

WHO ART IN HEAVEN

A RETREAT BY R. H. J. STEUART, S.J.

WHO art in Heaven.' This is a puzzling expression. Where is Heaven, and how can God be fixed in Heaven or anywhere at all? In old days people really did think that there was a hard-and-fast place in the universe above us. They thought that the sky was a solid dome, a firmament, and that there was water above and below, and that the water poised above the dome of the sky was allowed to descend. They used the expressions of their day. It is the natural instinct in man to look up to God as if he were poised actually, physically above us.

When we talk of Heaven, the Church does not mean us to believe that God is enthroned in one particular place above. God is everywhere in a sense that cannot be described in terms of our experience. Some writer has said that the existence of God is like a circle: the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. Or take Christ in the Host: he is in it all, in each part; even if it is broken, you don't break Christ. He is not 'in' things in the sense that we are in them —'in' the chapel, for instance. God is everywhere, but men cannot be everywhere. Our being is a totally different being from God's being. We cannot imagine that state of being; we are not furnished with anything that enables us to understand it. Therefore the words 'in Heaven' refer to our relation with God. They imply that he is above; not locally, in measurement, but above us in his nature. Heaven is a state of existence where we shall see God as he is, where we shall be when 'the dawn breaks and the shadows flee away'.

So we think of God as above us, one who has to be looked up to; 'the raising of the mind and heart to God'. What is this raising up?

The Church teaches as of faith that God made this race of man with a double nature so that we can be raised up to know and see him, without, as it were, arguing from the senses. Our first parents had that, but they lost it. Man could never be simply pure human being again. He's had it and lost it and there's a defect in him.

God having once raised the human race to that state when man could see and commune with him, there was left a yearning towards him. We should all find, looking back, periods when we were utterly emptied; an almost physical void, which was our unfallen nature striving to get back to God. Can we then see God directly? Not of our own effort, no; when man lost the high level he lost that which went with it. But it is deep within us now that we are restored to the supernatural life. The faculty was there but it could not be used, it was like an engine without water in the boiler. And then, when through Christ the supernatural level was restored, it began to work again. In saints, contemplatives, the faculty of our first parents began to recover itself. Contemplation is really part of our equipment, so that anyone who achieves sanctity, a heroic level of life, must have this faculty of contemplation.

My point is, however humble and commonplace I may be, there is within me a yearning restlessness—a faculty for this contemplation. God, who has made me for himself, and endowed me, as head of created things, with free-will, is trying to raise me up to it with every means short of compelling that free-will. This faculty of entering into direct contact with God is buried within me, not extinct. There is within us, even if we don't know it, an urge towards God.

Supposing I am beginning to be dimly aware of that? What is my reaction? Prayer, the 'lifting up'. The inevitable result is to move me on. In life one finds interests, preoccupations, engrossments—but not for long. We find it all temporary, we can hold on to nothing. Our intellect tells us that, and it is part of my urge to prayer. So when our Lord said, 'Our Father who art in heaven', it was an indication that we should raise ourselves above all that. The whole content of Christ's teaching is directed to that one object, to teach us how to pray: to bring us into direct relationship with God.

That is what the Apostles meant when they said, 'Teach us to pray'. So people who look at prayer as one of the details of the spiritual life are missing the whole point. Rather, spiritual life is one of the details of prayer. That immense apparatus of truth, spiritual aid, the Church, exists in order

to put us into contact with God, to bring us to reality. We have to become sick of appearances and want reality, truth.

Children are so direct with God. They have an unspoiled, uncorrupted way of speaking to God. Our Lord was, for that reason, so furious at the thought of someone cutting that short, checking it, corrupting or bringing sin into the life of a child. 'It would be far better for him that a mill-stone were hung about his neck.' Why?—because children are so direct with God. Theirs is a sure, unperverted thrust towards the real which they accept quite naturally. Shades of the prison house begin to close in on the child, new interests, new ways of looking at things, instead of this beautiful unconscious urge towards God. Here were these children going straight to God and somebody has turned them aside.

So we want to speak to God in quite a simple way, and we must let that grow; it must be nourished. The first infantile expression won't suit us as we develop. Either we must improve upon that or it will die away, and there will be no chance of growth ever. That is why religious education is so necessary. We want to know more about God; there is no knowledge worth anything in comparison with him. However much you want to know other things, by comparison with him they are worthless. Didn't our Lord say we have got to be as little children, and that God seemed to hide himself from learned people? But all he meant, I think, was a method of approach. The children's knowledge added to the natural turning towards God has got to be developed according to our human nature, and that brings us to the other form of prayer we call meditation, which is the spiritual method of advancing in my knowledge of God by the use of my intellect.

His goodness—that he loves me—that I ought to, can, love him—what he demands of me: these are things which I must think out for myself. I need this knowledge of God but I don't know that I need it.

The action of evil spirits is to get us to be satisfied with other things. If we are, you come across withered, unsanctified lives, waiting for—what?

Prayer is the satisfaction of the most urgent instinct we

have even though we don't know it. 'Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.' I suppose the saints used to wonder how it is that anyone could not realise it.

Prayer is not a luxury. Prayer is not a pious practice. Prayer is not just one of the tools on our bench, so to speak. It is the expression of a right relationship with God. And the fact that very few are conscious of it is our fault. There is in our power this tremendous force of prayer.

The Holy Spirit prays within us. The Patron of prayer is the Holy Spirit. You can't say that prayer is out of your reach, not your line of country, because you've got the Holy Ghost within you.

Therefore, when our Lord said, '*Our Father who are in Heaven*', it was that we should raise our minds to him, upwards from the material world in which we are immersed.



POINTS OF VIEW

THERE is one mildly disquieting note in Fr Oswin Magrath's excellent 'Hermits' in the April LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, as in the October, 1952, *La Vie Spirituelle*. That is the idea that the lack of mention of hermits in the Code of Canon Law is somehow a deplorable omission. May it not be, on the contrary, a Providential disposition? For priests and religious, status and a social milieu are part of their vocation: the Code provides for them. For hermits, as Fr Magrath admirably shows, status and any special human milieu are excluded by their vocation: by its very silence, the Code provides for that. Let us keep it so.

SOLITARIUS