

Archbishop Anthony Bloom has a lot to teach us in his book, *Beginning to Pray*. He says we must always remember that “first of all prayer is an encounter and a relationship...a relationship that is deep, and this relationship cannot be forced either on us or on God. The fact is, God can make Himself present or He can leave us with the sense of His absence, this is part of a very live and real relationship.” It’s important to understand because many times God seems to be absent from our lives or not listening to us. God is never really absent, but sometimes we do feel that He isn’t with us. Archbishop Bloom maintains that the day we recognize that God is absent...when He is silent....that is the beginning of prayer.

Archbishop Bloom who was a Russian Orthodox priest tells about an old lady in her 90’s who came to him. She had been asking advice for years from people who supposedly knew about prayer, but they never gave her any good advice. As only an old lady would dare to say, she thought to ask him, she said, not because he knew any more than anyone else, but because he might by chance blurt out the right thing. Bemused, he said, “Okay, what’s your problem?” The old lady said, “For 14 years I have been praying the Orthodox Jesus Prayer continuously, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner,’ but never have I felt the presence of God.” He blurted out what he thought. “If you speak all the time, you don’t give God a chance to get a word in edgewise.” So she asked, “What should I do?” Archbishop told her to go to her room after breakfast, light a candle in front of her favorite icon, and then take stock of the room she was in. “Just sit, look around and see where you live. Then take out your knitting and for 15 minutes knit before the face of God...But I forbid you to say or even think one word of prayer.”

Sometime later she came back to Archbishop Bloom and told him, “You know it works!” “What works?” he exclaimed, “What happened?” “I did just as you told me,” she went on, “I got up, washed, had breakfast and settled into my chair thinking how nice it will be to have 15 minutes to do nothing....and not feeling guilty. For the 1st time in years I looked around and thought what a nice place I have to live. I felt quiet because the room was so peaceful, so I began to knit. Soon I became more aware of the silence, realizing the silence was not merely an absence of noise, but the silence had substance. It was not the absence of something, but presence of something. The silence had a density, a richness...the silence around began to meet the silence in me. All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was presence. At the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace, all love.” And so it was, that day when God was absent...when He was silent....that was the beginning of prayer.