

# Separation Anxiety and the meaning of Advent (St. Otto, pray for us, Part II)

It has been advised by many a wise sage, many a saint, and many of good spiritual counsel that it is good from time to time to pray “out of your experience.” My daily experience of late has been living with a tiny black-furred, hyper-spastic Pomeranian puppy, who, by the way, at the time of this writing just started barking furiously at the “knock of the door” that was actually heard on TV. And so, I have been praying with this.

There have been many joys of having a little, five-month old puppy like Otto: running through the autumn leaves with him on the campus of St. Anthony Shrine in Emmitsburg; watching him wag his tail when he makes a new friend, dog or human, whether after church or as I am taking him for a walk through the neighborhood; and having him happily lick my face – and many other faces, including those of several students and faculty members of St. Maria Goretti High School in Hagerstown, where I am a chaplain.

Now Otto isn’t a priest, but his presence has helped me in my ministry to the students. It truly is calming, and I think it makes the confessions easier – especially when one can hold a 5-pound, tail-wagging puppy in his or her lap when making the “Act of Contrition!”



One of the hardest things though, I have to admit, is this: every morning when I have to leave him. I gingerly place him in his crate located in my rectory kitchen, watch him give me those sad “puppy-eyes” and then tell him good-bye and that I will “be back soon.” I usually also give him a silent priestly-blessing, making the Sign of the Cross over him. But often even before the door closes, I share the sorrow. He begins an incessant whimpering, a crying for his “daddy.” And what might be even more heart-breaking is that when I return about an hour or two later – usually after having celebrated morning mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, an eight-minute drive away in Thurmont – as I open the door, he is always standing inside his crate, at attention and looking at me in almost the exact same stance and position as when I left him!

But then, a miraculous thing happens. When I open the door of his crate and pull

him out, he smiles. He wags his entire body in happiness, hops around, tongue hanging out joyfully, so happy that I have returned that he is ready to almost leap out of his skin. And when I pick him up he washes my face with his tongue, licking me again somewhere between 20 and 100 times! It's hard to count... but I'm not really counting. I know he is just loving me - and saying, "I've waited for you! I'm glad you're with me again! I'm glad you're home."

This is a very simple experience and reflection, but I often think of this and of Advent. In this holy season of Advent, we consider the reality that our forefathers in faith, the Israelites, long-awaited a Savior, a Deliverer, a Redeemer they would never see. In some strange, surreal way, they were like my cute puppy in his crate, awaiting the coming and return of his owner - yet they had never, ever seen him. Can you imagine? I guess one might say that they had their own version of "separation anxiety": being separated from God because of original sin and not having God's presence with them, as they once had in the beginning in the Garden of Eden. And this went on for years, and years, and years.

And yet what is so awesome is this: in Otto, a cute little Pom puppy, I find aspects of the nature of God. When I return, he is always glad to see me. He always longs to see me. He can't stop licking my face and showing his affection for me. His love seems to be "unconditional" for me, even though he is merely a creature, only a little, happy dog. But God is like this with us. He always wants to see us, to be with us, to love us. He never, ever wants to be separated from us. I think of this often when I return home to Otto.

And yet, Otto also teaches us how we should be with God, in the coming of Christ in Advent as we approach Christmas. What should we long for more than the coming of God himself into our midst to save us? Our "Emmanuel," "God with us"? As the Lord wore human "skin" to come as a little child to save us from our sins and meet us, and remove our separation anxiety, so too in spirit should the fullness of our joy be: so elated, amazed, and astounded that we might even "burst out of our skin" to see the Lord Jesus, as if meeting him for the first time. Isn't this the true spirit of Advent - and Christmas? Much more than mere "things," no matter how nice and sentimental they may be?

So, the litany to St. Otto continues:

*St. Otto, apostle of the country of Pomerania, patron saint of dogs and perhaps humans with separation anxiety, and their hyper-spastic Pomeranian puppies and their grateful, knowing-that-they-are loved owners - pray for us! Help us to long for Jesus more than any other thing: and have a true joy in Him this Christmas.*

