

The One Who is Present in Everything

A Memoir by Sister Clara Marie



“God is Always Available. To Everybody.”

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God “Nagging” Us

First of all, I do not hear voices. Neither do I hear words. Periodically, God will give His presence, a known and felt sense of His presence to us. And that is true of every human being, every human being. Periodically, we sense His presence. And with regard to what He would like in a particular situation, He has a great way of insisting on certain things just by impulses, your own interior impulses. He works on them, I think. He intensifies them. He makes you know what you what should do, like conscience; you know you should do something or not do it. And that can be intensified. He doesn't have to have a felt presence. He is present to us always in all situations. I definitely think God is in that. He is here all the time. He is in your voice speaking to me. He is in this beautiful flower telling me how lovely things are. All the time, He is here.

Did I know there was God? Yes, indeed I knew it. Yes, I had a strong sense of God at various times during high school. I actually didn't want to be a nun, so it was kind of a case of “I had to do it.” I had to do it to get any peace of mind. He pesters. That was my experience of it. He pesters. He keeps nagging. At least He kept nagging me. I grew up in a good Catholic family in Minnesota, a great place! Beautiful Minnesota! I never spoke to my teachers about God's pestering. It's nagging and you try to put it out of your mind. At least I put it out of my mind. I got out of high school and went to college. After graduation, I said, “Ok, I'm sick of this. I'll enter.”

After my novitiate, God stopped nagging and gave me the gift of a felt presence of Himself. It made me want to be with Him. I knew I didn't want to join the sisterhood before, but when I did, it was fine. My first vows were in 1950. With regard to your activity as a sister, you do what you're told. So I did. I taught in the South and the Midwest. There is a place for faith in this, and sometimes there is no feeling. But there is faith. You know that God is there. Now that's different from feeling His presence, but you know He's there. In your home, you know your mother is in the next room, darning or whatever she's doing, and your dad is reading the paper. You know it. You do not see them. You do not feel their presence. You know that they are close.

Relationship with God

My relationship has changed, of course. Relationships don't stay static. It doesn't matter if it's between two human beings or between you and God. Never static.

Hopefully, mine has grown deeper. He puts up with me, let's put it like that. He accepts me and puts up with me. And I'm delighted to have Him. I can't say I'm always aware of Him, but I'm glad to have Him with me. I consider Him "the other". How would I explain that? Someone I want with me who is necessary to me. Not necessary that I feel His presence but that I know it. I'd be lost without it and this life would be meaningless. He is within me, but I would not say He is a part of me. It's more like vis-à-vis, face to face. Even when I can't perceive His presence, I know He's there. I know He's with me.

I think you have to make time for God. I don't know when or where. I don't want to say, "Don't use your phone." But you have to make time for God, even fifteen minutes a day. There has to be time, leisure in a sense, to speak with Him. And attention. Your attention has to go there. That's where prayer comes in.

Children are marvelously open. High school people can be open in marvelous ways. They don't always tell you about it, but they can be marvelously open at different times. College people can do the very same thing. So, no, I don't think there is any one time when someone is most receptive to God. As long as they remain available to God and open.

I can't imagine anyone joining a church if they haven't already encountered God. I think people are often searching when they enter a church. And that search is for God. I think that has to be first.

We have found God if we are trying to develop our relationship with Him. We don't feel Him. That's a different thing. And that is not necessarily a reward. That is, frequently, simply a help. We are weak creatures, at least I am, and we need help periodically. I think God is always available. This is what is so amazing. To everybody, to every human being. Where is your attention? That'll do it.

Divine Indwelling

How has He manifested Himself in my life? Have you ever heard of the divine indwelling? God, in a very special way, is within us and available to us within. You already know, if you're a Christian, that God is everywhere. Everywhere includes here, doesn't it. And it includes everything around us. God permeates everything. When He seems to be absent, He is not. He is present. On some occasions, I am permitted to have a felt sense of His presence. That's a gift. I don't earn it. It's a pure gift. Probably because I need it, who knows? You think of some of His closest friends, like Theresa of Calcutta. She didn't have that, the felt sense of God, for years and years and years. It's not a case of earning it ever, it's a gift. Maybe it's because people need it. Maybe I need it. She didn't have it for a long, long time. But she knew by faith that God was with her. And that is a definite presence, but you don't feel it.

Paying Attention to God

First of all, God is there. The problem is we have to avert to Him. We don't always put our attention to Him. The struggle is usually to stay focused on Him. Your attention needs to be there, and my attention gets called 90 million places. So when my attention is on other things, then I probably do not know, and I surely do not sense, God's presence. It's a matter of faith. You start working on the faith aspect, and you make acts of faith, you read the New Testament. And you pray to Him within. And your sense of faith will grow. And He may give you a sense of His presence, and He may not. If you address Him in the divine indwelling, your faith will increase.

It is a very quiet experience. When you sense His presence, it absorbs you. You attend to other things, but they don't have your full attention. Your attention is on Him.

How do you increase faith? You pray, even fifteen minutes a day. You practice kindness. You practice the Scriptures. You move and act as if whatever you think is true, is true. If we're working toward this particular understanding of God, then you make an effort to see God in other people. I don't mean seeing with the eyes, but of recognizing His presence. I don't care what condition they are in. God is there, somehow or other. And you make an act of faith that that is true. So it's faith. Once the initial gift is given,

that's something that you develop. I felt God was in my students, and I tried to serve Him in them.

I think God is free to give the sense of His presence to anybody. It may be that He gives some people a voice to hear, I don't know. I do know that He is available in faith to everybody. And my guess from what I've seen is that every single human being, at one time or another, experiences His presence. God is perfectly willing to be with you, but if you don't know how to receive Him, it's wasted. You have to open yourself. In other words, you make time for God, and give Him your attention. Then you visit with Him. I think a lot of people are distracted. If you're caring for a young child, there are times when you have no idea of anything else except to get that kid down and make him sleep. You're not concerned with God or anything else. You are focused on the task at hand. But some people, don't know if this is true but it's a theory anyway—today, with cell phones and all this stuff, it's almost as if we are constantly involved. We have no free times. It used to be that students would be out here walking alone. Not now. They are on their phones. And they're not even communicating with someone physically present. It makes you wonder: What is their sense of reality? I would wonder about their spiritual reality.

Looking For God

If someone comes to me for advice on finding God, I might ask: where they are looking and how they are looking? What makes you think you'll find it? If they know that God is present everywhere, there shouldn't be a problem. But you can't depend on their knowing that. There don't seem to be any basic understandings anymore. People don't take for granted that God is everywhere. I would think the first step is to realize that God is everywhere and that includes themselves; realize that God is within them in a special way and then start making contact.