

### 93. *“You will see my back”* (Ex 33:23)

Your letter brought to mind a woman of lowly estate whom I encountered over thirty years ago. As a young priest, I was then living with a colleague who had rented me a room near the Basilica of Montmartre.

A woman from the neighborhood came to do the housework, and I sometimes chatted with her while she was sweeping my room. She seemed very old to me. Today I would have quite a different idea of her age! She was tiny, nimble, discreet as a shadow, and seemed always to be apologizing for existing.

She was certainly very virtuous—I should say very holy. But to realize it, one had to take a close look at her eyes. They were the only chink into her interior world, from which shone an intense and pure light.

She would pray for hours at the Basilica on her knees, her eyes fixed on the monstrance. It was whispered about that she gave half of her meager salary to others poorer than herself.

I had to give you this brief description, so that you could grasp the significance of the dialogue I am going to relate to you. It is at once elliptic and very rich in spiritual meaning.

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One day, when I was preparing to preach a retreat, I said to her, “Pray that I may be able to speak well to them about God.” And she answered, almost inadvertently, “Oh! Above all, don’t talk about God!” Then, embarrassed about what she had just said, she apologized: “I’m really stupid. I don’t know why I said that to you.” And I couldn’t get her to say another word.

In any event, I was greatly intrigued by her curious little statement, spoken with so much conviction. It was probably from that moment that I took an interest in her spiritual life.

Something else she said, after hearing a sermon, enabled me to grasp her thinking a little better. She confided: “I was so happy. The preacher said that we cannot understand God.” “But don’t you have a great desire to know God?” “Yes, but not to understand him. It’s always when I think that we can’t understand anything about God, that I feel as if I’m surrounded by a very calm light.”

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Was I wrong in surmising that you would find the answer to your questions in these words spoken by a very simple woman?

Unless we stop trying to know God by our own means, we shall never really come close to him. We must not only go beyond the knowledge of the senses, but also beyond rational knowledge. Many prayerful souls are stymied in their search for God, be-

cause they are not willing to mortify their imagination and sensibility. They limit themselves to intellectual notions of God, not realizing that God will not let us grasp him through our concepts, any more than the ocean allows itself to be caught in the fisherman's nets.

This humble woman knew that beautiful ideas can at best carry us only a short distance on the road to God, but that when we cling to them they prevent us from penetrating the mystery of God. She was saying in her own way what Bossuet said in more eloquent, if not more insightful, terms concerning "God's sublime incomprehensibility":

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"The further we advance in our knowledge of God, the more we see, as it were, that we know nothing worthy of him; and rising above all we have ever thought about God or that we can ever think of God throughout eternity, we praise him in his incomprehensible truth and are lost in this praise."

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We must give up, once and for all the hope of knowing God here below as he really is. Then God can infuse into the center of our soul a knowledge of himself that is both the luminous certitude of his existence and presence, as well as the complete ignorance of what he is in himself. It amounts to seeing God's back, the way Moses did. "*When my glory passes I will set you in the hollow of the rock and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face is not to be seen*" (Ex 33:22-23).

While we remain on earth, we cannot contemplate God's face. St. Thomas Aquinas has written a deeply penetrating commentary on this subject:

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"When we have reached the limit of our knowledge, we know God as unknown. And our intellect attains in a very perfect manner to the knowledge of God, at the precise moment it knows that the divine essence exceeds every thing it can grasp in the present state of life."

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One of the best proofs of the presence and action within us of the gift of wisdom, the most sublime gift of the Holy Spirit, is our love for the incomprehensibility of God. We

rejoice in hearing others speak of it, and dread to hear statements that claim to reveal God to us. Likewise, we feel a need during prayer to allow ourselves to be engulfed in the abyss of divine incomprehensibility, the way a pearl fisher dives into translucent waters.

Before we reach this stage, however, we must spend a long time seeking the discursive presence of God by meditating on his word, and by contemplating his attributes as they are mirrored in his creatures. It would be presumptuous to want to advance at a faster pace than God's grace does.

Yearn with all your might to know God. Seek him. Abandon yourself totally to him so that he may lead you into this realm, infinitely beyond anything our human faculties of knowledge can explore. Meanwhile, remain very poor and small, and he will reveal himself to be very great indeed. Love his darkness, and he will welcome you into his light.

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*On one occasion Jesus spoke thus: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever you have revealed to the merest children. Father, it is true. You have graciously willed it so" (Mt 11:25-26).*