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The Reticence of God

on Signs & Revelation

by *Leon J. Podles*

I will die eventually, perhaps painfully. Yet in many incidents of my life I recognize the preserving hand of God. Once I was driving along a rural road on a mountainside at 60 MPH. I suddenly noticed the beauty of the wildflowers and slowed down to a crawl to admire them. At that moment a tire blew out.

Many Christians have had such experiences, yet they still tend to think of God as an undifferentiated, impersonal blob. One English Methodist, in justifying a new hymnal that addressed God as “Mother” as well as “Father,” explained that it didn’t matter what we called him (or her), because God wasn’t really a person.

The Scriptures reveal a God with a distinct personality. One of the most mysterious traits of his personality is his seeming reluctance to manifest himself. Even in his clearest manifestations, there is great darkness. He is a hidden God, even a hiding God; he is, we might say, reticent. His divine reticence is one of the greatest mysteries of his personality. It is this reticence, perhaps, that some Christians mistake for impersonality.

Nature’s Testimony

Nature testifies to the existence of God, according to Paul, but only in the darkest way. The testimony is not unambiguous, nor is the interpretation easy. Pascal wrote, “I have a hundred times wished that if a God maintains nature, she should testify to him unequivocally, and that, if the signs she gives are deceptive, she should suppress them altogether” (*Pensées* 229).

Signs of God’s presence and of his beneficent will are certainly present in nature, but how dark the signs are. How can a good God maintain a universe blighted by such evil? In the face of evil, man is tempted to think that either God is not good (in any sense that we can

understand), or there is no God. Yet if there is no God, or he is not good, whence come the miracles of goodness in the world? Why is there such beauty?

Even in revelation, God is still a hidden God. He works miracles, but we cannot command him to do so, or even predict when he will work them. Nor does he do them in sufficient number or power to convince the skeptical. Even when he does them, they sometimes harden the hearts of God's enemies against him. Jesus' raising of Lazarus did not convince his enemies that he was the Messiah. It convinced them that he must die.

Jesus seems reluctant to reveal his identity as Messiah. He performs miracles quietly, often before a handful of people, in out-of-the-way places. He will not throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple that all may believe. He silences the demons that know his true identity. After the Resurrection the disciples have trouble recognizing him, and he vanishes from their sight as soon as they recognize him. Even among his disciples who see his ascension, some doubt. Jesus does not show himself to his enemies, but only to his disciples and even then in such a way that they are not overpowered into belief.

This reticent God does not like to force himself on people. He wishes to be sought for his own sake, not for the sake of the signs he can do, and therefore reveals himself only a little. As Pascal wrote, "God has set up in the Church visible signs to make himself known to those who should seek him sincerely, and that he has nevertheless so disguised them that he will only be perceived by those who seek him with all their heart" (*Pensées* 194).

God wants to be sought and to be found; he does not want to impose himself on those who are not interested, much less on those who reject him. Pascal connected this search with the wretchedness and glory of mankind. "If there were no obscurity, man would not be sensible of his corruption; if there were no light, man would not hope for a remedy. Thus, it is not only fair, but advantageous to us, that God be partly hidden and partly revealed; since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, as to know his own wretchedness without knowing God" (*Pensées* 586).

Seeing God Rightly

A too easy knowledge of God would blind man to his own corruption; the hiddenness of God awakens man to a sense of his sinfulness and his need for redemption. Why should this be so, why would blazing and cosmic displays of the divine presence keep man from recognizing his own sinfulness?

The philosophers and theologians from Plato and Aristotle onwards who talk too glibly of God may provide the clue to resolving this paradox. When the mind has (or thinks it has) a firm grasp on God, it may easily feel that there is no real gap between God and

man; it may forget not only the contingency of the creature, but also that he is incredibly degraded and lost apart from God.

The presence of God to the intellect is not the same as the presence of God as redeemer from sin and death. The mind lives in abstractions and timelessness; it recognizes only error, and contains within itself the power to correct that error. But this mental world is not the real world. Man is subjected (and subjects himself) to degrading passions, to cruel impulses, to diabolical suggestions, to the nothingness that seeks to tear the fabric of being into shreds.

God's clear presence withdraws from this horror; or rather, those who are trapped in this horror cannot see the clear presence of God. It is better for them that they do not see it, because the clarity and sweetness of the divine presence would make them forget their own wretchedness. The absence of God forces man to recognize his own wretchedness. He is forced to look at what he has made of himself, and cannot distract himself by gazing at the goodness of God.

But seeing only his own wretchedness would lead man to despair. "If there were no light, man would not hope for a remedy." Therefore, even in creation there remain signs not simply of God's existence but also of his goodness and his beneficence to man: the mysteries of human love, the many hints of resurrection and delivery from death written in the order of creation, in the sun and moon, the changing seasons, in birth and rebirth throughout nature. Man, although doomed to death and corrupted by sin, does not despair. In the beginning God created light, and this light has not been grasped and obliterated by the darkness we have made.

In nature there are signs, in revelation there are clear signs, but both are still only signs. The reality is not yet. The Eucharist is but a foretaste of the Banquet of the Lamb, not the banquet itself. According to Thomas Aquinas, the sacred banquet is a *pignus futurae gloriae*, a pledge of future glory.

Christians' Hidden God

Christians too have a hidden God, a God who desires to be sought for his own sake, not for the sake of the powerful signs he can do and has done throughout history. God can deliver from death, but Christians continue to die, sometimes in terrible accidents or at the hands of God's enemies. Sometimes the tire blows out while they are going 60 MPH on a mountain road.

Yet Christians do not despair, because the signs of God's presence remain. There are enough signs to guide those of good will, but not enough to force the willfully blind to recognize the presence of God.

Once, a few years ago, as I came off an expressway I hit a pool of water at the bottom of the ramp and hydroplaned across the street. I was heading straight as an arrow toward the side of a station wagon full of children. I prayed, “Jesus, help me now.” My car stopped and touched the side of the station wagon. We were so close we could not get a credit card between the two cars, but neither had a scratch and neither felt an impact.

Would this incident have convinced an unbeliever? No, he would have dismissed it as mere luck. Such things happen all the time. It doesn’t mean anything. It’ll be your turn next time. But to a believer such small signs are perhaps more powerful than great miracles, because they occur more often.

The signs of God’s preserving power are given to us so that when we do have to face the darkness, we know that we are not alone, that he is there, hidden in the darkness. Jesus himself cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Yet even in that darkness his last words were: “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

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