

## Finding God on the Metro

I love riding Washington's subway system, known locally as the Metro.

I love the speed, the crush of people and the crazy noise of it all. I love the idea of being in motion towards. Most of all I love the Metro because I see God there almost every time I ride. I look for signs of the Almighty's presence, and because it pleases the Creator that His created subjects should know Him, I see Him. Not too long ago, on a commute to a clinic for the homeless, I hopped on the campus shuttle bus and met God at the Rosslyn Station escalator. We rode it deep into the earth, and on the first train downtown, I had a powerful experience of His love.

I am a member of the Society of Jesus, a Jesuit. Meeting God in the everyday is one of our great pursuits. It is part of the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola and is open to all: Jesuit and non-Jesuit, Christian and non-Christian alike. When our eyes are open, all of us can see God everywhere, in people, places and things, in ideas, actions and chance meetings.

Examining the day for traces of God's presence is a Jesuit's twice-daily duty, but the discipline can enter into anyone's routine. With practice, it becomes more a respite from hectic everyday life than a burden, a way of being more than a particular effort or task. These exercises ask, "Where is God?" in any particular experience. Ignatius would suggest we request a hefty dose of God's aid each time we undertake such a self-review.

How did I find God that sunny Friday morning? How did God find me? As on any commute, I asked God to help me while I waited for the shuttle in front of the student dining hall in Georgetown University's Southwest Quad. Beginning a Rosary, I muttered the Apostle's Creed as we bounced eastward on Prospect, and signs of God started popping out all around me. The broad rose-lit arches of the Key Bridge shimmered in the early dawn. A coed clad in curiously pajama-like attire dragged a roll-on suitcase aboard, presumably en route to the airport. I was forced to squint as, across the river, a Krypton-red sun painted a fireball in the mirrored windows of a Rosslyn skyscraper. Looking down the hill to the old towpath along the B and O Canal, I knew that running shoes were crunching in the gravel as faithful joggers' took their morning exercise. Below on the Potomac, two four-seat sculls emerged from the mist: the rowers' backs steamed as they pulled in rhythm at their oars. The quiet beauty of all these things assured me of God's certain presence.

By the time I clambered to the curb at Rosslyn Station, the presence of God was nearly palpable. Some people see God while looking at mountains, or in a baby's smile. I seem to find Him especially on escalators. At Rosslyn the platforms are 97 feet below the surface: it makes for a two-minute ride descending what is reportedly the third longest continuous escalator in the world. If I stand on the staircase rather than running to the bottom, this piece of a half-hour commute becomes a privileged two minutes I can use to look for God.

That Friday I rode with high-heeled business commuters who clattered by in barely controlled descents while laborers in hard hats joked in Spanish about their boss' drinking. Desert-camouflaged soldiers and Air Force officers in flight suits joined us in our journey. Most of my anonymous companions were quiet. Some conversed in twos and threes. I narrowly avoided colliding with an office worker who clutched a leaky cup of coffee. I reminded myself of my vow of chastity as I found my own eyes

lingering upon a pair of young women who ascended opposite, their curious glances fixed some while upon my Roman dress. I admired a spike-haired artist bobbling an oversize portfolio and a mother in a purple sari carrying a baby sleeping in a sling. The wonder of God's creation shone out of all these people like the like the white on white brightness of a near-death experience.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, had these suggestions for making Steps for a "Twice Daily Spiritual Examination."

Step 1) Quiet yourself and recall that you are in the presence of God.

Step 2) Ask God to assist you in making the examination.

Step 3) Recall the people, places and things that have entered you day since your last examination. Ask where God might have been present in the sights, sounds, tastes, and sensations of your day.

Step 4) Consider where you may have turned away from God's desires for you in your choices or actions.

Step 5) Form a resolve based on numbers three and four above to change some behavior or attitude in yourself. Ask God to help you with this resolve. Conclude with a familiar prayer that you like.

Acutely on that morning, I felt God brush my face in a steady rush of wind that wafted up the escalator tunnel. A watery scent hinted at dark and secret courses beneath the river, I imagined subterranean chambers frequented by orange-vested Metro crews, beyond the pedestrian reach of ordinary commuters like me. I stood upon the platform, waiting for a train, while the pillars of the earth walked and ran, jostled and careened all about me.

Now ordinarily, any of the above would be sufficient fuel for an examination in the Ignatian tradition. I could review the input received from my senses to find that He was in the sight of nods given by the security guards when I made the effort to establish eye contact with them. He was in the sounds of the incomprehensible announcements that rang overhead, enumerating the elevator outages for the day. Abstractly but proximately, he was in the care taken by the engineers who designed the arched vault of the tunnel's ceiling. Even more remotely, but nonetheless real, he was in the sweat of the miners who had labored to dig the ore that made up the steel escalator steps that whisked me down into the earth. In any ordinary examination, I would thank God for these many gifts and perhaps ask to recognize them more often, or to be more grateful. If I had found myself being rude to the bus driver, or pointedly ignoring the homeless man begging beneath a stairwell, I might ask for the grace of patience or generosity or charity. Then I would ask Him to help me in achieving this change of behavior or attitude while praying the Lord's Prayer, or some other formal closing.

However, that particular Metro ride was something different. Once aboard a car, it was not yet 8:30 and my day was made, my joy more near complete. I wondered where the people were going, of what they were in charge or who might be in charge of them. I wondered what they struggled with at work, what prayers ran through their heads. I saw God in all my musings. The windows of the car reflected the souls of two heavy-set African-American women. With Government Printing Office ID cards dangling from their necks and colorful Smithsonian tote bags at their feet, the pair rested their eyes on

the way to work. The backdrop of the tunnel walls ebbed and flowed behind them, alternately racing and slowing, lights flashing and glaring like freeway street lamps, while the car lurched towards Foggy Bottom making roller coaster rattles and eerie screeches all the way long.

That ordinary morning, on a plunging high-speed run through Foggy Bottom, three stops north of the Pentagon, but before the Red Line transfer at Metro Center, the engines wound up like turbines on a tarmac and for a moment the car seemed to rocket towards someplace beyond the limits of space. Then, in a special way, at some ear-popping depth beneath the Potomac River, God washed right over me.

Hidden below the pilings and culverts, the mains and conduits whose tangles sustain the Capitol above, I rested in his love. He poured through me like an endorphin rush that crescendoed as the train sped along carrying its cargo of God's people to their unique and personal destinies that day. Arriving near my clinic, I took another escalator to the surface, and went about my work.

Trappist monk and celebrated author Thomas Merton once described a vision he had in everyday life that happened as he walked down a city street. "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers." Merton later reflected, "There is no way to telling people people they are all walking around shining like the sun." I used to reflect a great deal upon those words, and wondered if I could ever love like that, or whether I could see God's people in that way.

When I first read Merton's lines, I thought perhaps his experience had been a singular event; similar to the spiritual epiphany experienced in the 1500's by Saint Ignatius on the river Cardoner in Spain, where "the eyes of his understanding were opened..." I used to look for powerful experiences of God in discreet particular moments, but recently it seems to me that mystical contact with Him comes more frequently in repeated series of commonplace activities, such as a commute.

Recognizing the Lord in any place or time is sometimes as simple as asking, "Where is God in this?" The question asked and God's aid invoked, He presents Himself in pajama clad travelers, public transit platforms, and views of rose-tinted bridges. Sometimes he touches us strongly, as in those ecstatic moments approaching the Foggy Bottom platform, but He is generally more subtle. It is increasingly apparent to me that he can be seen everywhere and in everything. For those interested in finding Him, one place to look is in the breeze blowing up the Rosslyn Station tunnel.

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