

“Thinking head”: Absentee

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By bishop Peter Kohlgraf, Mainz

“Absentee” – I am thinking of the situation of so many husbands and fathers returning home after war. For years they were absent, their presence in the family was reduced to a picture on the mantelpiece, they spoke to their loved ones only in rare letters. These men and their families desperately hoped for a return – but their coming home often turned out to be a disappointment: the husband and father was a broken man, mentally and physically exhausted after years as soldier or prisoner of war; the wife and the children had learned to live without him, he had become a stranger and his presence was rather a nuisance. For years, they had thought about the absentees and formed a picture, an idea of them, but this idea was not consistent with reality – and therefore had become an illusion.

This experience that so many made in our country in the late 1940s and early 1950s tells me this: an absentee can become very powerful. He or she only exists in my thoughts and ideas, but is not part of my reality, as there is no direct contact with him or her. The absentee becomes an illusion – but therefore even more powerful.

And at the same time loving someone who is absent can be less challenging than loving someone who is very close. Someone who is close can come too close. Love and being loved puts limits on my freedom and independence. An absentee, however, can be kept at distance. It is I who decides about how close we get – and I can dream him or her the way I want him or her to be.

This is the challenge of all those who try to live their lives in relationship with God. God is not present in a physical sense, he cannot be touched or perceived by our eyes and ears, “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18). How can I experience this God who is omnipresent, but invisible to my eyes? And how can I protect him and myself from creating him in *my own image*? How can I protect him and myself from subordinating him to my wishes and ideas?

The Old Testament bans all material representation of God. “You must not make for yourself an image” (Deuteronomy 5:8). You must not be presumptuous, you must not dare to think you have an idea about who God really is; you must not dare to think your intellectual or artistic ability is sufficient to make an image of the One. He is absent, as he cannot be seen or touched, he is not from this world.

But I believe in a God who is present among us.

In the evening prayer said every night in monastic communities the monks and nuns pray for their brothers and sister who are absent. They ask for God`s blessing during the night for themselves “et cum fratribus et soribus nostris absentibus”. Remembering one another and praying for one another creates a bridge between those who are not physically present. The border between presence and absence is not a hard one any more.

Believing in God means to believe that an absentee can be present, but not necessarily in a physical sense – and he builds a bridge trying to reach me. And I am building a bridge trying to reach him.