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Nothing

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Nothing

What if we try to pray, and nothing happens, or we attempt to understand what is taking place in our lives, and are unable to do so? Is something radically wrong, or have we another perspective for viewing such experiences? We might recall the old joke about the person hanging on to a branch over a precipice and praying, "God help me," only to hear, "Let go." At which the person calls out, "Is there anybody else up there?" There are very few of us who have not had an unpleasant incident of receiving apparently nothing when we were very much in need of either direct help or a helpful idea.

We are time-centered creatures who understand that we live in the present, not the past or the future. When we want something, we usually want it now, or in the very near future. We might be quite clear about what we want, or we might be only aware of a generalized need, but the more immediate our concern, the more we want to receive, this second, the help or answer we seek.

As we reflect on some of the more uncomfortable moments of our lives when we most keenly felt a need, we might begin to recognize that not only have we moved on from those occurrences, but we have become more confident about the difference between what we thought we had to have at those moments and what actually worked for us. How interesting that we once felt our need so strongly that we thought only of help or escape. Upon reflection we find that sometimes the intense negotiations of prayer and inner struggle that were precipitated by our need have resulted in some very positive growth, perhaps quickly, but possibly after some time elapsed. We would not deliberately choose those difficult times as a means to becoming more fully human, but from moments of "nothing," we have gained a more holistic capacity for dealing with some hard realities of life.

"Nothing" is sometimes the better response to our desires for understanding or for assistance: any immediate resolution would not in fact have met our real need to grow into another level of maturity. Only those who have directly faced suffering, who have at times apparently received nothing of what they wanted, have grown in self-understanding and therefore in compassion for the suffering of others. We are not lacking in care when we allow children and those in every level of education to have similar experiences: rather than doing everything for them so that they will not have to suffer even minor setbacks, frustrations, or failure, we support them and encourage them to face challenges and move through them to a level of satisfaction they could achieve in no other way.

God, in the person of Jesus, did not heal every person, or right every wrong; and he most certainly did not avoid suffering some of the worst things that can happen to a human being at the unjust hands of others. But we, like him, know when to offer immediate assistance to someone who needs food or understanding, and when to allow them, with our caring support, to work through their difficulties to a new and more appropriate understanding and appreciation for what is happening.

Sometimes, nothing is exactly what we need.