

Catholic Review Column: God Knows Us. Do We Know God?

Many people today are concerned about how much information is being gathered about good, law-abiding citizens. Huge information-technology firms such as Google continue to collect vast amounts of data from millions of people the world over. The IRS will amass even more information about individual citizens and families once it begins to fulfill its role in administering the Affordable Care Act. And much has been made of the internet, e-mail, social media, and cell phone records which the National Security Agency has collected. But it doesn't stop there. Almost everywhere there are surveillance cameras. Even the letters and packages that we send via "snail mail" are screened. As a result many people rightfully worry about the need to balance the legitimate security concerns of our country with our rightful expectation of some measure of privacy in our communications, electronic or otherwise.

I think that most everyone chaffs at being watched, even from childhood. Who was really comfortable with the thought that Santa Claus was watching all the time - "he sees you when you're sleeping; he knows when you're awake"? Did it engender trust in God when we first learned that God is watching us all the time, that He sees our every action, and that He is taking note of them? As people grow older they may take one of two paths. Some may see God as an overbearing master whose constant gaze upon our every thought, word, and action is unbearable. God can be imagined as a sort of cosmic NSA. Others come to see God's watchfulness as a myth. These individuals have decided that while Google and the IRS know a lot about them, God doesn't, either because He is not a personal God or because He really doesn't care all that much what we do.

Scripture shows us a very different picture of God. He is not relentlessly spying on us in hopes of tripping us up. Nor is he an indifferent god who really doesn't care what we may be doing or how well we may be faring. Rather, he is the God who is love. He gazes upon us as a lover looks upon the beloved. His gaze of love does not stop at appearances, including the personal façades we can so carefully erect. His gaze burns through every pretense, every false intention, and every secret of our

hearts.

Consider, for example, Psalm 139: “Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it all. Behind me and before me you encircle me ... Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence where can I flee?” In various places in the Gospel, we read how Jesus knew what was in the hearts of those who challenged Him. To their amazement He would ask them, “Why are you thinking such thoughts?” Jesus was referring to unspoken intentions deep in their minds and hearts. In John’s Gospel, we read that Jesus had no need for anyone to tell Him about human nature for He knew (and knows well) the human heart (cf. John 20:23). This did not mean that Jesus was looking at His opponents angrily. He was looking at them accurately and lovingly. He called forth what was really in their hearts not for their destruction but for their salvation.

When we put our faith in Jesus Christ, when we truly encounter Him in prayer and come to know Him through sustained prayer, not only will we grow in knowledge of the Lord but we will also come to know ourselves. The Delphic oracle said, “Know yourself” but the Church says to you and me, “Know Jesus Christ” – for gazing at Christ is like gazing at mirror in which we can see ourselves as we really are. We may not always like what we see, at least not all of it. Yet true knowledge of ourselves is the first step in turning away from sin while turning our hearts in faith toward the Father who loves us so much that He wants to see and love in us what He sees and loves in Christ.

In the end, we shall find our true dignity, happiness, and security, when we can say with St. Paul, “I shall know even as I am known!” (1 Cor. 13:12).