

1. Definition of the Presence of God

Thomas a Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ* (Book 3, chap. 4, v. 1), gives a descriptive definition of the *presence of God* and of his own personal efforts to be attentive to God: to stand before God, to walk in his presence, to keep watch over my motivations and to act from supernatural motives. To live in the presence of God is to be recollected, to pay heed to the Lord living within me. It is to listen to him speaking in me through my conscience, my aspirations, through persons and events.

The Imitation of Christ calls happy those who habitually turn towards God, who take time to prepare their hearts to listen to him. Happy are those who hear the Lord speaking in the depths of their being; happy are those who receive words of consolation from the mouth of the Lord. Happy the attentive ears that listen not to exterior voices but to the truth that lives within them. Happy are those who penetrate the mysteries preserved in their hearts and who, by daily exercises, prepare themselves more and more to understand the secrets of heaven. Happy are those who find their joy in serving God. Happy are those who close the door to dissoluteness and who listen to the word of God — the inner inspiration.

Only faith can incite us to remain in the *presence of God*. Even if the world does not succeed in completely gratifying us, nevertheless, it is so interesting, so captivating. It is quite efficacious in

corroding our lives and gnawing away at our time. Without realizing it enough, we become slaves of the world, and our precipitous rhythm wears down our capacity for reflection. As we let ourselves be devoured by the attractions of the world, we become incapable of discerning between an efficacious good, namely the formation of the Christian, and an immediate good, namely one that is superficial, transitory and often insidious.

To remain in the *presence of God*, we must recognize his omnipresence. Faith teaches us that God is in objects, in events, and in persons, that he is wherever good takes root and subsists. We must also discover God in ourselves. He is a living, acting, loving Being eager to contact us and to enter into dialogue with us.

To live in the *presence of God* is to habitually use whatever is at hand to discover Him everywhere. Jesus says to his first companions:

"Look at the wild flowers of the field. They do not work nor spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?" (Mt 6:28-30)

"Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow nor reap; they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they?" (Mt 6:26)

To live in the *presence of God* is to develop the aptitude of turning to God at all times and in all places. If God lives in us, why do we not think of him more often? Let us realize that the Lord always gives us first place in his scheme of things. We must believe that he considers all human beings superior to flowers and animals. What he does for these latter, he will surely do for us in order to encourage our progress.

God paid dearly for our friendship; the price: the blood of his Son. Thus, he is not satisfied with merely holding first place in our hearts, *he wants all of us*. He wants to be in control of our very being; the choice of what a human heart can contain belongs to him. He desires to act in his own way; he wants each human being to become docile to his will. Still, God does not want to do violence to us. For our own good, he wants us to understand what he accomplishes by remaining present to us and by following us everywhere with his goodness and his mercy. If we could only understand!

The *presence of God* has the power to maintain our whole being in good, to bind our passions, to direct our affections, to channel our sentiments, to determine the rhythm of our friendships, to develop in our hearts spirit, ardor and vitality, and to help us to support the hard knocks of life.

The *presence of God* enables us to follow the example of Jesus, to be grafted onto the Father and turned toward our neighbor. It opens our mind to a better knowledge of God, stimulates love, sows enthusiasm and keeps our hearts alert.

The *presence of God* is a school where we are taught to love. It is a technique that awakens us and permits us to joyfully discover in things, events and persons a multitude of little presences of God: in ourselves, in others, in nature, everywhere.

The *presence of God* is an awareness that the Holy Spirit is in us, that he lives, acts, loves and inspires us to accomplish positive deeds, as the Gospels so often demonstrate.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. ... the holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. He came into the Temple moved by the Spirit." (Lk 2:25-27) The presence of God is a recognition that the Holy Spirit abides within me, that he speaks to me and moves me. That is why old Simeon had the greatest joy of his life, that of holding the Infant-God in his arms.

An elderly woman named Anna had no other interest in the world except God. She never left the temple; she served God night and day in prayer and fasting. (cf. Lk 2:36-37) She, too, received the joy of touching the Infant-God.

The awareness is important; in fact, it is indispensable, because we can be in God's presence without ever discovering him.

The adolescent Jesus was in Jerusalem. He was in the temple in the midst of the doctors. They looked at him, admired him, found him intelligent, even brilliant. (cf. Lk 2:46) All the same, none of them saw the Messiah in this child prodigy because none of them were attuned to the Holy Spirit.

These intellectuals simply considered the presence of Jesus on a rational basis.

He who seeks the Lord wants for no good thing, says the psalmist. (Ps 34:11) Jairus, one of the synagogue officials, often stands in the presence of God. His daughter is dying and he is ready to do anything to save her life. The doctors do not understand her illness. He hastens to Jesus, drops to his knees and pleads earnestly: "*My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live.*" (Mk 5:23) The daughter dies but Jesus raises her from the dead.

A woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years has visited all the doctors possible. She spent all her money without being healed. She believes in Jesus: "*...if I could just draw near to him, if I could touch the hem of his garment, I will be healed.*" She is in the presence of Jesus; she walks up to him, touches his cloak (a gesture of faith) and feels well. Jesus turns around and demands to know who touched him. The Apostles intervene — many people have touched you. But Jesus answers: "*I felt a power go out of me.*" The woman in fear and trembling tells him the truth and gives witness to him. Jesus says to her: "*Daughter your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.*" It has been confirmed; the change that she felt within herself was her healing. (Mk 5:25-34)

To live in the *presence of God* is to be attentive to God, his wisdom, power, goodness and mercy. It is to believe in him to the point of folly, to pray by looking at someone with the eyes of the heart. It is

to wait, to believe, and to receive with thanksgiving the gift of faith.

To remain in the *presence of God* is to seek him like the disciples of Emmaus. They were walking along the road that led away from Jerusalem. A stranger drew near and walked with them. They were visibly sad and he empathized with their grief. They felt themselves moved by the healing words of this man who was so well-versed in Holy Scripture. They invited him to spend the evening with them, and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread...

Mary Magdalene sought Jesus... where had they laid him? She found him and did not recognize him. Jesus called her by name and Mary wanted to throw herself into his arms.

The situation of the disciples of Emmaus and of Mary Magdalene demonstrates that if we allow ourselves to be grafted onto God by placing ourselves in his presence, our seeking will result in our discovering him. He will give us a sign so that we, too, can recognize him. There will be a "breaking of the bread" where we will hear him call our name. He knows us so well; he loves us so dearly.

Let us get used to remaining in the presence of God, to becoming aware of his presence. This is essential for every spiritual journey. Jesus tells us "*...no one can come to the Father except through me. I am the Way.*" (Jn 14:7)

2. To Touch God Present within Us

a) *Presence of Immensity*

God created man in his image and likeness. (Gn 1:26) God is therefore our Creator and also our Providence and Defender. As the author of life, God exercises a *presence of immensity* over us, giving us life, but also preserving it. He places a static force in each of us that enables us to stand firm and to resist, but also a dynamic force that permits us to subsist, to progress, to evolve, and to establish a relationship with him.

Therefore, God has placed his own powers in each human being, without any danger of his becoming poorer. We will thus find within ourselves the riches that exist in God and if we can find them in ourselves, we can also find them in others whether or not they are aware that they possess these riches. Their attitude changes nothing as far as God is concerned.

God is so present in us, so identified with our lives, that if he were to withdraw, life would be annihilated. God is not only the principle of life but also the principle of its conservation, of its duration, and its progress. God is the Creator who both gives life and distributes its positive qualities: our natural talents, our gifts, our aptitudes, our energies, our dynamism; the powers to love, to understand, to be free, and to have confidence. All these give us a personality, a free will, a proper and distinct identity, an unchangeable autonomy, an

irresistible empathy. If God gave us all this gratuitously without demanding our collaboration, it is because he does not expect us to return the favor.

All is freely given, and God, through his Providence, continues his work by preserving what he has made, by placing at our disposal all the defense mechanisms needed that we need to protect ourselves against disintegration, aging, the hard knocks of life, and the toxins of suffering accumulated in our interpersonal relationships. He gives us natural life because he is the Creator; he preserves it because he is Providence.

Whoever we are, Providence watches over us. This goodness on the part of God does not depend on our mood, on our degree of understanding nor on our collaboration. Whether we practice our faith or not, whether we are atheists or unbelievers, whether we are indifferent, oblivious, tepid, slothful and treacherous, or fervent and committed to his service, we will enjoy the same benefits, the same temperature, the same gardens and have the right to the same measuring stick. Our efforts will be rewarded according to the use we make of our intelligence and will. The sun shines on everyone; rain falls on all doorsteps; cold penetrates all walls; heat effects every person because all of us, without exception, are made in the image and likeness of God.

b) *Presence of Friendship*

There is also another form of the presence of God, the *presence of friendship*. This is given to us on the day of our baptism and presupposes our adhesion to it as soon as we are able to reason. On the day of our confirmation, it continues its development insofar as we do our part. It does not function without our collaboration.

By baptism, all the natural powers received at birth acquire an indescribable, supernatural vigor. Baptism creates in us an unfathomable mystery: God has accepted as his child the one that he created in his image. God, the divine artist, desires to adopt his handiwork and to insert it into his own divine life!

Confirmation, which is consciously requested, awakens us to this form of presence where God makes us his own children, loves us as a father, and produces marvels in us by the power of his Spirit who has chosen us to become his Temples.

The Holy Spirit is in us. He delivers himself into our hands, his mission is to make us witnesses of Christ. He allows us to use all his gifts for as long as we want to utilize them. He fills us with abundant charisms; he nourishes us with his fruit. His table is always plentiful, he gives us abundant fruit. Holy Scripture enumerates some of them for us: love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (cf. Gal 5:22) Because we are children of God, we only have to help ourselves to whatever we want. In this way God strives to make us feel like one of the family.

If the *presence of immensity* acts without our collaboration, the *presence of friendship* works only in rhythm with our cooperation. All the riches belonging to a child of God are within us, but they are absolutely without effect, if we do not believe in their value. However, if we adhere to Christ, they can have considerable creativity: if we strive to live in his spirit, in his style, and if we establish here on earth a positive relationship with his Father.

Thus we must become aware of God's presence of friendship in each of us. We must be convinced of the necessity of faith, as Jesus taught us more than once. If you believe in me, if you are baptized, if you observe my commandments, you will have eternal life and my Father will live in you as he lives in me, and I shall be in you as I am in the Father. (cf. Jn 15)

God is the principle of positive action. He sanctifies us, possesses our being and transforms it. God not only knows all our problems but he also has on hand the best solution for each of them. He requires our collaboration: not simply an exercise of asceticism to prove our love for him through renunciations, but simply an attitude, a gesture from the heart, an act of faith. He asks us to believe in the love that he brings us, to believe that we are loved by him, that we are precious in his sight, that we are a part of his plan, that he is present in us, that nothing in us escapes his goodness and his mercy.

We must believe that if we allow him the liberty of loving us, he will guide us, sanctify us and lead us out of our anguish, our anxieties and our

problems. He does not want to make us slaves who become pliable because they are constantly threatened but free persons who have been paid for and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. (cf. Gal 3:26) He wants us to be proud like children, without being arrogant. He wants us to walk with our heads held high, our hearts free, like someone willingly engaged in serving an infinitely loving Father, who has freely chosen us to become the object of his predilections because we are his children, his sons and daughters.

God takes the responsibility for animating us, for activating us. He asks us to look upon him with faith, with a positive, confident attitude. We must feel that we are loved; we must get used to letting him act, to watching him do things, to letting him bring about changes in us that give him pleasure. God is the active agent of our perfection, he wants us to remain passive under his gaze of friendship. We receive all from him; our role consists in showing him our gratitude, in manifesting to him our joy and in being happy.

We must have the same confidence as St. Paul had when he wrote to the Romans:

"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other

creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:35-39)

To believe that I am loved by God is to believe that God has a plan for my life, and that he has already foreseen the means of accomplishing it. It is to believe that I have been chosen to be his instrument in the realization of this plan. But I must allow myself to be possessed and gripped by Christ, without counting the cost.

Wherever we are, there are vibrations. If I have a television set, I capture images and sounds. But these vibrations hide many riches from our senses. God, too, is in the atmosphere. It is up to us, through our attentiveness and vigilance, to discover him, to gaze upon him, to listen to him. Our attention is the instrument that detects God there where he is. The heart of our attention is the thought that God loves us, that he has done everything for us, that he is constantly leaning over us by his *presence of immensity* and his *presence of friendship*.

When God takes hold of a heart, it suddenly becomes fascinated by him and totally abandons itself into his hands. It is no longer concerned with itself; only God counts. To love God for himself alone, to love him in everything and everywhere: in nature, events, people, and in oneself, is to receive from God the most beautiful vocation in the world. It is to fulfill the most wonderful mission on earth. This love will grow insofar as I am conscious of what he accomplishes in me, for me, by me, so that I may be transformed in him. His action in me is awesome, but it is just as beautiful in those whom I

call my neighbors. Therefore, it is up to me to discover in others these *presences of God, presences of friendship*. God unites us in his love when we seek to understand his manner of loving, absorbing, assimilating, and unifying.

It would be good to stop and to analyze with our hearts what it is we feel within ourselves when we feel loved by God. What is the quality of the relationship that unites us to him? It is not fear, but friendship, love, abandonment, confidence, a need to be faithful, to correspond to his sentiments.

We strongly perceive within ourselves the desire not to grieve the Lord, but to accomplish all that is pleasing to him. We feel the need to meet with him in the depths of our being. When we become aware that we are God's temples, that we are truly his children, that we belong to the family of God, that he takes pleasure in each of us because he finds himself in all that is agreeable, then we can feel that we have succeeded before God. He alone is the universal author of all good and of each individual good.

Our life will be a failure if we pass God by. If we only seek God occasionally, we will lack happiness here on earth. We must become aware that God is someone alive, active and loving, someone who lives in the heart of our being, so that he becomes the totality of our lives.

It would be good for each of us to write the story of our spiritual life, to note the important moments where we were moved by the goodness of God. This story is alive in the depths of our heart. A few hours of recollection and we will rediscover

those moments when the presence of God filled us with enthusiasm. We have lived hours of spiritual euphoria. These marvelous moments appear in different forms. In the lives of St. Paul, St. Augustine, the venerable Libermann, Blessed Eugene de Mazenod and Charles de Foucauld, they took on the aspect of conversion. In the lives of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila they appeared as a desire for reform, a desire for a more precise and conscious contact with God.

God is always ready to appease our hunger and our thirst.

3. Qualities of the Presence of God

God created us in his image and likeness. He wanted us to truly become his own children. To become children of God it is necessary to have real values. He himself gives them to us; it is up to us to make them fructify by paying special attention to three qualities: *the quality of being, the quality of presence, and the quality of love.*

a) *Quality of Being*

A human being is of great importance in the eyes of God. In ancient times, Moses almost went into ecstasy at the thought of God's attention for us.