

# ACKNOWLEDGE GOD ABOVE ALL ELSE

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**Gregory of Nazianzus** [329-390] was a brilliant theologian and Archbishop of Constantinople. Gregory made a significant impact on the shape of Trinitarian theology. One magnificent passage in his *Oration 14* is the springboard

for this month's writing.

*What benefactor has enabled you to look out upon the beauty of the sky, the sun in its course, the circle of the moon, the countless number of stars, with the harmony and order that are theirs, like the music of a harp? Who has blessed you with rain, with the art of husbandry, with different kinds of food, with the arts, with houses, with laws, with states, with a life of humanity and culture, with friendship and the easy familiarity of kinship?*

Gregory wrote extensively and quite eloquently which is why he was proclaimed one of the Doctors of the Church. The scope of this one paragraph is rather cosmic in that it captures everyday parts of human life, especially the ways we relate to other human beings. The question format also intrigues me a great deal because it invites the reader to respond to the entire universe. And as people of faith, how DO we respond to the life of God around and within us? It immediately calls to mind Psalm 8: *When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place, who are we that you are mindful of us?*

We stand before God every single day and are given the choice to acknowledge the Holy One or to breeze through time virtually blind to divine presence. I have always respected the writing of Joseph Pieper. In his notable work *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, he states that leisure is an attitude of contemplative celebration that implies non-activity, silence and inward calm. To celebrate anything is to enter fully into the event, day or moment, to be aware of the person, object or occasion before us. And

there is no purpose to leisure activities other than to appreciate the person or object or event itself. We observe, revel in and appreciate art or nature simply because they are beautiful. That beauty draws us closer to God is one of the benefits of allowing ourselves to make time for leisure. True leisure is not a waste of time. Leisure is what Gregory alluded to: the generosity of God is constantly around us and we allow ourselves to become aware of the gifts given us.

Here's an example for you. One day this February I had to drive to the northwest part of Chicago on the Kennedy expressway. It was Sunday midafternoon and we were blessed with a snow storm. Now, in bumper to bumper traffic it's quite normal to get upset and impatient. However, I chose to make the best of the drive. I left early because the normally twenty minute trip took seventy five. I chose to drive safely, be aware of driving styles, see how snow flakes collected on the hood and windshield and thank God for urban landscapes. Myriad opportunities present themselves to us all day long in which we can ponder the works of God.

Gregory's oration continues: *Is it not God who asks you now in your turn to show yourself generous above all other creatures and for the sake of all other creatures? Because we have received so many wonderful gifts from God, will we not be ashamed to refuse God this one thing only: our generosity? As God gives to us so generously, we are called to give to others from that abundance. How?*

It is Lent. Prayer. Fasting. Alms giving. The sole purpose of this season is to rid ourselves of anything and everything that keeps us from being closer to God. The first Sunday of Lent always recalls Jesus' three temptations he experienced before his ministry. The Synoptics want us to understand that this is how Jesus remained sinless. He was constantly aware of the presence of the Father in his life and ministry; his response was pure obedience and self-giving. Whether in a crowd or in silent prayer Jesus consistently sought to be aware of God's presence and gave of himself through acts of healing, preaching and sacrifice. He gives us a pattern for our own Lenten living and how we celebrate the ever present, living God among us.

If you're a new parent hold your infant and consider the fact this child is a miraculous result of you and your spouse's love and the very creative power of God. Look at those teeny fingernails, pure skin and searching eyes. Listen to various sounds that express hunger, peace and a wet diaper. Stand in awe of our Creator.

One of the benefits I love of living in the heart of a major city is people watching. I can



spend hours simply looking at and being mystified by the unlimited variety of human beings. Sure, there are similarities but ponder the fact that there are **7,400,000,000+** people on Mother Earth and no two are absolutely identical. How can we not marvel at that? And for believers, how can that fact not help fully take in what God said to Abraham: *And I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.* [Gen. 26:4] Sometimes I let my mind wonder what people might have for dinner (if anything) that night, where they work, why they dress that way, are they happy or ill or depressed or lost...God is present in each and every person and so that variety of creatures is an endless supply for marveling at the wonders of God's creativity. *What benefactor has blessed you with a life of humanity and culture, with friendship and the easy familiarity of kinship?*

I love flowers because of their endless variety. How many petals does a rose have? Lilies and tulips have six anthers around the stigma while a lotus flower has many. Colors, shapes, seasonal or constant fertilization, temperature and light sensitive, parasites and insect eaters, edible and poisonous leaves,



healing petals... remarkable, aren't they? All gifts from God. St. Francis wrote this in *Rule of 1221*:

*Therefore, let nothing hinder us,  
nothing separate us, nothing come between us.  
Wherever we are, in every place, at every hour,  
at every time of the day,  
let all of us truly and humbly believe,  
hold in our heart and love, honor, adore, serve,  
praise and bless, glorify and exalt,  
magnify and give thanks  
to the Most High and Supreme Eternal God,  
Trinity and Unity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
Creator of all, Savior of all who believe  
and hope in Him and love Him,  
Who, without beginning and end, is  
unchangeable, invisible, incomprehensible,  
unfathomable, blessed, praiseworthy, glorious,  
exalted, sublime, Most High, gentle, lovable,  
delightful, and totally desirable  
above all else forever. Amen.*

The man found it difficult to contain himself when describing the presence of God, didn't he? And mind you, this is what he expects of his followers too! So how can you and I pay close attention to God all day long? There is such a thing as common sense. For example, if a surgeon is replacing a heart or major organ, that demands intense concentration. But during surgery there are moments (I asked a cardiologist friend) when the surgeon can appeal to God for guidance and stability interiorly. Or if one is giving a chemical engineering lecture, the demands of teaching require clarity of content; perhaps little pauses can contain prayer. And those don't have to be verbal. A preschool teacher watching a child make the connection between sounds and letters can just watch the dazzling human brain do its interconnected activity with awe before our Creator. Just because a person of faith is not in a church doesn't mean she or he cannot be aware of God's presence. Stand before Grand Canyon and you'll *love Him who is incomprehensible, unfathomable, glorious and sublime.* A homily of depth, power and sensitivity can move one closer to God, and so can everyday objects that are the results of human ingenuity.



**Transfiguration Church** is on Lake Onega in Republic of Karelia, Russia. The 1714 structure itself has 22 domes and constructed with thousands of pine logs and no nails. Legend has it that the builder used one axe for the entire building, which he threw into the lake with the words “there will never be

another to match this church.” I share this with you as an example of one human who envisioned a proper dwelling for the Holy One and brought his vision into reality through pure ingenuity, will power and a love for God. This is the 120 foot tall “king” of 80 buildings on Kizhi Island. Thousands have vicariously been moved by this artist’s vision and that vision, through the eyes of faith, could only have come from God.

Back to Gregory’s *Oration 14* and Lent. Is it really possible to be cognizant of God all day long? I do believe it is possible, and not just because I’m a friar or that I’m ordained. The human heart inherently searches for something or someone greater than our created world. Every religion charts a path of searching, whether it’s to find Buddha, God, Nirvana or other deities, a journey of faith going far beyond human nature that is rooted in experience.

We Christians are rooted in the experience of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. Paul summed it up in Romans 10: *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* The 40 Days of Lent are our annual opportunity to allow God’s grace to change what is wicked into that which is holy. We are called to purify our lives not just by living without something but by DOING. That can be anything from volunteering at the House of Mary and Joseph shelter we operate here in the city to tithing to seriously seeking help to

heal a broken marriage. Transformation is the object of Lent and that happens in the spiritual life when we allow God to permeate the most fundamental parts of our lives and recreate them. Our God who is *gentle, lovable, delightful, and desirable above all else* raises us from one plateau of living to another level of holiness – **if** we only allow that amazing grace and limitless mercy into our hearts.

Listen to our Shepherd: *God’s mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37:1-14). ... Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.* - Message of Pope Francis on Easter, March 31, 2013.

It takes effort to allow ourselves to become more aware of God in the course of a normal day. That inner search for someone *completely other* is always active within us and it doesn’t take a prayer book, ritual or anything other than our heart to let God enter daily life. A simple “good morning, Lord, thanks for another day of life” can put the whole day in God’s hands. *Keep me safe, O God, for all my hope is in you* or any line from the psalms takes all of five seconds but can immediately place one in the Presence. Experiment, dig for passages or a short prayer that fits YOU and YOUR LIFE, take a minute away from the computer screen to simply say inside: “I can’t do this alone, God.” Express gratitude when you encounter something of great beauty. See the face of Jesus in that woman begging by the L stop. Pray for refugees as you watch the news or hear a siren through the streets. Let the Lord enter.

We pray for you, our benefactors, every single day in our community prayer and at every one of the 41 Masses we celebrate each week because your kindness, generosity and prayers allow us to continue our ministries here at St. Peter’s. May God take you to Himself and bring you new life at Easter and always.

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