

II. Closer to Me than Myself

Saint AUGUSTINE of Hippo (354–430) expressed this closeness with his famous sentence: “*Deus interior intimo meo*” – “God is closer to me than myself.” And a friend of mine once coined the sentence that God is closer to us than our own skin. This closeness is so strong that we can never truly shake it off – not even in denying God.

It would, however, be sad to merely recognise God’s closeness as an objective fact. It is much more than a simple fact: it is an encouragement and a task. An encouragement, because no-one can ever take away from us this source of strength. And a task, because we need to live it out – for the sake of our own happiness.

Although this closeness of God is a deeply personal matter, it is at this deep level that all humanity is connected. And with regard to Jesus Christ – the whole Church is connected. Our bond with humanity and with the Church lies deep down in our soul. There is where we are most connected to God.

III. How can I See God?

When we participate in a baptism, we are called to renew our connection to God, the Church and our fellow humans. To renew our consciousness of God’s presence and closeness, as a community of those who have personal experience with it.

And if we manage to continually deepen this experience, we will certainly be brave enough to face the baptised child’s questions when the child becomes older. Who knows, maybe one day the child will come to us and ask: “Tell me, how can I see God?”

Daniel PASTIRČÁK

The Eternity Tale

Life was an island for him. No one arrived, and he walked out towards no one. Along the seaside, fringed by the foam of the waves, he had met only his own footprints for many years.

Any former life seemed to him the storytelling of old women. It was as if it were not him at all: a young man zealously climbing up the social ladder. How many bitter apples had he begun to bite before understanding that the world upon which the civilization of his ancestors stood was a tapestry woven of squandered illusions? Was there really emptiness behind that web?

He was never really sure if he sailed here over the real sea. Perhaps he had not discovered this island in the ocean at all, but rather, in the bottom of his heart, into which he was descending, step by step, with his continuing meditations. More and more he had become convinced that out there, there was no real world at all. Only consciousness existed. Absolutely dimensionless, it created only inklings with pictures. So, like a little boy playing with bubbles, he would fashion the world into a large glittering orb. He would let it float into empty space and then, after all, would break it so that he might create it again. “Only my self really exists.” In this thought, the man found peace.

Now, if this island actually existed, it would be quite small: a coral ringlet crowned with garlands of virgin forest whose shore a man could circle in a single day.

On the eastern side of the island, atop a ridge rising out of the sea, the man had built a rustic temple of heavy stone. In this temple, which he had consecrated to the God-of-the-Self-Most-High, he sat, all day long, casting his eyes over the flickering flame of a candle.

The roar of the sea beneath him and the tedious tunes that he played upon his reed carried his mind into a trance. In the midst of this trance all was clear to him. He felt as if the smallest cells of his

body were joined with the furthest stars of the universe. They sprang forth in invisible, whirling waltzes spinning round and back again to his own mind. When he awoke, however, his old doubts would return. A wild scream from the island's heart was enough for the invisible web to fall away, and he would find himself again isolated and strange in the midst of a hostile world. Even in those moments of deepest introspection he felt that somewhere in his bowels his being remained split. While his exalted half granted life to all things with a ruler's gesture in an everlasting game, the other half of his being would writhe in the depths of silence, tortured by a formless solitude.

He had no idea how quickly and unexpectedly the world where he had felt so safe for ages could disappear.

It happened on the day she came to him for the first time. The last shaft of the dying sun had barely reached the candle flame when he suddenly felt her presence. He anxiously looked around but saw no one. Carefully, he moved down to the edge of the cliff with apprehension and surveyed the grey-blue depths below.

He first took her to be a tendril of mist. A white ribbon, she crept up the rocky walls of the cliff. When she finally stopped before him, he was staggered by the unexpected reality of her eyes. He tightly squeezed his eyelids closed and tried to control her, to reconcile her to his universe.

"You are just a new creation of my consciousness," he said silently to his mind.

Behind his closed eyelids, however, he saw those deep black eyes. She was of greater strength. He could not dam the powerful wave that flooded his internal being. Suddenly, he knew that the one who stood before him was truly different. She had come from the external world that he had not believed existed. He felt her call penetrate him. He was surprised and could not know that what was beginning to grow within him was love.

"I am here because of you." Her voice made him open his eyes. "I have come to ask you to leave your futile solitude."

He stretched out his arm to touch her pale face, but his fingers passed through her as through an immaterial vision.

"Do not be frightened," she laughed. "Everything that is real vanishes due to the touch of a mind that is proud. I shall arrive with the dusk and depart with the dawn. If it is your wish that I stay with you forever, you must find the answer to my question. What does



love need most? I will give you the space of one year. I shall return every evening, that you might continue in your quest.”

In the morning he watched her until she blended into the mist beneath the cliff. He spent the whole day in the stone temple. The roar of the sea did not elate him. It roiled within him, as did his own thought, from nowhere to nowhere. The king of the universe was being transformed into a pauper.

The inky darkness when she return, nearly hid her fragile being, save for those enormous, burning eyes. They were mysterious gates to an unknown being. He felt the searching of mystery make his love all the more powerful.

“Love needs a secret,” he said, but she kept silent.

One evening, she came while he was immersed in his meditations. She sat next to him and blew out the candle on the altar. She eased the reed from his fingers and began to play. The un-bound joy of the song shattered his silence. At first, only a sharp pain gnawed at him, but it quickly grew into rage. He rose above her threateningly.

“Who are you?” he said quietly, suppressing his subterranean roar. “For what have you come? To steal my peace? You called my solitude pride, but what about your pride? Does my humiliation bring you delight? And you cynically called this perverse art *love!*”

Mute, she handed back the reed. Her defenceless eyes spoke more clearly than his anger. He threw the reed violently and flew at her. She retreated and was lost to the dark.

He searched for her all night. Shortly before the break of day, he found her curled up among the sea grass on the shore.

“Your candle and your reed led you away from our love,” she said when he leaned over her. “I wanted to wake you, but I did not know the savagery of your heart.”

He felt her pain overwhelmed him.

“Love needs understanding,” he whispered.

She looked at him silently, without a single word, yet with hope, but she did not answer, because this is not what love needs most.

He waited all night, all day, but she did not come at all. Day dragged on by day, week by week; a month was over and a second nearly gone and every evening he would wait, with a small spark of hope, for her on the seashore.

He would now exchange all his lonely eternity for a single moment with her. At last, she appeared. He beheld her leaning over the stone altar in the twilight. The waiting had amplified his desire.

The downcast spirit within him took off on wings of unknown bliss.

“I needed to lose her to find her ultimately,” he thought. “Love needs waiting.”

But it was not “waiting,” and therefore she remained silent and left in the morning, as she had always done before.

The season of drought was over. From the southern side of the island, the days of warm trade winds swept in and swept out with the large summer stars at low tide. Their reign was left to the twilight and to the rains roaring with the wind in the old forest’s bones. The sea rose and fell with the rhythmic breath of time, leaving behind a necklace of salt, seashells, scallops and seaweed on the nape of the shore.

Then, the last evening began. She came and sat silently beside him. Her pale forehead reflected a cloud distance. Tufts of cloudy scarlet melted in the azure remnants of the sky, like drops of blood on water. Despondent, they remained silent. It seemed to him that he could see the spirit of the sea as it lifted its white head crowned with kelp, counting down the bars of a tune on a silver tambourine in a merciless swaggering tempo. The melody divided the night’s music from the chant of the daybreak.

“You got not the answer.” She uttered aloud the thing they both knew. He felt he no longer was. His spirit was that of the rock on which they sat. Nothing was left here, only empty silence, wide as the world, this irrational absolute, in which he had been fed with vanity. He wanted to take her away, to hide her somewhere far off, to hide her from the devouring jaws of time. He knew, however, that she was immaterial, transparent, and unobtainable, as was the meaning of his existence, which he had been seeking helplessly for the whole year.

He thought about the next morning. What would come after? He saw the empty shores, his own grotesque figure pursued by the sun, and on the entire island, only his own footprints going round and round in pointless circles. Would the pain remain? Pain. He enjoyed the bitterness of this word deep in his soul, and he recognized that his love was growing, seizing him and penetrating his whole being.

“Love needs pain,” he cried in hope. But when he looked into her face, he knew that all was lost.

Dawn broke from the heart of the island with the first singing. The secret remained unrevealed. Heartbroken, they descended to the shore. There, on the edge of the sea, she sat. In time with the gaining light, she faded into the sand until only a white silhouette remained

as if drawn by salt. But it, too, was licked by the cool tongues of the waves.

Something was changed in him. The world suddenly grew strange. A world in which the eagle hurls itself from the wild heights to sate his hunger on helpless creatures. A world that falls to rise, consuming life that life, itself, might be renewed. A world in which nothing lasts forever, save anguish.

He hated the rocks because the biting water gnaws on them until finally they slip into the abyss. He hated the woods because rot treacherously attacks the roots of the tree and the thunder hammers it into the swamp where a thousand years hide it in the coal reserves of the Earth. He hated the falling stars and the flowing river that disappeared into the sea, and the sea itself, which ends on another, however distant, shore. Now, he knew it for certain.

“Love needs eternity.”

Irony Divine. He had looked for eternity and found love. He looked for love and found eternity.

He recognised, for the first time, a different world stretching out invisibly above him; a separate, Godly existence that is not bound to anything which dances its cruel dance in the circles of birth and extinction. He beheld the Almighty with awakened consciousness. His revived heart experienced a mysterious touch.

From the cave beneath the ridge he carried a boat, unused for ages. With a bare chest he sailed toward the sun. The dolmen of the stone temple consecrated to the God-of-the-Self-Most-High diminished in the distance. He turned his face to Heaven and looked up at the place which cannot be seen. And love remained with him always.

Sören ASMUS

Dialogue as Unlimited Interpretation

In comparing and evaluating religious traditions, is it more important to be committed to at least one of them or detached from all of them? The task of comparing and evaluating becomes most relevant in an encounter with other religious traditions facing a common reality, problem or concern and being dependent on the development of a common (re-) action. In this situation there is no alternative to a commitment to one's own religious (cultural or philosophical) tradition, because it is on this basis every action and analysis will be contributed.

I. The Place of the Question

In the wide area of possible dialogues between people, the question of oneself and others – basically beliefs and convictions – is the most important and at the same time the most difficult question to ask.

If we move in the area of dialogue between people of different religious traditions – be it Christian or other – the question is that of hopes, aims and values, which open the horizon of the individual towards her or his own future and the future of humankind.¹

At the same time, these traditions shape the way in which the individual experiences her or his life and expresses those experiences towards others.² Difficulties arise if those expressions are not in line with one's own expressions of such experiences – be it because of different experiences or because of different expressions.

In order to relate those expressions to one's own view and experiences of the world, there must be either a comparison or an

¹ A good exploration of the involved questions: NEWBIGIN Leslie, *The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Interfaith Dialogue*. Scottish Journal of Theology (SJTh) XXX/19. 253–270.

² See the summary of views on doctrine: LINDBECK George A., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. London, 1984. 73–90.