

THE DIVINE INDWELLING

FOR MOST PEOPLE, ORDINARY LIFE IS characterized by the sense that God is absent. Yet, a little metaphysics would alert us to the fact that, if God were not present at every moment, we would not be here either. Creation is not a one-time event. It is God's ongoing gift on every level from the humblest quark to the highest stage of consciousness.

St. Teresa of Avila wrote: "All difficulties in prayer can be traced to one cause: praying as if God were absent." This is the conviction that we bring with us from early childhood and apply to everyday life and to our lives in general. It gets stronger as we grow up, unless we are

touched by the Gospel and begin the spiritual journey. This journey is a process of dismantling the monumental illusion that God is distant or absent. When our particular petitions are not answered, we become even more convinced that God is absent. This is an irrational position, however, one based on the judgment of emotion, not reason. Unfortunately our unruly emotions do not obey reason and will; they have their own dynamic. Whenever our reason and will decide to do something, our emotions get into a huddle and decide whether or not they will go along with them. If our plan contradicts their perception of what is pleasant or unpleasant, we have a riot on our hands.

The start, middle, and end of the spiritual journey is the conviction that God is always present. As we progress in this journey, we perceive God's presence more and more. As we emerge from childhood into full, reflective self-consciousness, our concept of how God is present in us is usually vague and primitive. The spiritual journey is a gradual process of enlarging our emotional, mental, and physical relationship with the divine reality that is present in us but not ordinarily accessible to our emotions or concepts.

The dogma of the Trinity is presented to us as one God in three divine persons. The first person is called Father.

The second person is called the Word. The third person is called the Holy Spirit, which means breath. Did you ever know a person who was a word or a person, who was a breath? That we do not should alert us to the fact that, when we speak of God, we are not talking about any person we know.

The concept of persons in God refers to relationships that are only analogies of relationships in human affairs. Hence, we must not expect God to be present in the way other people are present. The chief fruit of Old Testament spirituality was a long-term education that gradually weaned the Chosen People away from their narrow concept of God as one among many other Near Eastern gods to the Transcendent One. The monotheistic God is the great gift of Israel to humanity.

God is present to us all the time but inaccessible as long as we have preconceived ideas and judgments based solely on the feedback our senses and feelings provide. Jesus' sayings might be paraphrased: "The reign of God is close at hand—not distant or absent. It is within you and among you."¹

Thus, the fundamental theological principle of the spiritual journey is the Divine Indwelling. The Trinity is present within us as the source of our being on every level. Each level of life from the most physical to the most

spiritual is sustained by the divine presence. To go to liturgy or to prayer thinking that God is absent prevents us from properly relating to the divine presence.

The reign of God is basically what God does in us. The divine is present as energy sustaining our physical, mental, and spiritual activities without a moment's interruption. Jesus is calling us to full human development, re-rooting us in our source, and enabling us to experience that this divine energy is infinitely tender, compassionate, nurturing, enabling, and empowering. Jesus' experience of the Father was *Abba*, God of infinite concern and tenderness for every living thing, especially human beings. His experience of God was revolutionary in the religious context of his day. His understanding is reflected in the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church, and now needs to be made the first lesson in every catechetical instruction and constantly repeated in sermons and homilies. The Divine Indwelling of the Holy Trinity is a truth of faith that is easily forgotten or avoided. Yet it is the one on which a radical personal conversion depends.

In our Christian tradition we believe the Word of God, revealed in scripture, is addressed to us. That Word also became flesh in order that Jesus' example would give us a blueprint of how to become fully human and fully divine. The eternal Word of God addresses us through scripture

and the liturgy to awaken us to his abiding presence within us. Contemplative prayer is our opening and awakening to this relationship, to what God is doing for us, has done, and will do.

Scripture for the early Christians was not so much read as listened to, because the Christians did not have books. If you only heard the Gospel once a week and were interested in the spiritual journey, you would go to church all ears and listen to the readings with the whole of your being. We have been so desensitized by reading everything under the sun that the aliveness of sacred scripture does not easily come through. We must convince ourselves that there is a special presence of Christ in scripture that speaks to the hearts of those who are open and prepared. The Holy Spirit nudges us to perceive that what we hear refers to our personal situation and is meant to be a challenge and an encouragement to us. Once we understand that the Gospel addresses a presence within us that already exists, listening to the word of God becomes a process of gradual enlightenment.

The Divine Indwelling Unfolds in Prayer and Action

The early Fathers of the Church called this process the development of the spiritual senses. The external senses perceive the immediacy of material reality. The spiritual

senses perceive the immediacy of the divine reality in various forms by means of a gradual process in which the Word of God is assimilated, interiorized, and understood. As the process advances, the Fruits of the Spirit enumerated by Paul (Gal. 5:22–23) and by Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–11) begin to emerge. These are signs that we are waking up to the divine presence.

The first stage of this process is listening with the undivided attention of one who wants to learn from a great teacher. In the Christian scheme of things, Jesus is the enlightened one who lives in the Christian assembly as the glorified Christ.

The liturgy juxtaposes texts to awaken us through words and symbols to the divine presence within us, and how it operates in our lives in both prayer and action. Prayer, the sacraments, and good works are all directed toward one purpose: to awaken us to whom we actually are, but do not yet know. The reception of the Eucharist is not a passing visit from Christ, but an awakening to his abiding presence within us, leading us into the further experience of the Father.

The Spirit bears witness to Christ's resurrection by empowering us with the Fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes. On the literal level, all we can do is listen to the message with good will and begin the process of

dismantling our illusion that God is absent. In daily life the action of the Spirit increases as we try to put the values of the Gospel into effect. The monastics of the Middle Ages called this the moral level of scripture. When we are moved by the beauty and example of Jesus' life, we take courage that it might be possible to overcome our emotional programs for happiness that prevent us from accessing the full light of God's presence and action within us.

When the Word of God addresses us at a deeper level, we move to the allegorical understanding of scripture. We become aware that the same graces that we are hearing about in the Gospel are taking place in our personal lives. If Jesus could put up with the faults of the Apostles, he might put up with ours. At the allegorical level, one begins to understand the deeper meaning of scripture to which Jesus invited his disciples when he said, "If you have ears to hear, please hear," implying that they were not listening at the level at which he was addressing them. The Word of God is not only addressed to our ears, to our minds, and to our hearts; it is addressed above all to who we are at the deepest level. We are rooted in God, and by accessing that divine energy we are united with God and able to do what Jesus did: be a manifestation of God's

tenderness and compassion among the people we serve and love.

The allegorical level awakens us to the fact that Jesus is inviting us into the commitment of friendship. This commitment opens up the various levels of union that the Fathers of the Church called the unitive way. The unitive way is the awareness of the abiding presence of God, a presence that is not undermined by what we feel or think, by what others do, or even by tremendous tragedy. We have found our Source. We become the Word of God and express the divine presence, just as Jesus expressed it in his daily life.

Each time we move through faith to a new level of hearing the Word of God, all our relationships change: to ourselves, to God, to other people, and to the cosmos. Then we need to spend considerable time integrating all our relationships into this new perspective.

As we read the scripture in an attitude of listening and respond to it with openness, reflection, and love, we interiorize and assimilate the message. In addition, scripture moves us to respond to the good things that we read about. Thus, prayer becomes the spontaneous response to the presence of the Word of God. This Word is not only present as a sound, but as a person. When we speak of the Word of God, we mean both the written word

of God and the Word of God enfleshed in Jesus. Both words are knocking at the door of our inmost being where, because of our weak faith, Christ seems asleep, so to speak. Since we have never or only rarely experienced his presence, we assume that he is absent. As faith grows, that illusion is gradually diminished and overcome.

The spiritual journey is often presented as the purification of illusion, liberation from seeking the wrong things or too much of the good things, and freedom from the compulsions that arise from the misguided search for happiness that is still present in our unconscious and manifests itself in upsetting emotions. The afflictive emotions arise when something we do not want happens, or when something we do want does not happen. Our decision to follow Christ on the conscious level is not enough to heal the wounds of original sin. The unconscious programs for happiness that we bring with us from early childhood, and which we are not fully aware of until we vigorously pursue the spiritual journey, continue to upset us when they do not achieve their desired objects.

Thus, if power or control is our predominant program for happiness, we can make all the resolutions we want not to be upset by circumstances that are out of our control—and still the feelings of anger, grief, or

discouragement arise when something we planned is frustrated. We are always struggling with what we want to do or decide to do and with the feelings that oppose our good resolutions. This is the area that we must address in daily life. The sense of the radiant energy that Christ communicates when his word has finally resounded at the deepest level within us begins to work its way into all our thinking and activity in order to enhance our capacity to respond with the kind of love that motivated him.

The spiritual journey, then, teaches us the following:

1. To believe in the Divine Indwelling within us, fully present and energizing every level of our being.
2. To recognize that this energy is benign, healing, and transforming.
3. To open to its gradual unfolding, step by step, both in prayer and action.

Our prayer, as contemplative persons, is the constant exercise of faith, hope, and charity (Divine Love), and takes place in the silence of our hearts as we listen to the Word of God—not just with our ears or minds, but with our inmost being. God speaks best by silence. This does not mean that we do not have unwanted thoughts during prayer, but that we return again and again to the basic consent of self-surrender and trust. We say “yes” to that

presence, and every now and again enter into union with it as we identify the divine presence in Christ's humanity with the divine presence within us. When we say, "Come, Lord Jesus," we should remember that Christ is already here and that his coming means that he becomes more and more present to our consciousness. He does not move. We move. This process is one of consent to God's presence, of surrender to it, and of transformation into it. As we learn to listen to the Word of God within us, we develop greater sensitivity to the Seven Gifts of the Spirit, allowing the divine energy to manifest itself appropriately during prayer and in the events of daily life. Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist to be with us all the time and to suggest how we can lead our human lives in a divine way.

1. Luke 17:21. The Greek word *entos* means both "within" and "among."