

## Presence/Absence

*Although this article has nothing to do with Essays of the Early Church, it lives there. Reason? Simply because this heading has more space.*

This is a very short article! I had to resist the temptation to extend it but after some reflection, I decided to lay that aside. Even though I've posted a number of documents dealing with a wide variety of subject matters, there persists a feeling that they have to be a moderate length to be acceptable. If not, forget about it. Of course, that's not true but is good to be aware of. As for the material offered here, it's difficult in and by itself to present clearly. Because I had to struggle with it, the article is kept short...a wise decision...even though shot through and through with plenty of holes. At the same time it may lead to another article, a kind of second chapter. Somehow I feel that will happen. So regardless of which way things will turn out, the main point is to set forth the results as something I enjoyed doing instead of viewing it as a chore. While the article is written in that spirit, I was aware of the existence of some vague pressure saying, no, best to leaving it not completed. Again, this stems from the fact that the subject matter is far from easy and that I was not qualified to complete it. Enough said in this regard. Let's proceed with the subject matter at hand regardless of how short it happens to be.

Around the beginning of winter I had a casual conversation with a friend who, spiritually speaking, is quite impressive. He's married with two grown children, his wife equally impressive. One day I brought up my interest in Gregory of Nyssa, of how he's a great proponent of perceiving God first through light and then in darkness. For him Moses on Mount Sinai is the great archetype of this spiritual transition described as apophatic, knowledge of God obtained by negation. Given the ongoing Covid 19 epidemic, our conversation was from car-to-car. Normally this would be considered inconvenient, and we'd be lamenting the fact that we couldn't hold down a cross-table conversation. However, the topic at hand transcended all this. The form was completely incidental which made us remark, would that most conversations during this time of crisis were of this nature and be less concerned with physical circumstances.

So after having presented my little ditty about Gregory of Nyssa, my friend who indeed heard of him but was unfamiliar with his work, chimed in. The way he expressed himself was as though he had been reading Gregory for years. It reminded me of the slave boy in the **Meno** who, while ignorant, provided Socrates with the right information about a question relative to geometry. In other words, the slave responded more through a kind of in-built recollection (*anamnesis*) instead of having accessed the information through learning. As for talking about God, it's a subject matter that knows only beginnings, for you can start off virtually anywhere. This, of course, ties in with God being in the present moment,

a very common way to put it but still largely misunderstood. Perhaps it's because many proponents omit to speak of the faculty of *anamnesis* by reason of their ignorance.

After all, we're dealing with such a general, inclusive topic that while fraught with pitfalls and misunderstandings, touches upon life's essentials. Thus it should come as no surprise that every person on the planet is preoccupied with the subject, including those who reject any type of divinity. That's how we are made, take it or leave it. We know even from archaeological evidence that humans always had been obsessed with the supernatural. We're manifesting this obsession right now even as we delve into interstellar space and the equal infinitude the other way around, the microscopic world. So we're engaged in the process of mediating between the two which is a nice place to be located. Perhaps realizing this fact is sufficient to justify our existence regardless of our respective talents.

So here we are in a strange situation where interest in God is as popular as ever yet the culture or environment in which most of us live practically forbid us to talk about God. It seems everything is devised to keep him out of our lives. No small wonder that people are confused, so it's a time for great understanding and patience. What we all want is something that satisfies round the clock, no exception! A tall order, to be sure, which makes you say, a nice goal but in the end, is a figment of our imagination. And so we go along stuck in this mode which incidentally is fertile ground for the creation of spiritual books and spiritual guides. In the meantime we go about our business accordingly still nagged by that always present desire for Everything-all-the-time, no exception. That's a good a description of God as any.

Is there a way to escape this mess? Yes. The first step is to set aside gently all the external reading material at our disposal or perhaps better, let it slip away. We know instinctively when we're ready for this because such material represent sources of authority no longer suitable for guiding us. Such a gesture can be difficult because we like being guided, even if we know we're misdirected. The reason? It's more reliable to act on an external authority than to have none at all. We persist in the hope that the misguided kind just might turn itself around. This can't but affect our relationships with each other perhaps quite radically. However, like the reading material, best to allow that to slip away since maintaining it only causes harm over the long term. Although we make the decision to let go, further reflection reveals that it happens on its own which gives a certain miraculous air about it. Indeed, trying to understand the process is one of the hardest things to do. So the absence versus the presence of a guiding principle seems to have something to do with how we handle the conundrum of divine presence and divine absence. It's a model in which we find ourselves and must come to grips with.

A general perception to which we subscribe is that somewhere along the line principles intended to guide us through life had been installed within us. It's simply a matter of com-

plying with them. adhering to this makes it easier to explain things away, even such phenomena as evil. They are principles which stave off both inner and outer turmoil and have a firm collective grip on us chiefly because they offer assurance. Trying to locate them essentially is a waste of time, so best to accept them as part and parcel of our human constitution. They are mentioned here because dealing with them is an important part of this essay. Early on we got comfortable with these guiding principles and so built up a whole network of support in order to keep them around. They work well in many circumstances but get worn around the edges when it comes to transcendent reality which is wholly other than our usual experiences in life. These guidance as we've come to know them are destined pretty much eventually to fall by the wayside. Automatically we think something must replace them, for without any such support we'd pretty much fall apart. This experience is common to a lot of well-educated folks who in effect are children when it comes to spiritual and religious matters. Just like everyone else they're in search of either an inner or outer authority which, if asked a question, gets a response automatically. So education in this regard has little to do with how we handle the type of authority at hand.

As for questions, almost everything I'm attempting to describe here involves asking plenty of them. They can be answered but conspire to keep the discussion at the lowest possible level. Once a question is asked and answered, you move on to the next one and so forth while never achieving any satisfaction. This opens up plenty of space for doubting whether the enterprise that has been undertaken is worthwhile or not. We run directly into a wall of silence with our minds running wild and leading to frustration. While engaged in this we see our compatriots out there on the front line engaged in worthwhile activity. They're saving the world, and clearly we are not. We're just treading water (apparently).

Yet if we're patient enough, we can see through this low grade, persistent mental turmoil which acts as a curtain to keep us from something better we know is close by but just beyond our reach. Indeed, we can identify with the man in the **Republic** who had walked away from the cave-like dwelling where people were kept chained and compelled to watch images on a wall. Note that he walked away. He didn't escape, walking suggestive of a free, unhindered decision wholly on his part. It seems no one before him ever conceived of simply getting up and taking leave. Once we follow like him, things begin to happen on their own. It takes place on a level most of us aren't familiar with except a vague awareness that something is afoot. Really, that's all we can garner from the man who woke up one day and made his decision to leave without the text explaining how he got that insight. So what do we do? We look for guidelines as how to proceed and try to find them rooted in a knowledge that had been inserted within us at birth. It's the wrong approach but fully understandable. No small wonder some came up with the idea of reincarnation. During one of many lives we access an authority within us that supposedly improves each time we're reborn until no longer we have a need for this process. Indeed, the proponents of reincarnation were on to something but lacked an accurate appreciation of our *anamnesis*, recollective faculty.

Because the two planes of presence and absence are complete opposites, it's difficult living with them since always we're trying to find where we stand relative to the authority of each. We hear a lot about this from *bona fide* spiritual authors, even saints, so it's natural to buy into what they say hook, line and sinker. After all, they are the authority *par excellence*. So the question is, does this distinction have any validity? If so, how do we make sense of it? Just asking it implies we recognize it and aren't happy with the distinction. That means, of course, we're on the look-out for another approach. What's so interesting is that behind the scenes our inbuilt need for an authoritative source to our questioning is at work. We recognize the incessant division within and although we wish to lay it aside, we're powerless to do so. Indeed, this is a momentous decision. Should we let on to family, friends and associates, we'd open ourselves up to ridicule. They have the power to hit us where it hurts, so one of the first things we learn is to keep all this hidden from them. They're right there ready and eager to offer their unwanted advice—that is, share their authority—because to them, we're in dire need of it.

Indeed, peer pressure is the greatest challenge we face when it comes to the issue of presence vs. absence of God. We're dealing with people with whom we associate on a regular basis, so when the issue comes up, we comply to keep them happy and thus at bay. Perhaps those in the cave-like dwelling knew each other very well. One would exclaim positively or negatively at an image cast on the wall and the others would respond to agree with him. It'd come as no surprise that the man who walked away had enough of this. His return later on may have been motivated by concern not for strangers but relatives and friends.

Being free from authority can be scary simply because we hear so little talk of what's life without it even if we're in the full sunlight as the man who had just left the underground dwelling. Indeed, written records are virtually non-existent. Part of the reason may be that they stress authority and obedience. On the other hand, a person philosophically inclined (in the ancient sense of the word, lover-of-wisdom) would be suspect because he's his own man. For this reason Socrates was considered venerable but never would qualify as a saint. As a friend recently deceased once told me, we need more philosophers, not saints. Nothing exotic or beyond our reach is involved here even though we tend think like that by reason of our ignorance. Anyway, the quicker we find our bearings as not subject to authority inside or outside, the quicker we'll be in a position to enjoy life free from this presence-absence syndrome, of opting for one over the other. At the same time we could be setting ourselves up to drink the hemlock. Still, it's worth the risk.

What scares us the most is a newly discovered vulnerability. Since we're not dependent on any inner authority to direct us, we can feel as though we've been left out to dry. Thinking this way is understandable because we're so used to allowing ourselves be hijacked by any and all authority which wants to exert power over us. So instead of being compelled to re-

spond in a way that may go contrary to our wishes, the absence of such inner authoritative voices means we're dealing with a new reality we can't quite put our fingers on. In a nutshell we can call this absence of authority peace, one superficially like the absence of strife which turns out to be limited because that can return at any moment.

So when we speak of presence, movement is implied as opposed to remaining in one place. After all, freedom of movement is quintessential and is odds with being subject to authority as it's defined here. Then again, we can't leave the authority exercising command within us as easily as we'd like. Not only will it continue wanting to direct us, we will continue wanting to be directed from fear of being left rudderless. This causes us to wonder...Where in the world does this fear come from? It pops into existence while barely we notice how it got there.

Strange to say, we can say that fear comes into existence when we confront what seems to be nothing. We're empty on both the inside and outside which gives us a kind of vertigo. Instead of taking the usual path of looking for something to fill the void, we could allow it simply to remain there without trying to tweak it one way or another. This experience reveals what really ails us, fear of being paralyzed while being conscious which means we can't communicate with other people nor can they with us because they're in a state of motion. Right now we're experiencing a unique societal paralysis as a result of the Covid 19 quarantine. Though that isn't as radical as the one at hand, it's radical enough so as to throw a lot of people into a tizzy.

The interesting thing about this paralysis is that should we wish, we can shake it off anytime. It doesn't control our lives but remains an option. However, the price we pay in shaking it off is high. We revert to that interplay of inner and outer authority telling us to do this, don't do that. In fact, having abandoned it and returning to it later makes the situation worse. The voices are more clamorous than ever. So the key is to allow the paralysis to do its work. To date the work had only been partial but must be completed. Often we're terrified that this may take an awfully long time because within this paralysis time comes to a halt. The same seems true with space as well though we don't contract physically but sometimes feel it's happening.

Then...out of the clear blue...comes a surprise. We wake up to an awareness that it's okay to be without that authority, the one outside and the little man in our head. Actually the latter is of concern to us since it's within and has greater sway over us. Take care of that and the outer one can be dealt later. Both are of the same substance but to posit that now isn't helpful since we're new at all this. When, one naturally asks, do we break free from this paralysis? It isn't up to us. It happens on its own timetable, so better not try to figure it out which is incidental. One way to verify if we've adapted is to consider those disruptions in daily life which consist of trivial misunderstandings. Actually they're so trivial that at the

end of a day they're barely remembered. When I brought this up in a discussion with a friend and tried to gloss over it he stopped me dead in my tracks. He insisted that while small, they are significant. Why, I asked. Because they have an accumulative effect tied in with the overall theme at hand regarding presence vs. absence of God. What that represents—previously important in our lives—disappears. Literally speaking, not figuratively.

How do we know? Can we pinpoint this? The answer is yes. Now we see the issue of authority as one that had been hijacking us most of our lives. It was going on all the time which initially may appall and embarrass us. That's true if we stick on the temporal level. Yet having emerged from the paralysis spoken of just now, the element of time is irrelevant. Perhaps the man who had walked away from the cave-like dwelling felt like this. Basking in the light was his reward. Instead of remaining there and engaging in regrets, he decides to return and tell his former fellow prisoners that they too can make the same transition.

So freeing oneself from the inner and outer voices of authority in one sense is easy. However, it looks that way once we've made the transition but before we do it's a struggle dealing with that blindness to our actual condition. Again, authority is waiting in the wings to step in and assist us. The problem is it doesn't know when to let go and does so only by being paralyzed not just occasionally but for once and for all. The image that comes to mind spontaneously is the man possessed by a demon in the Gospel (Mark, Chapter Five) after Jesus had healed a man possessed by a demon. I may be reading into the situation, but after his cure he just sits there. At first he wanted to follow Jesus who refused which means being subjected to his authority. Jesus wished to communicate that he had no need for it, something that dawned on him shortly thereafter. Blasphemous sounding perhaps, but Jesus is thrilled this man has found himself and has no need to be subjected to anyone. He will, of course, go through life with its customary manifestations of authority and will comply like everyone else. Yet often he'll return to that rock or place where he had sat down after his cure and simply have a laugh which will reverberate throughout the land.

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