

ON KNOWING GOD

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The Psalmist tells us to “be still and know that I am God” (46:10a). This is not easy for us, and for several reasons. One is that in general we fidget. We are restless, become filled with worried anticipation at what might go wrong (next), or we are eager with anticipation to finish what we are doing (like going to school) and get on to “real ministry”. Being still takes discipline and practice, for one must overcome distractions from inside as well as external noises and events that compete for our attention. The Psalmist calls us to be still because being still is requisite to paying attention, and knowing God requires the highly refined skill of paying attention.

Paying attention is especially difficult in our frenetic culture that has ruthlessly exterminated the circumstances needed to train oneself in the art of being still, or I should better say in the enjoyment of being still. In the churches I frequent, most parents seem to have given up the struggle to train their children in the art of being still and paying attention even to what is going on around them, not to speak of paying attention to God. For example, one Sunday I was in a church I do not usually attend. In the pew in front of us was a lovely family: parents and two boys ages and four, more or less. The four-year-old sat quietly near his dad. The nine-year-old had an empty liter plastic soda bottle that he had tucked under his arm and was practice shooting out the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling one by one as he slid back and forth on his half of the pew to take better aim. I kept waiting for him to lower his sights. His parents ignored him.

Silence has been eradicated from our lives and is, in any case, so widely feared that pastors fear even 45 seconds of silence after a Scripture reading or prayer in a worship service, because the congregants may become uneasy, not knowing what is happening or what to do with the time. The fear of silence in worship suggests that we do not need time to absorb what is going on. Perhaps we cannot handle

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stillness because we demand to be constantly entertained, distracted.

Stillness of body is also increasingly difficult for us, as the discovery and wide use of the diagnosis ADD attests. Our forms of entertainment are almost all based on movement, much of it violent, giving the sordid impression that violent or seductive movements are signs of strength or attractiveness. Stillness of the eyes is also becoming beyond our reach, with television popping up in every conceivable location, as it pushes us to take in more images and information than we can possibly process.

Not only are we unable to still our own bodies and minds, we have lost the sensitivity to the disturbance our own noise makes in others' lives. Chattering in church at pre- and postlude is acceptable behavior despite its rudeness. Audiences have to be told not to open candy wrappers or take flash photos during performances, fans have to be controlled at sporting events, not to speak of disturbingly raucous customers in public places. In short, stillness is a vanishing art. Cultivating it, especially publicly, is a counter-cultural value that is now an act of social protest. I am a constant source of embarrassment to family and friends when I walk into a store or restaurant and ask the first employee who approaches me to turn down the music. I was recently waiting in a hospital emergency room. Some inane soap opera was babbling on the telly. No one seemed to be watching. I asked if anyone would mind if I turned it off. One shocked man objected that the telly was covering his conversation. Apparently it never occurred to him that he could talk softly enough to keep his conversation private himself.

Another reason it is difficult for us to be still is that we are not really sympathetic to the Psalmist's plea. He suggests that we know God better in stillness than in movement and sound. We rather think that we know God in song, music, and dance. Psalm 150 urges us to praise God with timbrel and harp, and Ephesians urges us to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord in our hearts. We use all the resources of our technological age to aid us, too: video screens, amplifiers to make it louder, electronic instruments, and so forth, to lure a crossover audience into church without challenging their musical taste—a kind of switch without having to switch.

How are we to make sense of these two seemingly contradictory counsels from Scripture, one to be still and one to make a joyful noise unto the Lord? From the perspective of our spiritual growth, perhaps we can think of praising God that we do in song and movement as somewhat different from the counsel of the Psalmist to know God through stillness. I will leave to you the tantalizing question of whether one should know God before one praises him, or whether in praising him we come to know him.

If the Psalmist is correct that we know God through stillness, and we praise him through song and dance, we still need to inquire what it means to know him. Now, I want you to consider me an old lady—old in the sense that I was raised in a time when homework was done in quiet. I think, in retrospect that may have been a mistake, because I still need quiet to study, think, and write, while others seem more adaptable to contemporary culture. I was raised to concentrate on what I was doing and to do things one at a time, so that I could devote myself fully to each task at hand. Perhaps to some of you, this sounds quaint. Yet, if this psalmist is worth listening to, being still enough to concentrate on one thing at a time is key to knowing God. At least we might say that

God should beat out the competitors for our attention. Multitasking while trying to know God, well, it seems a little insulting to God.

I did my homework without television, radio, or talking because I was trying to absorb what I was learning. My parents wanted the history, chemistry, and Spanish to go into me and stay there, and not be pushed out by other things. Perhaps, knowing God is in some degree like knowing other things. We want not only information about God, the way we know the degrees of an isosceles triangle, we want to know God the way we speak a language or play an instrument or a sport that makes us who we are. We want God to make us who we are.

God deserves our full attention, and that requires weaning ourselves away from the distractions, both internal and external, that always beckon. If we follow this line of thought, we conclude that the art of stillness is not necessarily motionless, but centers on the art of focusing that enskills us for knowing about the world as well as about knowing God. Knowing God then, is not discontinuous from knowing other things. It is a skill that at least requires concentration, and the ability to notice: [learning Greek].

Job says, "As for me, I would seek God, and to him I would commit my cause" (5:8). Seeking God is a craving to know, and we in the West have craved to know God, to have the vision of God, even though we know we can never have this fully in this life. That may be true of other things, too. Suppose one wanted to know the solar system, or human psychology, or the right way to live. One can work at these things all one's life, even make progress, even be thrilled by the steps one takes along the way, but never be confident that one has reached one's goal. I think that knowing God is like that. The deeper one goes, the larger and stronger the soul becomes, but asymptotically, always approaching, but never arriving at the goal.

In thinking about knowing, of which knowing God is a part, I think that there is better knowing and worse knowing. The better the knowing the closer we get to clear understanding; the worse the knowledge, the further we are from clear understanding. Furthermore, knowledge may be strong in one sense, but weak in another, depending on how skilled the knower is. Distinguishing between strong and weak knowledge is an art that requires further skills. I, for example, lack the skills to judge what scientists tell us about the depletion of the ozone layer, the melting of the polar ice caps, and the greenhouse effect. I am helpless to decide what to believe from what I read in the press and must trust some authorities in this matter, although I often lack even sufficient knowledge to know whom to trust. I cannot make an educated guess for I am unskilled in these matters.

Good knowledge then, is gotten by a well-skilled self, or what in Christian language we might call a virtuous soul, bad knowledge is gotten by a poorly skilled self, or in Christian language, a vicious soul. The God-seeker must have good skills of knowing and employ them carefully and consistently in order to approach the desired result. Good skills of knowing include the ability to allow the data one is looking at to speak in its own terms. That is, one must have respect for the subject matter itself, not merely as an extension of ourselves. Further, one must be prepared to let go of one's hypothesis when it does not work. That is, the seeker must be humble and not be persuaded that she or he has the answer before the inquiry is completed. Third, the seeker must be willing to stay with a problem until a possible solution emerges, rather than closing off resolution prematurely

in frustration if it is not going well. That is, the seeker needs the virtue of patience. Knowing well requires a respectful, humble, patient person who works carefully and consistently. In other words, good knowledge requires strength of soul. It does not come easily.

That good knowledge requires spiritual strength suggests that it is grounded in the virtues, and the virtues, like athletic skills, must be actively cultivated by proper exercise under someone further along the path of virtue, a spiritual coach. Good knowledge, then, requires powers of the soul that create a pattern of life that may be expected in science or mechanics, yet carries over to friendship, love, and politics. They make the difference between good friendship, good love, and good politics, and bad friendship, bad love, and bad politics. That is, the virtues are trustworthy companions that make for a good life, and knowing God well, Christians believe, is central to the goodness of that life. If good knowledge brings good understanding more nearly, approaching truth, and bad knowledge produces bad understanding more widely, approaching falsehood, then we can say that a good or virtuous life is truer than a bad or (to use an old word) vicious life. On these terms, truth and falsehood are not absolute but relative notions that carry moral connotations. What we know shapes us as moral beings, and who we are as moral beings shapes the knowledge we gain.

ON DISCERNING WHAT TO KNOW WELL

From the Psalmist's admonition to stillness, we have seen that we need to cultivate certain skills in order to know anything well, but especially God. We have called these skills, virtues, or, we might say, graces in the classical sense. On the mundane level, they are strengths of the soul that guide and improve daily functioning and smooth social interaction. These include patience, refraining from overreacting or reacting petulantly or exuberantly without warrant, or rushing past important signs or data. They also include submission, sitting quietly and without undue anxiety before a problem until a prudent strategy for dealing with it emerges. Another skill or virtue is endurance, the ability to see a difficult project through to completion without giving up in frustration, embarrassment, or anger. The ability to be flexible and follow hints that lead away from results that would flatter the seeker is also a great strength. These skills are powers of the soul that increase, not simply intellectual acumen, but also spiritual maturity. They involve more than cognition or ratiocination. They enhance moral beauty.

The virtues, that are gifts of divine grace, enable us to know well and in knowing well we may come to know the wisdom, beauty, and goodness that Christians understand to be divine attributes that enable us to know God intimately.

Figuring out the skills needed to know well is one step. Next, we need to ask what it is best to apply those skills to. Many things call for attention and choices must be made. The Psalmist admonishes us to know God. The Oracle of Apollon at Delphi admonished the Greeks to self-knowledge. Clement of Alexandria and long after him, John Calvin, both noted that it does not much matter where one begins in seeking knowledge of self and of God. The two sorts of knowledge are finally inseparable.

ON SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The Greek philosophical tradition, the Christian theological tradition, and the modern

psychological tradition have all maintained that good self-knowledge is most advantageous. Since knowing is self-involving, or rather soul-involving, the skills or virtues that develop the soul stimulate soul-reflection. Sometimes trial and error help one to discern which skills are weak or lacking, or strong and functioning well. Sometimes failure or criticism enables us to face aspects of our personality that impede or counter the maturation of the soul. Sometimes a hero, model, or mentor contrasts with us until we strain to grow in the hero's direction. Love is an even stronger stimulus for soul-examination.

Cultivating one's soul is an art. It is difficult to do well alone because our defense mechanisms often tempt us to blame someone or something else and to avoid facing our own limits. Human powers of denial are tremendous. Friends may offer false encouragement or simple flattery that is counter-productive. Without an honest alter we have no standard against which to measure our growth or ourselves. Furthermore, self-knowledge, as Socrates learned, is often painful and we resist true friends who want to help us find it, often preferring flatterers instead. Socrates and Jesus tried to point out things to people, things about themselves, and were executed for their pains. Some people flatter themselves in thinking that they want self-knowledge. For these and other reasons, the Christian spiritual traditions have always held that the only master guide to a happy or a worthwhile life is God. Only God is the standard and the teacher of happiness.

Yet this is not the most important reason seekers turn to God in order to understand themselves better. Self-examination can go only so far, and sometimes not very far. The frailty of the mind, over which modern epistemology stumbled, is matched by frailty of the spirit. The spiritual power gained from disciplining the affections and one's powers of attention may be more glimpsed than realized. What I have called learning to know well, or training the soul may readily founder because we are spiritually weak, resist seeing ourselves in a fresh light, and finally admit that we cannot help ourselves.

HEALING THE SOUL BY KNOWING THE BEAUTY OF GOD

I have been arguing that the virtues help us see and know qualities of God. Experiencing this knowing both brings us joy on its own account, and forms us spiritually by bending and shaping us into certain patterns of seeing, doing, and thinking. Christianity has always been in the business of both teaching us to enjoy God in this life, and forming us for that enjoyment, for our flourishing and for the flourishing of society, that it may glorify God. I would like to illustrate this point with two examples from the spiritual literature, one from Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth and one from Teresa of Avila in the sixteenth century.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

In the early Middle Ages Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), abbess at the monastery of Rupertsberg, in the Rhineland, wrote the first opera or musical drama in the West. It is called the *Ordo Virtutum*, the rite of the virtues. Her opera dramatizes the twin parables in Luke 15 of the lost coin and the prodigal son, in four acts. It tells the Christian account of the story of the soul, created in perfect innocence, then seduced away from its true nature into sin by the Devil, and finally brought back to God. The action takes place before the patriarchs and prophets. They see the virtues who tell them that they consti-

tute the limbs of the incarnate word of God. That is, Scripture constitutes the tree of life, the Old Testament being the roots and trunk, the body of Christ being its flowers.

Act 1 opens with unhappy souls regretting their sins; they have rejected their identity as daughters of the King. A happy soul contrasts with these miserable ones. She calls upon the virtues that she wears like a shining garment. The virtues agree to fight for the unhappy souls to bring them back to their place as daughters of the King.

At this point, the knowledge of God urges the miserable soul to tend to her body and to resist temptation, but, at the urging of the Devil, she gives herself to him. The Virtues—like the chorus of an ancient Greek drama—mourn the soul's loss of innocence. The Devil seduces her with offers of "everything" and when Humility intervenes to try to stop the seduction, the Devil mocks her. Humility, however, a warrior for God, takes over, for she is queen of the virtues.

Act 2: Humility's warriors gather round and introduce themselves: Love (*caritas*) Fear of God, Obedience, Faith, Hope, Chastity, Innocence, Contempt of worldly goods, Discipline, Modesty, Mercy, Victory, Discretion, Patience, all stand firm in rebutting the Devil's taunts.

Act 3: The weak soul has fled from the beautiful virtues who mourn her loss. She too mourns her weakness. They, however, lovingly invite her to come back to them, with the promise that "God will support you." The penitent is intimidated and so they cajole her, assuring her of divine aid. "Now I need you to hold me up," she says, "for my wounds are festering, where the ancient serpent has poisoned me." She returns to the virtues and they urge her to put on the armor of light. She takes refuge in humility. The virtues encircle her and lift her up to bring her back to God, "with all her scars, for the sake of Christ's wounds." They promise not to desert her, saying that the whole host of heaven will rejoice over her. The warrior virtues tie up the Devil, with Victory leading. They rejoice singing, "Praise be to Christ, King of angels." Humility embraces the penitent soul and the virtues sing a hymn to the sweetness that God, the great healer, has given back to the soul.

Act 4: The Devil, discovering the betrayal of his catch, is furious and threatens revenge. However, the penitent soul, now armed with the virtues, vows to fight him. There follows a short confrontation between Chastity and the Devil. After all, Hildegard was writing her drama for young girls in her monastery. Chastity remains unmoved by the Devil's taunts, and the curtain falls to the singing of a hymn to God's great plan (the Incarnation) that destroyed hell's poison so that sinners now "shine in paradisaal goodness."

The *Ordo Virtutum* is a psychological examination of moral struggle between the wisdom of God in which the soul is created and the temptation to sin. The forces that fight for God are the Scriptures, depicted as the patriarchs, the prophets, and the wounds of Christ, and the virtues, who are "a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy" (Prov 3:18).

The virtues symbolize psychological strength and spiritual power that bring lightness to the soul. For Hildegard, the virtues are the arms and legs of Christ. When they become the soul, they enable her to know and understand the Creator; she moves from Christ to God the Father, "the kiss of the King." The repeated hope of being led, carried, or lifted to the King represents the medieval longing for the vision of God that I mentioned earlier.

Repentance and amendment of life enable one to see God even in this life. The virtues themselves dwell with God in heaven. By accepting their help, the soul joins them. In psychological terms, we would say that they are internalized. In theological language, we would say that the virtues lift us to God. As Discipline puts it in her speech, "I always gaze upon the King of kings and it is my highest honor to embrace Him."

Some will object to Hildegard's opera because it is not the brute fact of Christ's death but the virtues disclosed in his body that are taken up into the life of the believer bringing her joy and goodness. They bring us saving health. In pondering this objection it is, I think, important to keep in mind that Hildegard wrote before salvation was associated exclusively with the death of Christ in the West. It is noteworthy that she was born in 1098, the very year that Anselm of Canterbury wrote that *Cur Deus Homo* that eventually established the death of Christ as the crux of salvation in the West, but of course, it did not triumph in so short a time.

Yet further, if the purpose of theology is to help people know, love, and enjoy God better, as I believe it is, then Hildegard is on the right track. For it is not only the death of Christ that helps us in this way, but also his birth and resurrection and ascension and so forth, just as the second article of the Creed puts it. And, we might add impishly, not only the second Person of the Trinity, but the first and third also.

Hildegard's is a different path to God from many popular today, because it is about transformation of character, rather than confession of faith. The one who is steeped in the knowledge of the patriarchs and prophets and embraced by the incarnate Christ is able to embrace the Father.

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

The Doctor of the Church I want to consider next is another brilliant Christian psychologist-theologian in the tradition of St. Augustine, who led the way to self-knowledge through knowing God, and knowing God through grappling with one's own soul. St. Teresa of Avila's masterpiece, *The Interior Castle*, is an exploration of the soul that is a pilgrimage into intimacy with God. Teresa (1515-82), was a leader of the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Catholic Reformation had a different coloring than the Protestant Reformation had. It renewed rather than reformed the church. Teresa renovated her own order of the Discalced (unshod) Carmelites. Her writings fell into the hands of the Inquisition, which was most virulent in Spain. She was not imprisoned or executed, but was forced to burn some of her library.

Like Hildegard before her, Teresa wrote for the sisters in one of the many convents she founded at the order of her confessor. He realized that a woman would be better equipped to help women with their spiritual concerns than a man would be. Teresa, however, turned out to know more than simply women's psychology.

Teresa takes us on a journey of spiritual growth through self-examination and self-knowledge. She pictures the soul as a brilliantly cut diamond or clear crystal. God dwells at the very center, which is filled with light. The first hurdle that the seeker must overcome is how to get in the door of the castle. He or she begins by being locked in self-ignorance, in darkness. The exterior of the castle is ugly, and the grounds are covered with squishy, slithery animals: one's financial portfolio and pension plan, one's promotion

schedule, and so on. As long as these completely occupy one's attention, one is locked out of the diamond castle. Prayer is the way in. I would say that it is a miracle of God's grace that anyone ever wants to be let in the door to self-knowledge.

The way to God is through seven sets of labyrinthine apartments inside the castle. Help comes from both vocal and mental prayer and from the guidance of a (good) spiritual director. The first three apartments focus on what we can do to attend to our life with God. This is as far as most people get. Apartments four through seven pertain to the mystical life that concerns the actions of God, which she calls the favors of God toward some individuals. They are concerned with handling special visions and illuminations that come directly from God, and with preparation for mystical union with God.

Since many of us are not recipients of such divine favors, I will note what St. Teresa has to say to us. The goal of examining one's inner life, through the first three apartments of the soul, is "to help us see the perfect goodness and mercy of God who comes to love such foul-smelling worms" as we (36). The diamond castle is beautiful because God made it so, but without genuine self-knowledge it is impossible to see the great disparity between the beauty of God's intention for us and the misery of sin in which we wallow. Those who practice prayer become more open to invitations of Christ's grace, and they seek external means to press forward: good books, sermons, wholesome friendships, and trials that enable us to see how difficult it is to battle temptation. Perseverance becomes the most important tool at this stage.

Those who stay with it become what Teresa calls good Christians who dwell in the third apartment. They are good religious citizens. They are regular church attenders and good givers. They are modest and well-spoken. They long not to offend God, but are still tempted by wealth and honor. As for myself, I am still struggling to settle into the third apartment, although I have had glimpses of what lies beyond.

Those who press forward to know God better undertake the inward journey in earnest. Most people, I suspect, do not receive the divine favors that Teresa speaks of to go that far, for it is fraught with spiritual danger even as it lures thirsty souls. Sometimes I pride myself on thinking that I am a thirsty soul, but then I remember that I want to leave a comfortable inheritance for my children, and in truth, I do want to attract students to my classes. So, I am forever consigned to apartment three.

Teresian spirituality is based on healing knowledge and truth: the truth about God and us. She wants us to know the dignity of our true nature that is the image and likeness of God, which we deface. St. Teresa wants us to grow in self-knowledge so that we see the blessings that God has granted us, and rejoice. This joy strengthens the intellect and prepares the soul to release its self-destructive habits and unnecessary attachments. Difficult choices will have to be made about entertainment, the use of money, and the use of time, for example.

Understanding self and God better forms one in humility, charity, and the practice of discretion. Patient perseverance with oneself is perhaps the most important skill needed at this time, for failure can be so disheartening. Keeping the image of God's mercy and help constantly in view is the only way forward, for, without trust in the mercy of God, it is impossible to desire to conform to God's will.

For Teresa, as for many Christian theologians, growth in knowing and loving God is

therapeutic in the sense that skills and insights that one gains along the way renovate the self. Knowing God is also moving courageously and humbly into the truth about oneself, without being stopped by despair. Empowered by the compelling beauty of what Teresa calls divine favors, one's wisdom deepens and one's personality smoothes out. The deeper our knowledge of God, the less untoward things afflict our desires. The greater our attachment to God, the weaker our destructive attachments become. At the more basic levels of the interior journey, the process is somewhat like the Police Athletic League: Playing basketball under the eyes of mature adults, uses time constructively that unsupervised youngsters might otherwise use badly. At the more advanced levels of the interior journey, noble activity and noble thoughts ennoble the soul. To put a more spiritual spin on it, with luck, or God's grace, the children will grow in wisdom by both watching and doing.

The PAL supporters rely on their volunteers and paid staff. Christians, too, acknowledge the value of constructive activity and human support, but insist that God is the only reliable center toward which the self ultimately can be fruitfully oriented. That is why Christians have insisted on the eternity and perfection of God. Moreover, if God truly dwells at the inner core of the self, as St. Augustine of Hippo proposed, then one always has a way to saving knowledge that restores spiritual health.

CONCLUSION

Being still in order to know God turns out to be a lot of work. Contrary to the popular misunderstanding that being still is doing nothing, being still is central to self-knowledge and I have argued, self-knowledge is central to knowing God that we may see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day.

NOTES

Avila, T. o. (1979). *The Interior Castle*. New York, Paulist Press.