

I

Encountering God in the Cellar



4 : 3 0 A M

I a m a t p r a y e r in my Abbey church. With my imagination I see myself in the cellar of my youth among the jars of tomato sauce, fruit, jams, jellies, Irish potatoes, and the moonshine barrel of new wine. I close and bolt the door, and I wait. Memories of the past come floating into my consciousness and my imagination begins to work.

What kind of a place is this? Maybe I should unlock this door and get out of here! But no, I will just stay here among these jars of tomato sauce and other preserves and see if Jesus is correct in telling me to come to this store-room to pray.

Not only am I invited to enter, I am also asked to lock the door. Why should I ever want to lock myself in the cellar with all these jars? Instead, what I am really inclined to do is scream loudly in order to get out. Okay, I'll give this thing a try, obey the words of Jesus, remain in this cellar, behind the locked door, and see what happens.

It is dark and lonely, but I am here to experience the Father. In this silence and solitude I sit and wait. With no place to go and nothing to do, I simply wait. Where do I go from here?

4 : 3 0 A M

Jesus, please don't ask me to enter into the cellar of my youth to pray.

A s I b e g i n t o p r a y I recall other locked doors. In my little hometown we had a general store run by Porter T. Sturgeon. Part of this store had a dirt floor and was filled with outdated clothing going back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The public was not allowed into that part of the store; it was even rumored that a tree was growing there. The place was dark and dirty, with only one narrow entry and a light burning over the old cash register. About ten feet from the cash register was the potbellied stove that turned red in mid-winter, but was only able to heat the space within five feet of the glow. P. T. Sturgeon made life possible for a lot of people

during the Great Depression because he sold on credit long before the days of credit cards. Behind the store, he kept a wild dog. We kids were sure that it was a wolf and were petrified as we ran past the pen. It was said that Sturgeon let the dog into his store at night. When locking up, he also tied a string from the door handle to the trigger of a shotgun aimed at the door. If anyone dared to break in at night, he was sure to be shot on the spot! I remember peeping through that front door on a Sunday and seeing the shotgun aimed at me. Those were the days when all stores closed on Sunday. I'll lock my cellar door, but I don't see the need to set up a shotgun.

4 : 3 0 A M

Sitting in the darkness of this Abbey church, I recall my journey to Nigeria in 1979 which gave me the opportunity to visit my aunt and two first cousins in Sicily for the first time. I remember how my relatives would lock and then bolt the front door of their house with a large piece of timber. It would have taken an armored tank to break through!

My memory now turns to Africa and my visit in 1981 to the little village of Abidu in the mountains of the Cameroon jungles. The twenty or so houses were made of mud blocks and thatched grass roofs. Some villagers were telling me in pidgin English that they wanted to go to Nigeria to earn money. I asked, "Why go to Nigeria? This is nice here. Why do you lock your doors at night?" They answered: "To keep out the wild animals." My reply was: "In Nigeria, they lock the doors to keep out the armed robbers."

Here I am in this Abbey church and I find myself in the cellar of my youth trying to pray among these jars of tomato sauce, yet my memory takes me all over the world.

The jars of tomato sauce remind me of the times my big brother would dunk the tomatoes into boiling water and we kids would skin them. Mom would spend all day cooking down the sauce before pouring it into Ball-brand glass jars. Papa reminded us that his mother in Sicily would dry tomatoes in the sun. They would be cut in half, salted, and covered with a little olive oil to keep away the flies, then they were put in the hot Mediterranean sun to dry. Thanks to Christopher Columbus and the early discoverers of America, tomatoes were introduced into Italy. What would Italian cooking be without tomatoes?

4 : 3 0 A M

A g a i n I a m m e d i t a t i n g in the Abbey church, and again I find myself in the cellar along with all these jars of tomato sauce. Sitting in this dark, cool room with the door locked, I wait, wanting to pray to my Father in heaven.

Memories come floating in. Are these memories of the past a gift from the Father above? These memories of the past renew fears I tried to suppress in the dark cellar of my life long ago. Fears—darkness, the Banana Room, wild dogs, facing a shotgun looking me in the eyes. All these fears I must face as I sit among these jars in the silence of this Abbey church. Yes! The ability to face the fears of the past is a grace from You, Father.

I am called to face the reality of who I am and where I have come from. Only then can I begin to pray. I am not

an African, Indian, Chinese, or Jew. Here I sit among these jars, the son of Sicilian immigrants, born in the small town of Avonmore, Pennsylvania, with a general store run by P. T. Sturgeon. If I were in Africa, I would be sitting in a yam barn made of tree branches and palm leaves with no roof, but open to the sky. I am not in Africa, but instead I am among these tomato jars. I sit here and wonder about the meaning of it all. What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of waiting for something to happen?

Once again I find myself in the cellar among the jars, locking myself in. This door reminds me of another door in Rome, Italy, along the street not far from the Abbey of San Anselmo. Tourists peep through the keyhole to get a glimpse of the dome of Saint Peter's in the distance. If I look through the keyhole of the door in this dark, cool room, am I able, with faith, to see the gates of heaven and the heavenly Father peeping down at me in this room? Does this make sense? Why should I lock myself in this room with the old moonshine barrel now filled with new wine?

4 : 3 0 A M

W h e n m y b r o t h e r J o e was locked in the banana room, my oldest brother, Anthony, would sneak down to unlock the door. Papa could not understand how Joe was able to pick that lock. When Papa asked the other kids how Joe had gotten out, no one would answer. I now wonder how often my brother Anthony told the priest in that dark confessional that he had told a lie. In those days my name was not Anthony, but Luigene, a unique name. My baptismal record reads

“Luigi,” after the saint of youth, St. Aloysius. I was the youngest of seven children: Anthony, Joseph, Francis, Salvatore, and two sisters, Catherine and Josephine. Including Mom and Dad, there were nine of us. We had to make a lot of tomato sauce to last through the winter.

I wish someone would come along to let me out of here and tell me I am wasting my time. But I know that will not happen since I have locked myself in. I intend to stay here to see if my Father in heaven really looks down into this cellar and hears my voice. Thus far, all I have been able to do is bring up the fears from my youth. Perhaps this is the first stage of prayer; the Father is giving me an insight into who I am and from whence I have come.

Perhaps instead of bringing up memories of my youth, I ought to think about the Father. In Matthew, Jesus tells me to go into this cellar and lock the door. Then “pray to your Father.” Instead of waiting for something to happen, perhaps I ought to start praying. What should I say? Jesus then goes on to tell me not to pray like the Gentiles who use a lot of words. He says, “You should pray like this: ‘Our Father . . .’” Okay, here goes—“*My Father.*” No! not “*My Father,*” but “*Our Father.*” Gee, here I am locked in by myself, but I am not praying by myself! It is not *my* but *our*: I am not praying by myself, but with others. Here I am praying for Papa and Mama, and my brothers and sisters. I am speaking on their behalf and calling God “Our Father.” I am praying on behalf of all my buddies and playmates in the street. I am praying for Porter Sturgeon. I am praying on behalf of everyone I have ever encountered during my life, my high school and college friends, Peewee, Flycatcher, Lanzi, Gene Kerr, my fellow monks, the monks and nuns in Nigeria and the Cameroon. On

behalf of them all, and all humankind, I go to God “Our Father”—here among these jars of tomato sauce.

4 : 3 0 A M

O n c e a g a i n in this Abbey church, I find myself in the canning cellar behind the locked door pondering the word “our.” This is similar to the first time I ventured into the Heart of Jesus only to discover that I was not alone. There were hundreds, thousands, and millions of others with me in that Heart. They spoke to me by their silence and example. This morning in this dark, cool cellar, I find them with me as I pray “*Our Father*.” Not only do I pray on their behalf, but I especially pray in the Name of Jesus who taught me to call God “Our Father.” Jesus is now teaching me how to pray in this cellar; the cellar that symbolizes the very hidden chambers of my being.

Jesus! Who is Jesus? He is by nature the Son of the eternal Father; He shares His Sonship with me so that I dare call God “Our Father.” Jesus! Who is Jesus to me? I would like to say Jesus is to me what He is to Mother Teresa. Twice I have been in her presence and spoken with her. Twice I have experienced the power of her personality as she recognized Jesus within me. To her, Jesus is truly “the Word made flesh.”

Jesus is the bread of life.

Jesus is the hungry to be fed.

Jesus is the thirsty to be satiated.

Jesus is the naked to be clothed.

Jesus is the sick, the lonely, the unwanted, the leper, the beggar, the drunkard, the little one, the blind, the dumb, the crippled, the prisoner, the old.

Her litany goes on and on. She saw Jesus in everyone that came into her life as she saw Jesus in me.

In this cellar, I pray with Jesus for all, as we pray together: *OUR FATHER.*

5 : 0 0 A M

R e t u r n i n g t o m y p l a c e in the monastic choir with my fellow monks, we pray Psalm 77. This psalm expresses where I have been during my half-hour of meditation: “I thought of the olden days, years long past came back to me. I spent all night meditating in my heart. . . .”

Our next psalm, 139, speaks of You, my God and Father: “If I climb the heavens, you are there; if I lie in Sheol, you are there too.” Or in my experience—“*if I go down into the wine cellar, You are even there. Our Father in heaven is in this cellar with me.*” Jesus invites me to go to such a place to pray to our Father. “*Father, why are You present in a special way in this cellar? Is it because this place symbolizes the very depth of my being, and how You, my God, provide for all of our needs? We call You Father. In a very special way You are a Father for all that was and is and is to come. Abba, Pater, Father!*”

4 : 3 0 A M

T o t h e s o u n d o f r a i n f a l l i n g on the Abbey church, I go to my corner to pray in the silence of the night. I begin with the Divine Mercy Chaplet, saying over and over again: “Have mercy on us and on the whole world.” Just as with the “Our Father,” I

do not pray alone, but in union with Jesus and all humankind. *In the silence of this night I pray with and for all humankind to You, O God, to have mercy on us.*

With my imagination, I find myself again among the jars of tomato sauce. “Here I recall my earthly father, Your gift to me as an external sign of Your ever eternal love as a Father.”

Dad was born in Termini Imerese, Sicily, in 1885 of very poor parents. He was the first born of my grandmother, who was an orphan. Papa would remind us that the only parts of a chicken they could afford to buy were the head, neck, and feet. I remember on special occasions Papa ordered a chicken from a local farmer. Mama would go through the ritual of wringing its neck and hanging it feet up until it stopped moving its wings. This ritual of death did not impress me. It didn’t make sense to see that chicken fighting for life only then to die. But this was my first initiation into death. Mama would then dunk the chicken into boiling water. We kids would have to pluck it until it was naked.

My second experience with death came while I was in the second grade, when Granddad was kidnapped by the Mafia. He then had a stroke and died in the hospital. I stood by his coffin and touched his cold, hard, motionless hands. We called him “Babi” (short for “Babianni”). This word probably originated from the Arabic word for father: “Baba” plus “annus” equals “father of many years” or grandfather. He was a “capo” and head of the Sicilians in our area of Pennsylvania. (This is not the place to go into Granddad’s history).

4 : 3 0 A M

From this Abbey church I again descend into the cellar of my youth, to meditate among the jars of tomato sauce. My memory is much like this cellar, where I store away the events of each passing day until once again they surface. It reminds me where I have come from, who I am, and where I am going. *Yes, I am going to You, our Father, who knows me. You know my past and where I have been. You know all about my earthly father and my Babianni and all those who preceded me and brought me into the darkness of this Abbey church. You are a God of history and Your book, the Bible, is filled with memories of the past. In the same way, I dip into my own memories to help me pray to You in this present moment.*

Yesterday I was meditating on death, the death of a chicken, the death of Babi, and now I recall a day in 1986 when I was a chaplain to the nuns of Abakaliki, Nigeria. On that day a strange sound came from the village. Peter and Augustine, our workmen, told me it was wailing, indicating that someone had just died.

I also recall Good Friday, 1982, in the Cameroon. We were celebrating the Liturgy and had finished reading the Gospel on the death of Jesus. A native began beating on a drum, made from a hollowed-out log, notifying those living in the jungle that the son of the king had just died. The sound of the drum went on and on and touched the very center of my being. Jesus died for these people in the jungles of the Cameroon.

In Nigeria it was not the hollowed-out log, but the loud wailing of the village women that indicated that someone had just died. The deceased was a man about thirty years old leaving behind a wife and a young son. That evening I

was invited to the funeral of Clement. Just before sunset I arrived at his home made of mud blocks and a grass roof. His body was lying under a tree and covered with a palm mat to keep off the flies. They uncovered the corpse. I looked down and saw his right arm covered with some chicken feathers, and drenched with chicken blood. I did not know the significance of this ritual.

Later, Peter and Augustine explained the ritual of the pagan death. After death, one of the elders kills a chicken over the corpse and lets the blood flow onto the right arm. The bird is flung as far as possible into the bush. One of the villagers claims the dead chicken and in exchange gives yams to the family of the deceased. Yams to the Nigerians are like bread to the European, or rice to the Asian.

Father, is this a continuum of the rituals of the Old Testament? The Ibo people claim to be the Jews of Africa. Death, blood, and food make up the ritual given to us by You, our Father. At sunset the men took Clement's body and ran with it toward his yam patch. There they had prepared a round hole within which was a rectangular grave where the corpse was placed. The women wailed. The elders of the village began pouring the native moonshine called *kiki* into the grave. The favorite drink of the deceased determined the kind of drink poured into the grave. It could be wine, beer, *kiki*, or even Coca-Cola. The grave was covered with logs and palm branches, and men started throwing in the dirt. Here he was, planted among his yams. Darkness set in and it was night.

4 : 3 0 A M

In this early morning, I call upon You, Father, to acclaim Your name of father as holy. To be able to know You by name means that You have made known to me Your name through Your only Son, Jesus Christ. You are holy, since You are also “Our Father.”

As Your son, I enter into this cellar to be among these jars of tomato sauce.

Mom really knew how to cook with tomato sauce; she added fresh basil, garlic, pepper, and other herbs. Chicken tasted great when it was cooked in this sauce. My brothers preferred the drumsticks, but I liked the white meat. Papa always ate the head, neck, and feet. By nature, I must be a vegetarian, since the only meat that I like is that white meat from those chickens. Oh, I forgot about the meatballs cooked in this sauce. Mom knew how to mix the ground beef with Italian bread crumbs, eggs, and grated cheese that we kids had ground with the hand grinder. She added her spices, fried the balls of meat in olive oil, and put them into the sauce. When Mom took veal and dipped it into bread crumbs, my dislike of meat vanished. On Sundays Dad would grill steaks over the coals burning in the furnace in this cellar; then Mom would cover them with olive oil, rub in the garlic, and sprinkle on oregano. Generally I didn't like fat either, but that fat, dripping onto the coals while being grilled, had a unique aroma. *Father, it reminds me of sacrifices given to You by the people of Israel in times of old. Will they once again offer animals in a newly constructed temple in Jerusalem, or will they join us in offering to You Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ? Will your people honor your name as revealed to us through your only Son Jesus? St. Paul tells us that they will* (Romans 11).

4 : 3 0 A M

O n c e a g a i n I find myself with the jars of *sasa*—the Sicilian word for tomato sauce, which rhymes with Papa and Mama. That Sicilian word is similar to the word for sausage: *sazitsa*. Mama knew how to take the pork and blend it with fennel seeds and a bit of hot pepper to make a mild Italian sausage. She would take hog guts, preserved in salt, wash and place them on the end of a special wide-mouthed funnel. Papa would begin to stuff the casing. It took extra strength to keep that pork going into the funnel. My job was to take a needle and punch holes into the air pockets seen in the sausage being formed. Mama then twisted the sausage to form the links and hung them out to dry.

Mama also often cooked the *sazitsa* in tomato sauce. At times, Papa broiled the sausage over the coals in the furnace of this cellar. The sausage was then covered with lemon juice and ah, what a taste! Our Jewish neighbors next door could not share in this feast, but on Passover they shared with us their matzos. *When will that day come when Your people will accept Your Son, Jesus, and become part of Your Kingdom? “Thy Kingdom come.” When will peace come between the Israelites and the Palestinians? When will the day come when Your kingdom will be established throughout the earth?*

4 : 3 0 A M

Our Father, You are in this Abbey church and You are with me as I descend into the cellar of my childhood memories. Your

kingdom must first come into my heart and into every heart before You will establish it upon this earth.

The green banana bunches hanging in this banana cellar bring me into contact with the ends of the earth. Each bunch of bananas has a history all its own. Who picked it? How did it get to Pittsburgh, and from there to the railroad siding in Saltsburg near where my uncles lived?

My uncles (all of them named Joseph) would get their sons, and Papa would get my older brothers to help unload the bananas. Then they were distributed into the banana cellars of different homes. We were afraid that in one of those bunches a poisonous spider from the tropics might be hiding. The dark, green bunches of bananas hung in the dark room, in the heat and high humidity. Slowly, the bunches began to ripen. Each bunch was placed into a round banana basket, which was about five feet high and had a burlap pocket set into the top. At times my first cousin Baby Joe and I would watch those baskets being loaded onto the old “White” truck along with other fruits and vegetables. They were delivered to the general stores in the different coal mining towns: Slickville, Coal Run, Tin Town, Salina. Baby Joe and I would ride behind with the produce and, at times, hide under the banana blankets used to keep the fruit safe from windburn.

You, Father, must have looked down upon us as we traveled with those bunches of bananas. The bunches were hung in the general stores. Smaller bunches were cut from the large bunch with a specially shaped “banana knife.”

4 : 3 0 A M

“Thy Kingdom come.” Jesus, be King of my heart, be King of all hearts. May Your Kingdom be established in all the lands of the world, including the depths of this cellar.

B a n a n a s are a unique fruit. They are shipped all over the world; but once they begin to ripen, they last only a few days. Papa would at times be called “Joe Banan” by the men in the streets.

The bananas now hanging in this cellar remind me of Nigeria. At times I was assigned to drive one of the nuns to the market—Sister Appolonia, Sister Nnaemeka, Sister Chineottito, or Sister Ife Christe. Taxis filled with people would come rolling in from the Cameroon border. Piled high atop the roofs were bunches of bananas. They were unloaded at the taxi park and then the natives would start bartering. Since I was *onyeocha*, “white man,” the price usually was higher for me. The sisters were better at bartering, but in time my reputation grew, and I became known as a white Ibo.

At other times, Sylvester, a small old man, would help us locate the best buys. One day he confided to me that he had no food or money for his family. *Jesus, You tell us that “our almsgiving must be in secret.”* The day came when we were notified that Sylvester had died. *He was taken into Your Kingdom. May he be blessed for the days he helped us buy bananas.*

Here in Georgia, I once had the job of buying food for the community. The bananas now came in smaller bunches packed in large boxes rather than in those large bunches.

I now recall the days when almost every household had a bowl of artificial wax fruit on the table. In our house the

wax bananas were small and reddish. It was only later in Nigeria that I again saw such bananas. They were supposed to be good for pregnant women. There were plenty of pregnant women in Nigeria. *May Your Kingdom come to all the kingdoms of this earth.*

4 : 3 0 A M

On this Feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux (October 1), I come to the corner of the Abbey church to ponder the words of that prayer Your Son has given us to pray. We pray to You, Father, that Your will be done. But how can we do Your will unless You first tell us what Your will is for us? You have spoken through Your book, the Bible, through Your Son, Jesus, and through Your gift of the Holy Spirit. Your will is that I descend into the cellar of my childhood, shut and lock the door, and call out to You as “Our Father.”

Papa was an external sign of who You are to me.

E a c h s p r i n g Papa would go out to the lot behind the house across the alley, and turn over the soil, shovel by shovel. Tomato seeds were planted in a flat box and placed near the furnace in this cellar until they sprouted. Daily he took the flat out into the sunshine, and at night returned it near the furnace. By the time summer vacation arrived, the tomatoes were in the ground. He planted them deep so that only half the plant showed above the ground.

When I got big enough, I was assigned to hoe the weeds, but this took time away from the swimming hole. The creek across the Kiskiminitis River was dammed with burlap sacks filled with sand. We boys would swim as

naked as we were born. When the plants started to grow, Papa would stake them up, pull off the wild lower suckers, and tie them up with strips of old rags which Mama salvaged from clothing too old to patch. The fifty-five-gallon drum under the downspout of the gutter on the barn saved rain water and also contained a sack of manure. This “manure tea” gave the plants that extra something to help them grow.

4 : 3 0 A M

Feast of the Guardian Angels (October 2)

The angels do Your will in heaven, and they bring Your will to this earth. They watch over and guide us. My angel is at my side as I enter in and lock this door. Alone and with my angel, I praise You, “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .” and in this cellar, this cellar of my heart, this cellar of my memory, this cellar of the center of my being, where You are a hidden God of love.

E a r t h. What does this word mean in the Greek of the New Testament? It means the arable land, the ground, the place where seeds will grow. *It is from this arable ground that Adam was made, and it is here that You want Your will to be done.* Earth, dirt, soil, dust, Georgia red clay—all of these are related.

Red clay reminds me of my entry into this monastery more than a half-century ago in 1948. The field in front of the old monastery was planted with tomatoes. The plants were growing wild and laying on the ground. Suckers were sprouting all over the place. Papa would never have grown tomatoes in such conditions. He would have hoed

the plants, tied them up with pieces of old rags, pulled off the suckers, and loved the plants until they bore their marvelous fruit.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, one day I ventured to tell my novice master how Dad grew tomatoes. But you will remember that my free lesson fell on deaf ears. I was told to mind my own business and be an obedient novice. *I had to swallow hard and remind myself that I did not come to the monastery to grow tomatoes, but to do Your will, Father.*

That field of wild tomatoes blossomed, forming tomatoes which began to rot as soon as they touched the ground. We novices were sent to pick the few tomatoes that were small and turning ripe. Even after they were cooked down they tasted horrible in comparison with the sauce that Mama made. Papa would never have done it that way. He would have picked the tomatoes when they were almost ripe, placed them in the shade inside the garage, and waited until they had completely ripened. Only then were they cooked down to make the tomato sauce that is in this cellar with me. *I had to keep reminding myself I didn't come to the monastery to grow tomatoes, but to do Your will, O God.*

Twenty years later, I was given responsibility for the old chicken houses which were converted into greenhouses for growing tomatoes. Then, I began growing thousands of tomato plants. When they were about eight to ten inches tall we sold them. One year I had many flats of tomato plants that grew about 3/4 of an inch tall and then died. What was wrong? Calling in the experts of the state, we found that the soil lacked magnesium, a simple trace element. A pinch of Epsom salts was all that was needed.