

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Advent and the Distance of God

[The second of three essays]

The story is simple, charming, true. Mary Ann, five-year-old daughter of some evening of mine, was preparing for bed one evening under grandmother's watchful eye. In her parents' absence, the little one struggled through her night prayers. The litany of thanks rolled on — only to lapse into an abrupt silence. Looking up to her "mother once removed," she lamented:



"You know, grandma, it's not easy to pray to God if you can't see Him. If only God had a face . . ."

On first hearing the story, I recalled the psalmist's cry: "Above the heavens is your majesty chanted (O God!) by the mouths of children, babes in arms." (Ps 8:2) Unconsciously, Mary Ann was echoing the prayer of another psalmist: "The blessing of the Lord . . . upon those who seek your presence, God of Jacob!" (Ps 24:5-6)

The human heart harbors agonies and ecstasies. The agonies of a terrifying loneliness, an experience of nothingness — the distance of God. A sense of this is Pascal's fearful cry: "The silence of the eternal stars frightens me!" On the other hand, there are the ecstasies of an uplifting hope, a surging power — the experience of God's presence. One is reminded of Augustine's "God, nearer to me than I to myself." Each of us, at one time or another, has been that five-year-old at prayer: magnetized by the powerful love of a God who is just a prayer away, overwhelmed by an unnameable Mystery that is an eternity away.

Of the two ways of experiencing God, the absence of God — rather than the presence — is the more common approach for most people. Granted, contemporary theology has made much of the touchability of God (incidentally, the subject of our final essay in this series). But most of us understand better the recent poet who talked of "the infinite

escapability" of the Almighty. God-talk seems to find more comfort in transcendence (remoteness) than in immanence (nearness). Put in simpler terms, most people find it easier to speak to God as "beyond," rather than as "within." This is that radical "otherness" of God, before whom all speech and feeling fall short.

What is at the root of this sense of distance?

First and foremost, the heavy sense of our own limitations. Before the Eternal we are most conscious of time's weight. A genuine experience of Peace throws us back into disturbing restlessness. To be human is to know, through aspiration, the unlimited heights to which God calls us. But to be human is also to know, through daily realism, that we rarely rise above the line of least resistance. This is the human predicament: to reach, as it were, for the impossible dream, and yet to live footdragging days unrelieved by enthusiasm and joy. Our own creatureliness is experienced as downpull, rather than uplift.

A second phase of the struggle comes from the challenge of endurance. Yesterday's successes have a way of becoming today's failures. As in mountain-climbing, each new step upward is filled with the risk of wiping out not just this step, but all progress made up to this point. To keep to the task is the best test of the human spirit. And while we reserve our highest praise for the first step and the last, every step in between is no less important. Hence, yesterday's discovery of God does not always become today's experience of God. The stretching forth, the renewal of effort makes each new day a new challenge, and each new challenge a test of endurance.

Finally, it might be worthwhile to observe that one cannot pole-vault to the very throne of God by asking the characteristic question: "How do I find a merciful (or close) God?" Any quest of God on that basis is doomed to failure unless one asks the correlative question: "How do I become a real human being?" And only after one has struggled, and struggled, and struggled, can those efforts serve as a yardstick for measuring the

distance between where we are and where God is, between what we are and who God is. Put in other terms, love erases distance. And love, as most of us know so well, is more often perspiration than inspiration. Ask any married person. Ask any priest. Ask any bishop.

Here, then, lie valuable opportunities to turn this Advent season to days of growth. We must learn to accept our limitations; even more, we must allow God's blessings to deliver us from them graciously, gratefully, gradually. We should pray for the gift of fresh starts with each new day, for time is God's basic gift to us. Nor should we allow ourselves to forget the truth announced by a brilliant theologian, Ladislaus Boros:

"A man who has accepted his humanity honestly has accepted the son of man. Ultimately man is explained in terms of the self-emptying of God. This is potentially a fundamentally Christological understanding of man. God is present in every sincere movement of the human heart." (Meeting God in Man, p. 119)

Undoubtedly, the deepest meaning of Advent is that, for all of the other truths hiding beneath its surface, Christ in his Incarnation most effectively spans the distance between God and man.

Boros has argued eloquently that, from a Christian standpoint, the Incarnation means not only that God has entered the human predicament, but that man is called by the very mystery of the Incarnation to become most truly man. This is the significance of Paul's great statement: "For me life is Christ." (Phil 1:21) No less eloquent is another theologian's testimonial to the meaning of the Incarnation, J. Robinson's The Human Face of God.

The human face of God? Apparently theologians and toddlers can stumble upon a nugget of truth in the soil of daily experience. The first mint it into theological wisdom. The second remind us: God is to be found anywhere, anytime — in wonderment, in silence, in prayer. In fact, even in distance.

What will this Advent mean to you?

vatican news

Italian Driving Ban Cuts Vatican Throng

Vatican City [RNS] — Thanks largely to Italy's first Sunday driving ban, Pope Paul VI addressed a drastically reduced crowd at noon on Dec. 2.

The private motor traffic ban, combined with exceptionally cold weather, cut the number of people to little more than 1,000, about one-tenth of the number usually gathered in St. Peter's Square for the Pope's weekly homily and blessing.

Dec. 2, the coldest first Sunday in Advent in Italy for decades, also marked the beginning of the country's year-long preparation for the 1975 Holy Year.

VISIT WITH POPE

Vatican City [RNS] — Pope Paul VI received President Albert-Bernard Bongo of the West African republic of Gabon, and his wife, at a special audience Nov. 26. In a speech of welcome, the Pope praised the "determination" of the Gabonese people "to develop fruitfully their human and economic resources, and thus face the future with boldness and confidence." As the smallest territory of French Equatorial Africa, Gabon was once chiefly noted as the land where the famous medical missionary, the late Albert Schweitzer, operated a ramshackle hospital at Lambarene for 53 years.

As church bells finished pealing the start of the year of preparation, the Pope spoke to the sparse crowd:

"Beloved sons, did you hear the bells? Today, at this time throughout Italy the simultaneous tolling of the bells announces to the people of God that the Holy Year has commenced in the local churches.

"Listen to their concert. Yes, listen to their concert. As always, the voice of the bells peals between earth and heaven. It is a dialogue of faith and prayer, a metallic song, an expression of the song in our hearts that arises to invoke an effusion of God's blessings."

The pontiff then said that the Holy Year was a period for "a positive examination of the authenticity of our Christianity in the context of modern life," for "an in-depth examination of our spiritual conscience," and "a stimulus to the realism of our social justice."

"It is not just a transient moment in our lives," he added, "but a long period dedicated to 'renewal and reconciliation, during which we must find ourselves again and become truly better Christians.'"



Women's Commission Meets

Members of the Vatican Commission for Women meet during its initial four-day session. Pope Paul established the Commission last May, asking it to look into the hopes and aspirations of women in the world at large and in the Church. Commission members include, from left to right: Deborah Schellman of the U.S.; Mrs. Mary Payne, president of the National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales; Mrs. Ductinea Rodriguez of India; Father Marie-Joseph Le Guillou of France; Guzman Carriquiry of Uruguay; Emma Seeger of Germany, a member of the Religious Institute of the Sisters of Mary of Schoenstatt; Mrs. Eugenie Bahingthier, mother and obstetrician from the Ivory Coast; Maria Vittoria Pinheiro of Portugal; Mrs. Marina Lessa of Brazil; Sister Claire Herrmann, member of the French Bishops' Congregation for Catholic Education in France; and Pilar Bellosillo of Spain. [RNS]