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PRAYING SO AS TO SEE GOD'S GLORY INSIDE OF HUMANITY

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[Last in a four part Advent series on Prayer]

Familiarity breeds contempt. It also blocks the mystery of Christmas by breeding a view of the life that cannot see divinity within humanity.

Yet all of us are hopelessly prone to see most-everything in an over-familiar way, namely, in a way that sees little or nothing of the deep richness and divinity that is shimmering everywhere under the surface. G.K. Chesterton, reflecting on this, once declared that one of the deep secrets of life is to learn to look at things familiar until they look unfamiliar again. Alan Jones calls this a process of unlearning what's familiar.

Whatever the wording, the challenge is the same: We need to learn the secret of seeing the extraordinary inside of the ordinary, of seeing divinity shimmering inside of humanity, and of seeing haloes around familiar faces.

Thomas Merton, in perhaps his most-famous text, shares how he once had a quasi-mystical experience of this in the most ordinary of circumstances. He had been living in a Trappist monastery outside of Louisville, Kentucky, for nearly 20 years and one day needed to go into Louisville for a medical appointment. He was standing at the intersection of 4th and Walnut Streets, when suddenly the ordinary changed into the extraordinary. Everyone around him began to shimmer with a deep, divine radiance. They were all walking around, he wrote, "shining like the sun." And he adds: "Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."

This kind of vision, seeing the world as transfigured with haloes around familiar faces, is ultimately the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of the incarnation, and the mystery of God walking around in human flesh. Christmas is not so much a celebration of Jesus' birthday as it is a celebration of the continued birth of God into human flesh, the continuation of the divine making itself manifest in the ordinary; God, a helpless baby in a barn.

But to have this vision we need to pray. Prayer is our major safeguard against the familiarity that breeds contempt and is one of the few ways in which we can begin to see with the deeper eyes of the heart. Prayer is a lifting of our minds and hearts to God, but it is also the way, sometimes the only way, we can purify and deepen our vision. Merton's experience on the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville was very much predicated on years and years of prayer.

Christmas is only seen by the pure of heart or in those moments when we are pure of heart. But when it is seen it is glorious

John Shea, in an extraordinary Christmas-poem, invites us to keep our eyes open for the manifestation of the divine within the human. The invitation within Christmas is to see the sacred within our barns, the body of Christ on and around our kitchen tables, and haloes around familiar faces:

Even at Christmas, when haloes are pre-tested by focus groups for inclusion in mass-market campaigns, they are hard to see. ... Seeing haloes is more than a lucky sighting. It entails the advent skill of sustaining attention, the simple act, as [Annie] Dillard found out, of looking up.

This is how haloes are seen, by looking into largeness, by tucking smallness into the folds of infinity.

I do not know this by contemplating shimmering trees. Rather there was a woman, busy at Christmas table, and I looked up to catch a rim of radiance etching her face, to notice the curves of light sliding along her shape. She out-glowed the candles. ... When this happens, I do not get overly excited. I merely allow love to be renewed, for that is the mission of haloes, the reason they are given to us.

Nor do I try to freeze the frame. Haloes suffer time, even as they show us what is beyond time.

But when haloes fade, they do not abruptly vanish, abandoning us to the sorrow of lesser light.

They recede, as Gabriel departed Mary, leaving us pregnant.

Familiarity breeds contempt. That's an archetypal flaw within human nature. And this, perhaps more than anything else, prevents us from entering the mystery of Christmas, from seeing God's radiance shimmering under the surface of what's familiar to us.

Jesus once asked his disciples to join him in prayer and, as they prayed, he and everything around him was transfigured and began to glow with a divine radiance. He invites each of us into that particular prayer.