

64. Atheism and mental prayer

[Portion of a letter addressed to Fr. Caffarel by another French priest.]

“Father, in the Catholic circles that I frequent, there has been much talk of atheism since the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council considered the matter. It is as if, all of a sudden, people are becoming aware of this new and terrifying phenomenon. A short sentence by Bishop de Hnilica of Czechoslovakia, who came out of the concentration camps, caused quite a shock: ‘One-third of the world is under the domination of atheism, which does not deny that it wants to conquer the whole world.’

“The reactions I note around me are no less varied than those of the Fathers during the 136th General Congregation of Vatican II. Equally varied are the causes to which this agonizing phenomenon is attributed.

“However, I am surprised that there is almost never any mention of what, to my mind, is one of the principal causes of atheism, at least in our Western nations: silence about God. Catholics, both priests and lay persons, rarely speak about God. I am not alone in noticing this. There is a cruel saying that goes back more than twenty years: ‘Religion has had nothing to do with God for a very long time.’

“In recent years, I have had the opportunity to study the results of questionnaires sent to the faithful, asking their reactions to the Sunday sermons. I came to the same conclusion. A novelist—I don’t know whether or not he is a practicing Christian—has noted this bankruptcy. Here is a passage from one of his novels:

“The truth is, that nobody talks about God any more. Nobody at all—and first of all the clergy.... In an age when material things reign supreme as never before, don’t we need prophets? People who speak in season and out of season about God, the Creator and Master of the world as well as all of life?” (R. Bésus)

“How can Christians hope that the upsurge of atheism will be halted, and the reign of God established on earth, if they do not first make God known to the world?”

My dear Father, have no fear. Your letter did not scandalize me. I have often made identical observations. Need I tell you that in retreats for priests—and I’ve made quite a few—I have not often heard anyone speak at length and in depth about God, his innermost life, and his perfections?

But why do we talk so rarely about God? That is the important question. To my mind, there is no doubt as to the answer. People don't talk about God, because they don't know him. We don't know him in the sense that the Scriptures give to the word "know." For the man of the Bible, to "know" means to have the concrete experience of a being. To know someone is to enter into personal relations with him. The Psalmist sang: "*Taste and see how good the Lord is*" (Ps 34:9). He knew God. Later on, St. John wrote: "*Eternal life [begun on earth] is this: to know you, the only true God*" (Jn 17:3). We know that for St. John, such knowledge is "communion."

Only those who know God experientially speak well of him (whether it be the pastor talking to his flock, the mother talking to her children, or the professor of theology talking to his class). The words of those who know God in this way, touch the innermost "self" of those they are addressing. This is the "heart" in the Biblical sense, the "center of the soul," as the mystics like to say. Their words have the power of awakening, stimulating and developing the sense of God in their audience.

But now a second question arises. Why are there so few of these "knowers of God," who can speak eloquently about him, and are impatient to make him known? I have no hesitation in answering: because the form of prayer is neglected, which the great doctors and spiritual writers have for centuries called "contemplation."

Objections are made to the use of this word. I admit it can be the source of ambiguity. In fact, God is not contemplated the way one contemplates a painting. Nothing comes between the contemplative and the God he contemplates. He finds this God within himself. He experiences, in the innermost depths of his soul, God's presence and love and light. But never mind the word. The fact is undeniable in its harsh reality: prayer is neglected and contemplation is discredited. Those who opt for a life of prayer are accused of deserting the cause of mankind, of ignoring the great and urgent apostolic tasks. So also are those who devote even a limited time to prayer. This is why some Trappists in recent years have felt twinges of conscience, and asked themselves whether they should not go to work in factories.

How far we have come from the conviction of the great Christian doctors—Augustine, the Gregories, Thomas Aquinas—who courageously affirmed the primacy of contemplation. They championed contemplation as a state of life, but also and first of all as a penetrating and delightful knowledge of God. Over and over again, they wrote commentaries on Christ's words to Martha: "*Martha, Martha, your are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is required. Mary has chosen the better portion and she shall not be deprived of it*" (Lk 10:41-42).

St. Augustine commented on these words in a short but famous sentence: "*Martha turbabatur, Maria epulabatur.*" It's not easy to give its richness of meaning in translation: "Martha busied herself, Mary enjoyed."

One would have to be completely ignorant of the history of the Church to dare claim that the contemplatives are ineffective persons. The detractors of the contemplative life would quickly change their minds if they read, attentively and in good faith, the lives of such saints as Bernard of Clairvaux, Catherine of Siena, Marie of the Incarnation, and so many others. Contemplation has always been the wellspring from which the boldest and most vigorous apostles of the Church renewed their missionary zeal.

God alone knows what his kingdom owes to so many hidden and unknown contemplatives. They don't all live in cloisters—many lay men and women are more truly contemplative than many monks.

My conviction stands firm. When contemplative life declines in the Church, error in diverse forms develops. The outstanding example is the militant atheism of our epoch, which one of the Fathers of Vatican Council II described as “the most serious error, the mortal illness of our time.”

This tidal wave, which threatens to submerge the whole earth, will be repulsed only if the Church first makes an immense effort to nurture the contemplative life again in every milieu. Then there will be no more lamenting over the lack of apostles, and the prophets of the living God will multiply.