



God Beyond All Names

No single analogy or name for God says it all

From the syndicated column "The Prayerful Heart"

By Julie McCarty

I am fascinated by Bernadette Farrell's song "God, beyond All Names" every time we sing it at Mass. The melody flows in embracing curves that remind me of the childhood wonder I felt when standing in the middle of an energetic brook, the waterfall sounding above me, water surging around my feet, water dancing on all sides in a joyous movement of life, music, and beauty. God's living presence is all around us, Farrell writes, reflected in creation, moving within our hearts, and found in the midst of living and dying, laughter and tears.

"God, beyond All Names" is also a brilliant song for its attempt to put into words not only the intimacy of God with creation, but also God's transcendent side. Although God created us in the divine image, God's Being is also far beyond our wildest imagination. In the book of Isaiah, God says his thoughts are not our thoughts; God's ways are not our ways. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts," says the Lord. Human reason can understand God only to a certain point. We can dream about God, but, as Farrell's song says, God is "beyond all our dreams." God's dreams for us far outstrip anything we can fantasize.

In recent columns, I have written about the many names and images we have for God or persons of the Trinity. We may think of God as a loving parent, merciful judge, good shepherd, the one who died for us, or the Risen Lord. Our prayers may be addressed to Yahweh, the Great Spirit, or the Almighty. Having so many names of God is good because it speaks of God's many dimensions. Words of prayer allow us to enter into a personal relationship with God.

There is, however, a problem with naming God. Our words, invented by humans and based upon the earthly realm, are very limited in their ability to describe God. For instance, the Good Shepherd image speaks of God's love for us, but it says nothing about God's creative side. Shepherds nurture sheep, but they do not *create* them. A shepherd has a physical body, whereas God's inner essence is Pure Spirit. (Jesus of Nazareth had a physical body, but I'm not prepared to speculate about Christ's resurrected body and how that relates to the other persons of the Trinity for all eternity—that's way out of my league!)

Another example would be the problem of calling God a lover. There are certainly plenty of references to God in Scripture, church teachings, and the writings of Catholic mystics to back the image of God (or Christ) as faithful husband and we, his people called the Church, as his bride. Marital imagery helps us describe the depth of God's love and the intense intimacy he desires with us. Yet, for some people, calling God "lover" brings up thoughts of one who is here today and gone tomorrow, like a brief summer romance of youth. Many people also point out how this imagery can sour if we associate all male humans with the one, perfect, divine God and all female humans with the imperfect, human bride who tends, in spiritual imagery, to be

unfaithful. True theology knows that God alone is divine—both men and women are sinners who are invited to lives of holiness that participate in the faithful love of God.

St. Augustine once wrote that if you completely understand God, it's certainly not God that you understand. In other words, if you think you have God all figured out, categorized, and put in a handy-dandy box, guess again. You may have understood *something* about God, but (as is said in the Southwest) not the whole enchilada. We grasp God only to a point—we do not have the complete picture. The deeper, inner being of God is largely hidden from us.

In prayer, words serve us as a means of communication with God. We also use words to gather our prayers together into one united prayer of believers. But it is good to remember what the song says: God is “beyond all names,” “beyond all time,” and “beyond all words.” Sometimes the best prayer is a hushed, loving silence before the hidden, mysterious face of God.

For further reading:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, numbers 39-49 and 198-231.

Reflection questions:

- Do you have a favorite name or image of God? What is the benefit of using that image? What might be missing in that way of describing God?
- Do you ever feel drawn to pray in silence? When does that usually happen? Is there a way to enter into a loving silent presence before God more frequently?

