

The Absence of God (something to consider)

How many times have we experienced this feeling? We stand in prayer and it seems we are shouting into an empty sky, out of which there is no answer. [Of course, we know that God is never really absent but often we experience the sense of His absence which we have and which feels very real and lonely.] What are we to think of such a situation? Archbishop Anthony Bloom, in his classic work *Beginning to Pray*, offers some insightful answers and practical solutions. First of all he reminds us that prayer is an encounter and a relationship which cannot be forced either on us or on God. "The fact that God can make Himself present or can leave us with the sense of His absence is part of this live and real relationship. If we could mechanically draw Him into an encounter, force Him to meet us, simply because we have chosen this moment to meet Him, there would be no relationship. We can do this with the imagination or with the various idols we put up in place of God, but we can do nothing of the sort with the living God, any more than we can do it with a living person. A relationship must begin and develop in mutual

relationship, you will see that God could complain about us a great deal more than we about Him." Second he explains that "meeting face to face with God is always a moment of judgment for us. We cannot meet God in prayer...and not be either saved or condemned" (of course, he explains that this is not meant in terms of eternal salvation or eternal damnation already given and received), but it is always a critical moment. "To meet God face to face in prayer is a critical moment in our lives, and thanks be to Him that He does not always present Himself to us when we wish to meet Him, because we might not be able to endure such a meeting....Therefore, the first thought we ought to have when we do not tangibly perceive the divine presence, is a thought of gratitude. God is merciful; He does not come in an untimely way. He gives us a chance to judge ourselves, to understand, and not to come into His presence at a moment when it would mean condemnation." To demonstrate his point, Metropolitan Anthony points to two Scripture stories: One the centurion (Luke 7:2-10) and St. Peter in his boat after the great catch of fish (Luke 5:8). In both of these accounts it is the humble approach to Christ that stands out. Peter, for instance, says to the Lord "Leave me, I am a sinner." Peter felt humble because he had suddenly perceived the greatness of Jesus. "Do we ever do that? When we read the Gospel or pray and the image of Christ becomes compelling, glorious, do we ever say 'I am unworthy that He should come near me?' Not to speak of all the occasions when we should be aware that He cannot come to us because we are not there to receive Him. We want something from Him, not Him at all. Is that a relationship? Do we behave in that way with our friends?" "How can we feel surprised when we experience the sense of God's absence when it is we who make ourselves absent, it is we who grow cold the moment we are no longer concerned with God." Let us begin to practice sincere prayer.

—Fr. Michael