

God and Prayer

May 21, 2015

This will be my last conference of the semester, for soon a number of us will be away for a few weeks, either visiting family and friends or attending conferences or going on a pilgrimage. Such reasons for being away would not have been envisaged by St. Benedict, but I do hope that the days or weeks any of us spend away from the monastery this summer will lead us to return with mind, body, and spirit significantly renewed, ready and even eager to resume whatever kinds of work await us after our community retreat in mid-August. What Benedict did expect, of course, even during those presumably rare and short trips on which monks of his day were sent on matters of monastic business, was that they remember they remained monks and that their first allegiance was to God. As he writes in chapter 50 of his Rule, “those who have been sent on a journey are not to omit the prescribed hours but are to observe them as best they can, not neglecting their measure of service.”

For us, this means not only these “prescribed hours” of the Divine Office but also regular time for personal prayer and *lectio*, which can so easily get overlooked outside the atmosphere and structured horarium of the monastery. It is above all in regard to personal prayer to an utterly transcendent God that I want to speak this evening. I’ll begin with something that John Cassian recounts at the beginning of his tenth conference. He tells of how Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria, in his annual letter to the monks declaring the date on which Easter was to be observed, one year included a lengthy refutation of the error of the so-called Anthropomorphites, those who took literally those words of Scripture that speak of God as having hands, arms, eyes, and ears just as humans do. Many of the monks refused to accept the bishop’s letter, above all an elderly and holy monk named Sarapion. When a deacon of great learning arrived in Egypt from Cappadocia to visit the monks in Scetis, he gave a long speech explaining how all the leaders of the churches understood anthropomorphic passages spiritually or metaphorically, not literally or

crudely. He concluded with the words: “That immeasurable, incomprehensible, invisible majesty cannot be limited by a human frame or likeness. His nature is incorporeal, uncompounded, and simple, and cannot be seen by human eyes or adequately conceived by the human mind.” As he finished and all the monks stood up to pray, old Sarapion felt mentally bewildered, for he could no longer have before his mind’s eye the anthropomorphic image of God that had always accompanied and supported his prayer. Throwing himself on the ground, he cried: “Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me ... and I know not whom to adore or to address.”

That story might seem merely quaint and irrelevant, for it may well be that none of us have prayed as did Sarapion, at least not since leaving childhood behind. I do believe, however, that we might not give full weight to what Bishop Theophilus and other bishops and theologians have been saying down the centuries. We may readily give lip service to such statements as that God cannot be seen with bodily eyes and that the divine reality is beyond the power of the human mind to grasp fully, but really to live this out, to take this teaching with the utmost seriousness, in a way that reaches to the root of our being, is something else. To help illustrate what I mean, let me turn to two of the most influential medieval philosopher-theologians, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

Thomas, of course, is a canonized saint and a doctor of the church. Scotus has not attained that status, but he was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1993 and has had many followers since his death in 1308. However much these two thinkers had in common, there was one very basic point on which they differed.¹ Scotus taught what is called “the univocity of being,” meaning that existence is the most abstract concept we have, applicable to *everything* that exists, including God, whereas St. Thomas insisted on the analogical nature of being, indeed

to such an extent that he taught that there is no genus, *not even the genus of being*, to which God belongs along with creatures.² God is therefore not *a* being, is not at all in the same genus as humans, who are a species within the overarching genus of being. God would more properly be called the principle or source of being and is, in that sense, beyond being. Even though there are surely still Scotists among philosophers and theologians today, on this particular issue I myself have no doubt that Aquinas makes far better sense.

This means that, as absolutely transcendent, God is neither outside nor inside his creation. As the philosopher and historian Brad Gregory writes, God can be “wholly present to everything in the natural world precisely and only *because* he [is] altogether *inconceivable* in spatial categories,” just as God can be “fully present to all events and every moment in time precisely and only *because* he [is] altogether *inconceivable* in temporal categories.”³ Accordingly, all legitimate religious language about God as God *has* to be metaphorical, for in relationship to the nature of language this is correlative to God’s incomprehensibility. We might well therefore “*expect* religious language to be loaded with metaphorical, poetic, evocative imagery, some of it running in divergent directions. *None* of it could rightly be taken to describe God adequately or directly,”⁴ something that we must keep in mind when coming across all the descriptions of God’s actions in Scripture and other holy books.

I myself find this teaching liberating, but I can’t deny that it might have, at least to some extent, an effect on one’s prayer similar to that experienced by the old monk Sarapion. However, it certainly did not have a negative effect on what Cassian himself had to say about prayer, for he goes on in that tenth conference to give what has become a classic exposition of contemplative prayer. Like all the Fathers of the Church, a sense of God’s incomprehensibility was for Cassian altogether consonant with profound prayer. Perhaps the best example is Augustine’s

Confessions, a work that is literally addressed to God and reads like one long prayer. Or again, consider that sixth-century writer known as Dionysius the Areopagite. The Fathers in general, and Dionysius in particular, “are not describing or defining God ... but instead are speaking *to* God in prayer. This language of praise is not descriptive, but performative. Its ‘saying’ is actually a ‘doing.’ It does not attempt to define the divine but celebrates God and exposes itself to God in prayer. Such a speaking enables it to be open to the divine (similar to what happens [to us when] in front of an icon) and to be transformed by God addressing us.”⁵

This confronts us with perhaps the most basic question conceivable in terms of religious belief: Will we entrust ourselves to God even while humbly acknowledging that God is radically transcendent and beyond human comprehension? To entrust oneself in this way is to go against a basic tenet of much contemporary thought: that all meaning originates with humans alone or, as some ancient philosophers already held, that “man is the measure of all things.” All this does, I think, rather severely downgrade the significance of certain kinds of academic theology—and I say this having practiced that craft for many years. But it is surely significant that the one who we believe gives us the best access to the reality of God—our Lord Jesus Christ—taught more by stories than by abstract doctrines and that he insisted that a blessed life depends primarily on how one treats those he called “the least of his brothers and sisters.” Although that Gospel phrase refers literally only to one’s fellow disciples, the Church has surely been right to expand our understanding of the passage to include all peoples, as did Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount when he asked us to love even our enemies and to pray for any who persecute us. That brilliant French writer Simone Weil, even though she felt unable to enter the Church, understood this teaching better than most Christians when she wrote that a

sense of human misery is a precondition of justice and love. Anyone who does not realize to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subject every human spirit cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as one loves oneself those whom chance has separated by an abyss. The variety of constraints pressing upon humanity give rise to the illusion of several distinct species that cannot communicate. Only one who has measured the dominion of force and knows how not to respect it is capable of love and justice.⁶

This means, among other things, that the human misery we see in the photographs of refugees in countries halfway around the world is a misery that we too share, and that it is not enough to remain at the level of what has been called “vague generality,” for that would be “to condemn Evil in the abstract while ‘enduring,’ both in theory and practice, the concrete evils from which our sisters and brothers, especially the children, daily suffer and die. By making faith ‘compatible with’ these evils, we [would] confirm the Marxist charge that religion is the opium of the people.”⁷ We must also accept the fact that in the endless shiftings of fortune, we might one day undergo such evils ourselves. It even means that those who are cruelly causing those refugees to flee, or murdering them before they can flee, also need our prayers—they perhaps all the more—just as we must recognize cruelty in the actions of some of our leaders past and present and, yes, in some of our own actions as well. At the very least, all of these persons should be taken up into our own prayer, both what we pray here in our church and in whatever places we find ourselves at times during the coming summer months.

1 The following comparison between Aquinas and Scotus is drawn from a fine article by Brad S. Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion," *History and Theory* 47 (December 2008), 495-519.

2 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1. q.3. a.5.

3 Brad Gregory, 503.

4 Ibid., 504.

5 Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2013), 111.

6 Simone Weil, "The Iliad or The Poem of Force," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 192.

7 Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1998), 185, quoted by Gschwandtner, 227.