

Ways of Encounter

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No one has ever seen God, St. John's gospel assures us, except the Son. Nor, despite the expression "odor of sanctity," has anyone ever smelled God. Taste and see that the Lord is sweet, the Psalmist says, but we do not take the advice literally. Nor can we reach out and touch God. But do we hear God? Karl Rahner has an essay provocatively entitled "Conversations with Silence," the title suggesting that he hears no response to his words of prayer. Speech is the way one person communicates with another person. If God does not speak to us, we are abandoned. I doubt that we converse with silence.

Any modern person hesitates to say God speaks to him. We are aware of how misleading subjective impressions may be. Do we hear God's voice or our mother's? Today we are confronted by militants who claim God's authority for their acts of belligerence. Yet I would have to testify that when attentive to conscience and its guidance and the sense of sin that attends it, I am conscious of listening and of hearing not by my auditory organs, of course; the speech heard is not conveyed by waves of air but is part of an internal dialogue whose source is beyond me.

I am, perhaps, on more objective ground when I recall my encounters with others speaking for God and quoting his words in the context of the Church. Although we do not often attend to it, we hear God in scripture only as he or his representatives are quoted by the sacred writers. There is sometimes an immediacy to the text that impresses us as if we were hearing the words directly from the original speaker. But the Ten Commandments (the Ten Words in the Hebrew) exist in quotation by the Pentateuchal authors. The Sermon on the Mount is quoted by Mark, Matthew,

and Luke. Scripture is the Word of God, but its inspiration does not convert the text into God's direct speech.

When I first read the words of these messages, I heard them as the words of God speaking to me. Now I understand that the Hebrew commandments were portions of the legislation of Israel; that how they are translated makes a difference (Is it "You shall not kill" or "You shall not murder"?); that the author or authors are often pseudonymous; and that the author of Exodus is quoted by the author of Deuteronomy so that there is at least a double quotation in the latter's transmission of the basic rules of behavior. And I realize that the Sermon on the Mount may be a composite and not a single discourse and that, again here, quotation of a quotation may occur from a text common to the three evangelists. Sensible as I am of these imperfections of the medium, I still respond to their teaching as to the voice of God personally heard.

To turn to one extra-canonical work of great significance to me since the age of about eleven, *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, here is an author who successfully impersonates God; that is, at times he addresses us as if he were God. For example: "Son, you are not yet a valiant and prudent lover. The question, Why Lord? is interjected. God continues: Because on a little opposition, you fall off from what you have begun." And the Lord's analysis of spiritual sluggishness goes on for several pages of chapter VI of Book III of the *Imitation*.

There are parts of the *Imitation* that could be read as *centos*, composites of scriptural verses, as in the introduction to Book IV:

Come to me all you who labor and are burdened
And I will refresh you, says the Lord.
The bread which I will give
Is my flesh for the life of the world.

Such passages move from explicit quotation to paraphrase in which the Lord is presented as the speaker. The employment of scripture adds authenticity to the speaker's voice. As I read the above passage, I hear the Lord.

This paper, you will observe, mixes reading and hearing, just as my account of conscience is not literal but speaks of speech and

hearing that do not depend on tongue or ears. Reluctantly, I am driven to concede that the speaking and the hearing are immaterial and must be metaphorical.

It disturbed Thomas Jefferson that God should be immaterial. For Jefferson, what was immaterial was nothing, almost as for a lawyer what is immaterial is irrelevant and not admissible as evidence. A believer himself, Jefferson contended that God consisted in very fine matter. I sympathize with Jefferson's desire for the tangibility of matter, but I think that he has not understood the terms he is using. A material God would be a finite, physical entity. We might be pleased to touch, taste, smell, see, and hear such an entity, but it would not be God, a being unconfined by space and time.

Communication to and from this spiritual being is, at least normally, spiritual, and that means it must normally be metaphorical. We communicate to God by images derived from our earthly existence. God communicates to us by similar images. God does not have literally a right hand, at which, according to the Creed, the Son sits. The coming Judgment by the Son will not be a judicial proceeding with witnesses, cross-examination, and an address by defense counsel. The physical image of the right hand, just like the social image of a court, functions to convey a reality that by its nature cannot be captured in literal language.

It is thus wonderful but not so surprising that I should encounter God in the Eucharist after its consecration by a priest quoting the words of the Lord, "This is My Body This is My Blood." Now, preceded by hearing, there is taste and smell, touch and seeing, of the bread and the wine, of course, but understood as a way in which God comes to us. Here is the very tangibility, the materiality, for which Jefferson longed. The symbolic united to the sacramental conveys a reality present beneath the material signs.

The language in which communication occurs is something that has interested me since childhood. My mother told me the story of Eve and the snake. She recalls that my response, at an early age, was, What language did the snake speak? More recently, my friend David Daube, a great student of the New Testament, raised the question of how Jesus and Pilate conversed; Jesus did

not speak Latin, and the Roman governor would not have learned Aramaic. Analogously but differently, the sign language used for communication in the Eucharist presents the question of whether a translation is needed. But there is a language in presence that dispenses with words.

In this ever-repeated ritual, in the books I have mentioned, in my inner being, I have encountered God. Let me add a further place that you will recognize by the words spoken: *Ego te absolvo*, as the old rite put it, I absolve you, as modern practice phrases it. Here the priest acting for God performs an act reserved for God: he forgives sins. His act is not psychological counseling, not an exhortation to a better life, not an expression of solidarity in the spiritual journey. The priest's role here is sometimes compared to that of a judge, sometimes to that of a doctor. *Ego te absolvo* are words that neither a judge nor a doctor can speak. Offenses are being forgiven. Only God can forgive them. In three simple words I encounter the Ego who, speaking through the sacerdotal surrogate, is God forgiving.

Prayers and rites and sacred books and the prompting of conscience are, no doubt, only the most formal, the most explicit forms of encounter with God. In a multitude of other ways—in music and painting, as well as in reading; in mountains and oceans, storms and starlight; in teachers and pupils, colleagues and friends, above all in parents and siblings, wife and children—I encounter the providential, the ordered, the gifts that are beyond chance and luck, that are recognizable as manifestations of the Spirit. I could, I suspect, discern a pattern in my life that I could read with devotion as communication from God. I grasp the possibility of such a pattern, I may perceive it, I accept the teaching of Thomas Aquinas that Providence has a plan, and of my friend John Dunne, who says that “things are meant,” but I refrain from being certain in my reading of the pattern. In my interpretation, I will stick to encounters with God in the holy books, the holy rites, and in the subjective certainty of conscience.

When did these communications from God begin? I have dated with some confidence my first reading of the *Imitation*. Communion and confession began at the canonical age of seven, but I am now unsure of when I was penetrated by their meaning.

Similarly I heard the gospels read as soon as I was able to attend Mass with my parents, but I find it difficult to date exactly when the words of the Lord began to speak to me. By eleven or twelve, I should guess, I had some sense of God communicating in the ways I've enumerated.

Let me turn to the other side of meeting God, the response side. Of course, the two sides can be separated only for purposes of presentation. One no doubt implies the other. But I speak now of my efforts to communicate. The "Our Father" and "Hail Mary," as well as the story of Adam, Eve, and the articulate snake, I learned from my mother early in life. You know that in one prayer God is located firmly in heaven, addressed only as our common father, and celebrated as exemplary in his treatment of offenses. In the other prayer God, not addressed directly, is presented as a child. Those two prayers I met again as they formed the substance of the rosary. Is it necessary to add that they have been basic to me for about seventy years?

I have sometimes wondered if we should not seek to be original in prayer. Is there not danger in repeating the old formulas? In writing and in public speaking, we value creativity. It is hack work to revise or remodel the words of another; it is plagiarism to copy them. It is parroting to say what someone else has put in your mouth. But in prayer we all say the same old words. Let's grant that stable formulae are the staple of ritual. Why are they a necessity of private prayer?

To these questions, my first response is that the "Our Father" has the authority of its author. No one will improve on the Lord. The "Hail Mary" is in part a *cento* of gospel texts and in part a very old addition to these texts; as a composite, the prayer became popular in Europe as an affirmation of the goodness of procreation in opposition to the Cathar view that procreation was a special sort of disaster. Only the *Salve, Regina* competes with it in expressing devotion to Mary, and nothing equals its simplicity and succinctness. When such a prayer exists, ingenious invention is not needed. And in my experience, for daily use the traditional prayers suffice.

Do I speak for myself when I repeat—quote, as it were—the words of someone else? When I ask such a question, I am

reminded that I am in a community. I use the common words to express our joint petitions to our Father and to ask Mary to pray not for me but for us.

These simple prayers, we all know, form a structure when, with the Creed and the Gloria, they become a rosary. Here the repetition of the words subordinates their meaning to the meditation that accompanies them. A kind of double consciousness exists: a consciousness of the recited words, a consciousness of the mysteries commemorated. From time to time, and at some ages more than others, I have reached to the rosary. It is indelibly associated for me with my birth month, October, and with Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, where the rosary runs down from Mary's lap to the edge of the ledge where sinners may still grasp it and not perish.

I turn from these ways of communicating to God known and used since childhood to the ways provided by the Mass, known and used by me almost as long. From the closely-woven whole, let me single out three passages, as follows:

The Confiteor. A wonderful practical compromise, an acknowledgment of sin without specifications so it is public yet private; a comprehensive acknowledgment not only of deeds but of words and of thoughts, so that sin is seen as more than material; an acknowledgment first to God but then to the community present as well as to that community composed by the saints.

The Offertory. God is asked to grant us by this mystery of water and wine to be co-sharers of the divinity of him who humbled himself to become a partaker of our humanity. Our rise is put in parallel to Christ's incarnation. He became man. We ask to be *consortes*, co-sharers of divinity. Is there any bolder prayer?

The Post-Offertory Prayer. We ask God to give us some part and partnership with the saints, into whose consortium we ask him to admit us. I do not suggest another English word for the Latin consortium, sometimes translated as "company"; the Latin emphasizes the idea of co-sharing. As in the Offertory we ask to be co-sharers of divinity, so afterwards we ask to enter the co-sharing of the saints. This repeated appeal to a common destiny with God transcending our individual lives is afforded by the

Mass, together with its central moment of consecration and its complementary moment of communion.

All of these prayers I came to know through the medium of a missal, a missal so constructed that the English translations ran parallel to the Latin text. I learned to read, to say, to offer the prayers in English and then, after I began to learn Latin, a subject I studied from age ten to age nineteen, I came to know them, if not offer them, in Latin. I cannot help confessing an admiration for the compactness of the Latin, as well as a sense of impoverishment in the disappearance of the Latin, the disappearance of missals, and the obfuscation caused by the singing of pallid hymns at the time of the great prayer to be co-sharers of divinity.

A liturgy more familiar when I was growing up than today was the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament: The star of that service is the poem-prayer *Pange lingua*, a composition in which Thomas Aquinas showed his truest genius, that of a poet. I do not know any adequate translation into English. I have tried, without great success, to make one myself. Let me only on this occasion offer a literal approximation of it:

*Verbum caro, panem verum
Verum carnem efficit*

True bread is made
True flesh
By Word-Flesh.

The poetry has the concentration of a haiku. It goes on:

*Fitque sanguis Christi merum.
Et si sensus deficit,
Ad firmandum cor sincerum
Sola fides sufficit.*

And pure wine is made
The blood of Christ.
If the senses fail,
Faith alone suffices

To strengthen
A sincere heart.

I have lost the rhythm and the rime. The emphasized tension remains between what is perceived and what is believed. And what is decisive? A heart without guile like Nathaniel's and faith alone. How *fides sola*, faith alone, would echo in another century and another context is irrelevant.

Outside of liturgies and daily prayers, I have found the prayers that run through *The Imitation of Christ* to be inspiring, even though I have read rather than recited them. To read about a person is not the same as meeting the person, but the reading may excite one's desire to meet. For example, "Invisible God, Creator of the world, How wonderfully You act with us; How sweetly and graciously you dispose with your chosen, To whom You offer your very self to be consumed in sacrament" (I.i.V). The emphasis on the wonder, sweetness, and graciousness of God's action stirs devotion as well as expresses it.

I don't mean to disparage other prayers such as the Psalms (unrivaled in antiquity and range) or the ejaculatory evocation of the Sacred Heart. I speak here only of prayers that have over a long period been measurable means for me to petition, celebrate, or thank God. I need only add that the Act of Contrition must complete this list.

From this selection you can see how much my approaches to God and my sense of encountering God have been set in certain pathways by the pieties that were almost as natural as breathing in what could now be considered the old church, though one not radically different from the new. No doubt there was great attention in my upbringing to the relation of the individual to God, more attention than would be the case today. But, as you also can observe, it was easy to move within the channels constructed by the Church; it was within the community that God spoke and was spoken to.

When speaking of encountering God, one is almost expected to speak of epiphanies, moments when the grandeur of God or the force of his love enveloped one. As you can infer from what I have already said, my encounters with God have mostly been on

lines already laid out for me, not special occasions. But I will speak of three times that were special.

In 1947, at the age of twenty, I was doing a post-graduate year at Cambridge University and during the spring vacation visited Capri, Rome, and Lourdes. It was Lourdes that made the greatest impression. The shops selling rosaries and postcards jostled each other like hawkers in a bazaar, but aloof from the sordid commercial scene it generated, the Grotto was unsullied. Worshipers flocked there by the thousand, and were serious, intent, united in prayer. I saw no physical miracle. Lourdes itself, the peaceful assembling of people from all parts of the world, was a moral miracle testifying to the power of God.

Ten years later in the fall of 1957, I was practicing law in Boston and, to tell the truth, bored with the minutiae that make up the day of an associate in a large firm. Dan and Sydney Callahan, then graduate students at Harvard, told me of a wonderful place in Bethlehem, Connecticut, where one could spend a weekend without work or other distractions and find spiritual refreshment. In this way I discovered Regina Laudis, now an abbey, then a priory of a foundation in France. I had never as an adult been on a retreat, and from what I had heard of retreats thought there were too many lectures. At Regina Laudis there were no lectures, only, if one wanted, conversations with Sister Prisca, Mother Jerome, or the prioress, Very Reverend Mother Benedict Duss. Its Benedictine monk co-founder was no longer there, but was reverently remembered. The thread binding the day together was the office sung in choir by the nuns. One could walk, read, meditate as one chose. It was a place for me of spiritual refreshment and reorientation. I came back to it several times in the next three years. Without the experience of responding to God in the context of such a community I do not think I would have been ready to make the most important professional change of my life, to move in 1961 from busily pursuing the business of law to teaching at Notre Dame on a schedule that permitted research in depth on problems in moral theology.

In 1965, still at Notre Dame, I published *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, and as a consequence became a consultant to the papal commission

on problems of the family. I participated in a number of sessions of the commission in which contraception was freely and fairly discussed. An unanticipated side benefit of being in Rome for the commission was that I was also there for the fourth and final session of the Second Vatican Council. This experience is the third that I mark as special. I have already commemorated it in *The Lustre of Our Country* and draw on that description.¹

Those of us who had never seen a council—and none of us had—were familiar with the theology that treated as the last word in faith and morals the determinations of a council promulgated with the concurrence of the pope. Pictorial images of councils presented vast and still assemblages of learned males; in some paintings a light shone, or a dove representing the Holy Spirit hovered above the solemn faces. The images were visual embodiments of the pouring out of grace upon the deliberations, which resembled the reception of revelation rather than a parliament of planners.

What we found, in fact, was a legislature in action: a legislature with a right, center, and left; a legislature with a variety of committees composing legislation, compromising disputes, considering amendments; a legislature of bishops guided by staffs of experts; a legislature interacting with the executive power possessed by the pope; a legislature surrounded by lobbyists on every issue.

The conciliar sessions themselves took place in the great basilica of St. Peter, a space suited to the size of the assembly—over two thousand bishops. The side altars of the basilica were turned into coffee bars where over an espresso one could engage in argument with other participants. At the end of each day's session there were press conferences; lunches, cocktail parties, dinners. The work of the Council went on not only in the nave of St. Peter, not only in its coffee bars, but around the town—in religious houses, in hotels, in embassies, in Roman congregations, and in the old palace of the Vatican. The experience of the Council was the experience of a demythologized Church. Those experienced in biblical studies knew that in the documents gathered into scripture God spoke through human tongues in human voices. Now the same phenomenon was observed in the flesh, as it were. The Council was the work of

human beings. Faith would accept its conclusions as the will of God. But the conclusions did not come in a disembodied voice from heaven or carved on stone tablets. *Dieu a besoin des hommes* (God needs human beings) a French film of the day was entitled. At Vatican II, I saw how God works through human beings.

In the course of my service on the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, I have found that, if I deal promptly with each case as it is presented to me, I have time to write on other subjects. I have used that time, for example, to trace in *The Lustre of Our Country* the development and triumph at Vatican II of the doctrine of religious liberty, of the right given by God to human nature and confirmed by the conduct of Christ in proclaiming his message, the right of every person to form his or her religious beliefs free of physical or psychological compulsion. Beyond that kind of exposition, which was at once historical, legal, and theological, I have found solace in composing poetry, largely, though not wholly, unpublished. Permit me to quote from "The Fishwheel," a poem celebrating the ordinary ways of salvation. A fishwheel is a wooden contraption I have seen inserted in the rivers of Alaska as a way of catching salmon. I describe its operation exactly. I use it here metaphorically:

Anchored to the shore
 By sturdy guy wires
 The fishwheel floats on its log raft
 And creaks rhythmically
 As the strong muddy current turns it.
 The wire baskets on the wheel
 Scoop up the salmon who swim in
 And spin them into the bin
 That is their way station.
 Without water the wheel will not turn.
 Without the wheel the fish will not be caught,
 Without the fish the wheel will be wasted
 And the water rush to no purpose.

The fishwheel is the Church, the fish are us, the water is the grace of God.

Do any of these ways of encountering God prepare one for the encounter following death? I doubt it. Eye has not seen, tongue has not told what is beyond. Metaphors do not bring us there. We do know, retrospectively as it were, that after we were conceived we spent nine months submerged, unable to imagine the world beyond the womb. Birth was a transformation, and a continuation, of life before birth. Will it be that way after death? So I believe and hope and trust in God who gives me life.

Notes

1. John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Lustre of Our Country* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).