



Boston Catholic Journal



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Talking with God ... in Person

If we begin to grasp this simplest concept, — that *God is a Person* — much of what we think, say, and do will very likely change, and even more likely, it will change for the better. We will begin to lose our fear not simply of *what* to say to Him, and *how*, but we will begin to open ourselves to genuine intimacy with God. We will come to see God as a *Person*.

In many ways, God is very simple. Even in the way of the most abstruse theological speculation, God, in the end, is utter simplicity.¹ We nevertheless tend to make a

tremendous complexity of God. We do not do this intentionally, of course, but it is rather a very human reflex before our perception of God as utterly transcendent, as *Other*, — even while we acknowledge His immanence in the most ordinary things that surround us, and to some degree define our being, things that are part and parcel of our existence as “mere mortals.”

God, as we have said, is a Person. But God is also a particular *kind* of Person, eminently possessed of an attribute that we *can* (at least some of us) understand very clearly.

He is a *Father*. Because there are so many miserable failures in human fatherhood, even an astonishing lack of what should most clearly articulate our understanding of fatherhood — *love* — we have put God rather at a disadvantage. Understanding Him as “Father” means, to many of us, perfunctory role playing, indifference, aloofness, even disregard or what is worse, abandonment. This is the reality of fatherhood in modern life, the reality in which father is sundered from child, rather than bound indefeasibly to the child. In a word, fatherhood as *absentee*, if not in fact, then in disposition.

Our fathers are a rather sad lot, in many ways emasculated of their fatherhood by an inordinate deference to *feminism* to which many men readily submit because it is easier to be irresponsible than responsible. When the promotion of one gender through the social dissolution of the other has become a matter of policy and politic, we are left with a caricature of fatherhood, a nominal token of a reality collapsing under the weight of the fiction of its own superfluity.

On the other hand, it is equally the case that the *realpolitik* of feminism is in many ways an opportunistic response to the autonomous default of men, of themselves,

upon their fatherhood. In how many, many families the woman is the one who remains with the children when the father leaves in pursuit, most often, of his own selfish interests.

We must be forthright and acknowledge that *through the neglect of men*, and the doctrinaire exploitation of *militant feminists*, we have been implicitly deprived of God Himself, of understanding the love of God as *Father*. So deep is this wound caused by men through their failures as fathers, that God Himself has come to acquire the odor of complicity, and we end up with such superficial nonsense as “God the Mother” — as though the mere nominal exchange of parental beneficence and liability will eradicate the breach. In the end, such exchanges are embarrassingly trivial and only testify to the fact that our understanding not only of God, but of the notion of *father* and *mother* has become acutely superficial.

While this plays a significant role in our inability to *relate* to God, it is, at least fundamentally, an aside to the far deeper issue of our inability to apprehend God as a Person, and until we grasp God as a Person, He will forever appear distant, remote, *inexorably transcendent* to us. Unable to relate to God as a Person, we approach Him not as child to parent, but as *practitioners* through *ritual*. As totally “Other” (and with few reliable exemplars in our lives) we fall back on atavistic tendencies that preceded the revelation of the True God, Who revealed the Father, in the Son.

In this sense, we are no different from the Philistines or Canaanites who attempted to placate a largely irascible god basically inimical to men, or at the very least poorly disposed toward them. In our own way, we offer up meaningless and repetitive gestures, as so many obsessive-compulsives, in an effort not so much to relate to, as

to appease this distant god bent on either toying with us or destroying us. We build, as it were, our own fires and heap the calves of our vicarious sacrifices upon them, splash blood upon hot stones, divide animal entrails, utter endlessly repetitive prayers, and do things that would be stultifying to mere mortals, but which we oddly deem to be palatable and pleasing to God ... at least a god who is not a person.

If we were God ... and we are not!

Suppose, for a moment, that someone prevailed upon you – a person – for a certain favor. Let us further suppose that you were favorably disposed toward this person; in fact, that you loved her and cared deeply about her well-being. In your wisdom, and were it in your power, you would not simply “relent” and accede to her request; you would immediately and gladly grant it.

Bis dat, cito dat. He gives twice who gives quickly. While the mechanism involved in bringing this about may of necessity preclude its being enacted instantly, it nevertheless remains that the petitioner is satisfied that the request was well received and even in the asking was in the act of being granted. After all, the “person” upon whom she prevailed, loved her, and she knew it.

Depending on the nature and the urgency of the request, she may grow impatient, and even be moved to ask again — to *remind* you, as it were, of its exigency, although all the while you had never lost sight of it. You understand this, and assure her that you have not forgotten, and that, in fact, things were well underway to satisfy her request. It is, in effect, a reciprocal act of trust. She trusts that you will help, and you trust that she acknowledges this; that is to say, that she acknowledges, recognizes, your goodness, your love, your willingness, and your ability to help her

and your faithfulness to your word. She walks away, grateful, and you are happily about bringing her affairs to a satisfactory conclusion.

Love does that. It is deeply radicated in trust. There is nothing of force, constraint, reluctance, no *quid pro quo*, bargaining, or balancing scales. In a word, love is autonomous. Acting *ex meru motu*, love is, of its own free will, inherently *responsive*. It need not be induced, propositioned ...

“*My ways are not your ways*” God tells us, so I do not know if God gets bored. Being just *men* we would likely be bored to tears, and perhaps even moved to annoyance, were we ourselves subjected to an endless repetition of words uttered by rote, largely empty of meaning and keenly focused on number – the magical number that will tip the scales in favor of the petitioner, despite the possibility of any disinclination on our part. They did the numbers, now we must do the deed.

This is God as a Wall Street Trader. As a computer model. Not as a Person.

Jesus admonishes us against this in Matthew 6.7-8:

*“And when you are praying, speak not much, as the heathens.
For they think that in their much speaking they may be heard.
Be not you therefore like to them, for your Father knows what
is needful for you, before you ask him.”*

This is *not* to disdain *repetitive prayer*, as some falsely claim; it is an admonishment against meaningless prayer uttered in the way of superstition, believing that the *number* prayed is somehow “*magical*” in obtaining what one is praying for.

Repetitive prayer is often helpful in bring one's attention back from wandering in prayer. The Holy Rosary is an eminent example. As mechanical prayer it is meaningless, however many decades uttered, no matter how pious the deportment, no matter how deep the conviction that sheer numbers culminate in anything more than a cipher.

Prayed from the heart, a single decade is a treasure trove of grace.

When we talk to God, we deprive Him of *Personality* when we speak with Him in a way other than we would speak to one whom we love dearly and who loves us dearly in turn. Think about it. We say Grace before our meals with a perfunctory Sign of the Cross and a petition mumbled in greater haste than ever we would speak to the person seated next to us. In fact, were we to talk to *other* persons, as we often talk to the Person, God, we would be summarily dismissed as rude and scolded for speaking meaninglessly. Were we then to utter the same thing again and again and in a ritualistic monotone, attentive to all else but our words, our host would surely leave in a haste only exceeded by our words. Were we to thank our hosts for the meal in the way we thank God for it, it is unlikely that we would be invited back.

The Pharisees lost the *Person* of God in the rigor of the Law ... until the Law superseded God, and then crucified Him.

As a result of our inability to apprehend God as a Person, *a real Person*, we have come to approach Him not as persons ourselves through love, but as mere practitioners through empty ritual. There is nothing wrong with ritual *per se*; it is, it ought to be, the outward vestibule of inward realities — it can be, and should be, holy, and it is holy when the gestures of the outward rite accord with an inner and deeper reality of which they are genuine, and spontaneous signs. *There is*

consonance between appearances and realities. Nothing is superfluous, nothing extraneous. And this can only be attained through a deep perception of the presence of a Person before Whom one stands, Who is the *Reality* concealed behind the *appearance*.

Once you recognize the Personality of God — *God as a Person* — your prayers will cease being soliloquies, meaningless mantras. Not only will you pray to God; you will speak with Him!

You will also come to understand the difference between the all in little and the nothing in much.

“*Perfectio divinae bonitatis invenitur in uno simplici*” — the perfection of divine goodness is found in one simple thing – *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Q.3 art. 7.2

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