually is through meditation or prayer, private or public, that is, liturgical. At the same time I realized that despite the benefit of these means how quickly I became unmindful of God. I prefer “unmindful” over forgetful because it’s a more comprehensive disregard. This lead me to consider the role of memory or better, *anamnesis* as Plato would put it. In essence that’s making present a reality that had always existed. I’m tempted to delve into that here but realize it’s better suited for another time. And so after a while I decided to let this alternation between mindful of God and being absent of him play out on its own. Quickly I discovered that despite the contrast between joyful and painful memories, on a deeper level something positive that was out of my hands was at work.

The observation presented in the opening paragraph represents a direct response to things divine by addressing Jesus. Though these words had no direct bearing upon the content of this article, nevertheless they served to give voice to a subject that somehow ties in with it. As for that subject matter, it deals with a common yet little discussed issue with regard to Christian prayer. Rarely if ever does Jesus respond verbally to our requests, let alone any other means. Yes, some accounts by so-called mystics exist out there where Jesus does communicate with humans, but I’ll leave those aside as an interesting phenomenon not tied into the article at hand. Because they are more problematic, I prefer to let them slide.

One of the most direct scriptural verses that can tie in with the statement under consideration are words from the Our Father, namely, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Consider how many of us have mulled over these words while uttering them not fully aware of the correspondence we’re asking to exist between our forgiveness and that of God. Reflection on the mode of our address reveals at once that it’s strictly one way. Upon realizing this our whole attitude with regard to prayer takes on a different dimension. More precisely, we pause for a moment, consider the way we’ve been raised with regard to the nature of this one way address and realize there’s no response. Absolutely nothing. Nada. At this point a great, impenetrable wall of silence hits us in the face which is infinitely larger than our puny selves. What to do next is the issue at hand.

Now extend our pause a bit longer and give careful consideration to the following. Never do we receive an answer to our heartfelt prayers. By that I don’t mean verbally but on a more subtle level of communication. The same applies equally to liturgical prayers, the Mass and Divine Office. Another observation worth considering is that yes, our utterances are nice, but when you think of it, essentially they’re all one way as pointed out in the last paragraph. From what I gather, reflecting on a lack of response from the other side of the great wall of silence rarely crosses the minds of most folks.

Why, then, do we persist in uttering such one-way words? If we receive no answer as always the case at hand, why don’t we question this? Are we afraid of getting no response? Perhaps it has to do with a kind of inbuilt superstitious inclination, something we prefer not to admit. If we don’t pray, we’re not fulfilling a necessary obligation. A certain fear in this regard had been instilled in us both from our parents, religious teachers and the like that’s difficult to uproot even should we offer vigorous protestations. And so we continue as usual with our prayers, both private and public. Better to be safe than sorry.

Though I had been present to hear that novice utter his unwittingly wise remarks decades ago—I believe he hadn’t the slightest idea of their lasting import—they nevertheless laid out a blueprint in simplified form which applies to everyone who follows some kind of spiritual life. I start from the most basic premise out there, one I had touched upon in a few other articles as to what the vast majority of us experience yet never get around to discuss. In a nutshell I describe that in terms of the ominous sounding phrase absolute silence or wall of silence. Whichever phrase we chose both are the exact opposite of what we humans are all about. In a word,

our reality consists in activity whether, mental, spiritual or physical. That, in fact, is how we've been made. Imagine all that coming to a grinding halt. Each and everyone of us knows it will with death but few of us are willing to anticipate it and see what will happen. One thing is certain. As we get closer to the inevitable, the absolute nature of silence can hit us with great force.

A keener awareness of this silence became more evident during the four weeks of Advent and more specifically Christmas. No surprise there because Christmas is a season with a considerable amount of activity and noise swirling about us. On top of it we have the secular trappings. By way of footnote, consider the presence of secular silence, if you will, the day after Christmas. The significance of that day is dropped at once like dropping a hotcake. So the silence on the day after is the exact opposite of the absolute silence under consideration. Actually it's quite chilling the more you think about it.

Note that I've just used the word season for this time of the year. The reason? It has several connotations, the first in that it refers to given celebrations characterized by certain things you don't find at other times. More particularly, season connotes the addition of flavoring with regard to food. Meals are prepared with a certain variety of seasonings which enhance the taste. Thus season has a more intimate significance when it comes to a given time of the year. It allows us to savor the various "flavors" at hand instead of passing through them unawares. The idea of season also allows greater freedom to expand upon different subjects while not straying far afield from the main one at hand.

Should we apply this rich notion of season to Christmas it cannot help but elicit a wide range of images and memories which you can almost taste. For that reason I found it one of the best times to contrast with that stark ultimate reality of absolute silence. All the stuff that comprises a season as the one at hand ultimately can be traced back to us. By that I mean we are the origin of all that goes into celebrating the season. When you think of it, like the prayers we offer, they are all one way and never questioned as to why it is as such.

Compared with other celebrations, Christmas is the noisiest in the sense of the one that cranks out the most words. Song too is characteristic of this time of year. Thus Christmas offers plenty of material for contrasting with the nature of absolute silence. We exert ourselves to the max and never get any response or acknowledgment in return. Once we're finished with Christmas, we move on to another season and so forth. Round and around it goes. We take great delight in

accompanying these rounds but rarely if ever stop to observe if they evoke a response.

As for the prayers we offer, we naturally seek to verify them with the best sources available which is why we look for precedents in the Bible. There we find that indeed the Lord does a lot of talking with regard to Israel and visa versa. That's modified somewhat with the advent of Jesus Christ who comes as *Logos* (word as expression) but still falls in line with this overall theme of us doing most of the communication. The explanation for this is that God has spoken to the world in his Son, so on his part nothing more needs to be communicated. Even as early as Acts of the Apostles, let along the epistles of St Paul, most of the talking falls silent right down to the present day even though our prayers continue without ceasing. Again, all this takes place against the background of that inscrutable, absolute silence. Against this silence we throw all our prayers, anger, suffering and whatever else we wish add. Talk about a catch-all.

So for a moment let's bring to a halt all the activities we're accustomed to direct to God. When we do, *mirabile dictu*, nothing happens! No majestic or threatening voice reaches out from behind the absolute silent to address us. On an occasion like this we're tempted to believe that the clamor we make, good as it may be, is not "loud" enough. The usual temptation is to increase the volume, rarely if ever to tone it down. This can take the form of ever more elaborate liturgical celebrations where the corporate endeavor involved relieves any burden on our part as individuals. In sum, it's a case of the more the merrier (or louder). We think, how can God ignore such well intention-ed efforts? There's no proof that he does or does not. Again, that silence which is absolute remains the same.

This gets to the title of the essay at hand which is posed as a question, **A Waste of Time?** The question isn't meant to be answered but to be put out there on behalf of all of us who engage in prayer whether private or public or both. Right away we know that the question touches something deep within us, and we grope around for a positive response. Once again fear of offending God steps in. We don't want to be caught with our pants down even though privately we'd respond in the negative. In the meanwhile that great wall of silence continues set before us with its intimidating presence. It doesn't confront us with a conscious awareness but with something greater, if I could put it as such. That's why we're left with the question whether we're wasting our time.

Stop and think for a moment. Take into consideration all the religious-speak that

has ascended the heavens over the millennia regardless of place or time. The desire to engage in such one way speaking happens spontaneously and is part and parcel of what it means to be human. Although the article at hand comes across as a bit too harsh in its assessment, it's meant to question whether or not there's some kind of indissoluble connection between down here and up there that defies any attempt to rupture it. At the same time you don't hear of anyone from among the world's various cultures getting up and questioning why all the fuss. If a clear response came...even just one...that would be a different story. Then again, pure silence.

This silence brought to mind a key observation made by the Italian jurist Giambattista Vico (cf. 1725). I believe he's the first person to identify transcendent reality with a particular physical phenomenon, namely, thunder. The reason? Thunder comes from above...from heaven, the realm of the gods. Gods live there, not here on earth where things are too messy. However, admittedly up there doesn't invite a response as in the form of dialogue. It's intended to cower people and make them submissive. The identity of thunder with a transcendent realm is a great insight, but let's face it. What good is a divine reality which fails to engage humans in an everyday, concrete manner?

It seems that regardless of which way we present any relationship between the divine and human there's nothing but absolute silence right across the board. This theme is repeated almost *ad nauseam* here and deliberately so. Perhaps if we found a person who had insisted in asking why he never go an answer from above yet continued to press his case, to be sure he'd end up from where he had started, in absolute silence. Again, that's why I posed the title of this essay as an open-ended question. Answer it in the best possible way but best to remain quiet.

Because this silence is something that's everywhere and inescapable, understandably most people find it terrifying. I've heard of astronauts having been profoundly affected by silence experienced when in space. While we can experience short bursts of silence here on earth, it's supposed to be nothing like the one astronauts have described. The same applies to anyone who has been at the bottom of the ocean or in a cave. Such persons are hardcore scientists yet are overwhelmed by the mystery they had encountered. If you want to experience an absolute, this indeed is it. Seek no further. You could say that these few representatives of the human race—as far from traditional mystics as could be—nonetheless they have something valuable to teach us. However, most of the time their accounts of absolute silence pass by unattended.

So if these encounters with absolute silence pass by largely unaccounted for, it doesn't mean those who had encountered it are dealing with an illusion. Again consider the astronauts. They were out there in what most likely was an infinitely large expanse of space and brought back their experience of it, minuscule as it was. Should you parallel this with your impending death, you're at least getting close. At this point we're at a major crossroad and can panic as we seek for ways out. Fortunately the Christian tradition takes this into consideration by speaking of eternal life. In addition, I believe the best account worth paralleling this is Plato's **Phaedo**. There Socrates who's literally at the threshold of death freely and almost casually discusses whether the soul is immortal or not.

Despite that there's a humongous difference exists between us and a transcendent reality represented by absolute silence, we desire to communicate with it. This sounds like a pretty basic premise but worth putting out there because let's face it. The experience is literally unavoidable, and we naturally shy away from it. This leads, as it were, to part two of the essay at hand. We've established the absolute nature of a reality we all must come to terms with sooner or later. Obviously I'm phrasing this in an imperfect way, but for the moment it's the best I can come up with. Clarifications can be added as we move along.

The second phase at hand is centered around a struggle. By that I mean a genuine contest with an invisible reality we know is out there and always gets the better hand over us. We find ourselves cast down at one time and at another time duped. Then we sit down pretty much confused and feel that we're being laughed at even though no one is around. At the same time this doesn't preclude some entity endowed with consciousness independent of us is looking on. So we're caught in between two realities, the one we know as present yet remains to be identified but turns out to be that absolute silence.

So what do we do when we've become aware of our situation in this strange in between land that seems as though it had been lifted from a movie? First, realize that we're struggling with an entity way beyond our human strength. Clearly this entity is hostile, and we're bound to recognize it has an uncompromising will to defeat...nay, to destroy us. Such is its goal. To many people this comes as a complete surprise, for we think, who would want to destroy us and why? What have we done to deserve death? The question becomes obvious after awhile. We're among those who have recognized the absolute nature of a reality to which we're all destined to arrive upon death, the good old absolute reality of silence. It's something we didn't choose on our own but was—and this might sound a bit

dramatic but in reality isn't—forced upon us.

We've been thrust into a situation almost like those who ended up in the Colosseum against their will. Once there, we find ourselves lightly armed and must contend with whom or with whatever comes out the nearest gate. Right away we discover a favorite strategy of our unknown opponent, and that is waiting. It knows we're in a new, hostile environment and wants awareness of it to press down upon us before making any move. Actually it's quite unnerving and can do in a number of people right then and there. Hence they are incapable of engaging in any form of combat.

Standing in the center of this so-called arena (when you come down to it, an apt example for the venue for life's struggles) ever watchful for what we know is about to assail us with deadly intent, the only thing we can do is not to panic. That consists of taking a slow, deep breath and exhaling it just as slowly. Automatically it leads to step two, keeping a sharp eye for that which is trying to assail us. Should it succeed in doing so, it's not a gentle shove or push but a genuine effort to cast us down. Once in that position, it will take great joy in slaying us. The assault doesn't happen once and goes away. It comes at us relentlessly with the intent of having us throw in the towel. Most people can put up with this for a while, but it's another question when it's extended over a long period of time. With this in mind we have to be very careful since these assaults don't come at us just once but are repeated over and over again.

And so putting it mildly, we end up bewildered. At the same time we're stuck in this arena and have to engage in a genuine mortal combat. Most likely we won't get killed physically but are in constant danger of being subject to a mental and spiritual death which really counts. This is something that strikes us unawares, so there's no warning how to handle it. Should we refrain from taking any sudden action...an absolutely vital step...there dawns something completely unexpected. We discover that the warfare in which we were engaged and seemed on the verge of losing big time at once is suspended. This suspension continues for an indefinite time beyond our control. Nevertheless, we shouldn't feel complacent because the warfare can erupt at a moment's notice.

Any eruption, if you will, can be disconcerting especially after we've gone through several suspensions of the warfare at hand. After a while we realize that it's temporary by nature and teaches that we're engaged in a life or death struggle. I don't know if it's unending in the sense of going on forever. Somehow I don't

think that's true. However, I'm pretty sure that the warfare continues to the point of our death. Though chances are that we will prevail, still there's the possibility...a very real one...that we won't succeed. In the end it's a toss of the dice. Instead of discouraging us, this should add to the thrill of the combat in which we are engaged. Referring again to the Colosseum, we're trapped there and cannot get out by our own efforts. Like the gladiators of old, the success rate of finally exiting depends upon our skill.

Upon engaging in spiritual warfare, we realize that time is short. By this I mean we become more aware that upon our death, somehow we're going to be dragged through that wall of absolute silence to the other side. In this situation it's best to avoid speculation. Indeed, it turns out to be a favorite topic of conversation where all sorts of ideas based on philosophy and religion are set forth. In the end they are precisely opinions, nothing more, despite the fancy language. One thing is helpful, though. We must avoid perceiving where we're going as a spiritual black hole even if it looks as such.

Spiritual warfare is as old as the hills and has been documented, especially when it comes to those who've lived some kind of intense spiritual life often associated with being a hermit or a monk. There are numerous instances where this warfare is described, but focus is upon the externals simply because there's no training as how to look at the inner mechanism of such warfare. In other words, there's the issue of facing some kind of blankness that we know must be filled but are at a loss as how to do it. This is characteristic of writing about these experiences which always seem to be just out of reach or graspability.

Part of the problem is that we don't know how to slow down in a controlled, efficient manner so as to allow a given situation to emerge on its own. I have in mind more precisely the negative ones. The proper way of going about this is not to be influenced by any outside interference but allow things to take their natural course. This sounds as dull and prosaic as anything but becomes real...very real...when we realize that we're smack in the middle of the Colosseum as described above. We don't want to be left standing there naked and dumb. It's a time when warfare of a nature completely foreign to us makes its initial assaults. We either cave in at once or despite having been wounded, learn to get up and take a stand.

In essence this brief essay started off as describing our normal mode of communicating with the divine. Upon closer reflection it turns out to be a one way

street leading to a recognition of absolute silence. While the need to communicate is perfectly fine, like anything else it can go overboard. When pushed to the max as is often the case nowadays it leaves a void which leaves an especially bad taste when we run up its inherent limitations. Every so often there emerges some persons...not many, usually a few...who see directly into this conundrum. Instead of running away from silence they take refuge in it and cultivate a relationship with it. Even if this completely unfamiliar, it's the envy of us all. Still, it isn't enough to make a sufficient number of converts. Nevertheless this unique relationship somehow prevents everything from becoming unhinged which is quite a testament to the nature of absolute silence.

In a recent conversation related to this subject a friend noted that while it's true most of us acknowledge the reality of absolute silence, few if any know what to do once at its gate. He noted that when confronted with topics that make us uneasy, we deflect them. It's a natural gesture like trying to avoid getting hit with a harmful object. Right away I latched onto that word because it spoke of a way of handling a difficult reality by reason of its indirectness. And the subject at hand can be best approached in such an indirect way instead of head on, the usual way we deal with reality.

The negative side is that we're good at avoiding things which make us uncomfortable while at the same time not wanting to engage in any type of confrontation. Applied to that wall of absolute silence it doesn't come across as something desirable. We think (rather connive) to see if there are any ways of putting it to our advantage. No doubt about it. That approach won't succeed and is best to abandon as soon as we become aware of it.

So if we come to accept the reality of warfare on an unseen yet very real level of our existence, it enables us to make great strides living comfortably with that great wall of silence. Instead of being an obstacle, this wall becomes our ally, the best available at any time and at any place. I hope that the thoughts offered here work in that direction. They're taken from personal experience and articulated as such even if in an imperfect and clumsy manner. Over the years I've acquired some familiarity with texts dealing with spiritual warfare both classical and Christian. While those authors offer the best material on the subject, at the same time I found it better to write from the personal point of view despite my limitations. This approach gives voice to real experience.