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FAITH THE GOOD WORD

Afraid of silent prayer? You're not alone.

Terrance Klein

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A Reflection for the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Times

Readings: *Deuteronomy 6:2-6 Hebrews 7:23-28 Mark 12:28b-34*

Shortly before Alfred Hitchcock's death in 1980, Jesuit Father Thomas Sullivan began visiting the legendary director at his home on Bellagio Road in Bel Air, Calif. Jesuit educated, Hitchcock had never been anything but Catholic, yet like many others, that did not translate into regular attendance at Mass.

Sometimes Father Sullivan was accompanied by a younger Jesuit, Mark Henninger. In Edward White's *The Twelve Lives of Alfred Hitchcock: An Anatomy of the Master of Suspense* (2021), Father Henninger recalls celebrating a Mass at Hitchcock's home:

On Henninger's first visit with Sullivan, they found Hitchcock dressed in black pajamas, asleep in a living room chair. Fatigue, old age, and ill-health hadn't eradicated his sense of humor. "Hitch," Sullivan said as Hitchcock came to, "this is Mark Henninger, a young priest from Cleveland." Looking up, a sleepy Hitchcock replied, "Cleveland? Disgraceful!" During Mass, it became apparent that the old ways of his religion hadn't left him, either; he gave his responses in Latin as he would have done as a boy, rather than in English as had been the practice since Vatican II.

What was happening during Hitchcock's last encounters with the Catholic Church? Was he, like so many English intellectuals and artists of his day, voicing a deathbed disdain for the banality of the new liturgy? Or was he, a dying and distracted man, unintentionally falling back into the familiar?

There is a third possibility. Perhaps using the Latin of his boyhood was an expression of Hitchcock's fear. Maybe it was a manifestation of the human desire to set God at a distance, to make of God something manageable and familiar.

Contemplative prayer is often paired with a frightening realization: Maybe there is no God!

While we live, faith is always a struggle. It is not something accomplished once and for all. Instead, we must repeatedly choose to believe. This struggle extends, as it perhaps did with Hitchcock, into prayer itself. Many people avoid what our tradition calls contemplation, setting aside verbal prayers to pause, trying simply to be aware of God's presence. They do this because such prayer is often paired with a frightening realization: Maybe there is no God!

Many people recite prayers, aloud or quietly, and never fall silent, even for a moment, trying to be aware of God's presence. But in such a moment, if we receive what St. Ignatius Loyola would call a "supernatural consolation," we know that God exists. We are conscious that we are in the presence of God and that God is aware of us.

Yet even in that moment, even with that consolation, we still have a need for faith. We are simultaneously aware of God yet still able to doubt God's existence. It is a bit like Wendy and the boys flying under the tutelage of Peter Pan. Wonderful! Unless we look down, and we are always tempted to do just that. The knowledge that we have of God is akin to that of knowing that someone loves us. Our divided human nature can know the truth and still be beset with doubts.

To pause for a moment and to let God be God is like every other risk that we run in loving another.

To pause for a moment and to let God be God is like every other risk that we run in loving another. We do not know that the love will always be returned, at least not in a way that we can recognize. Yet this is what it means to love God. God begins where our humanity comes up short. Again, love is the ruling measure. You must run the risk of making a fool of yourself as you freely acknowledge your desire, your hope, your fear.

Small wonder that we prefer to stay with the familiar. But if there is one thing God surely is not, it is familiar. Love cannot be familiar. The meaning of love is encountering someone who is not who we are. Someone for whom we long. Someone we desire desperately enough to risk disappointment.

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Many of us, much of the time, avoid contemplative prayer because we are more afraid of God's non-existence than we are sure that we will experience God's presence. And we can never be sure. True experiences of God always come to us as a freely given gift. Indeed, if we could summon them at will, St. John of the Cross suggests that we should then be wary of bewitching ourselves, mistaking something that we may have induced for the actual grace of God.

Only a God who is free to stand aloof, at least as we cognitively and emotionally experience this God, is a true God, one who is other than we are. We are not God. Even God's favors to us in prayer are not God. Indeed, we use the word "grace" to indicate real contact with God, without suggesting that we have grasped God.

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!

Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your strength (Dt 6:4-5).

The younger priest, Father Henninger remembers many details of that Mass in Alfred Hitchcock's home. "But the most remarkable sight was that after receiving communion, he silently cried, tears rolling down his huge cheeks." Love does not presume, though it does open itself to risk.



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