

Prayer as Experience of God

As Christians and as religious we are dedicated to living for God. A religious is one who leaves the world to live entirely for God. But what does this mean? Does it mean anything? What does it mean to know and love God, to experience him? People complain that they have no experience of God. And this is true of good Christians, even of religious.

First of all, we should exclude what it does not mean. To have an experience of God does not mean to recognize God as one being alongside of many other beings. God is not that kind of reality. God is not the world or people. God is the absolute, the ground of all being. God is love, says St. John; he is life and light. And yet in spite of this transcendence, he is Father. He has revealed himself as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is through Christ, through our union in Christ, that we are adopted sons and say, "Abba, Father." Christ reveals the Father, he is the sacrament of the Father, just as the Church is the sacrament of Christ. In Christ we somehow experience the infinite God who is not able to be experienced. The reason why we have such tremendous difficulty in recognizing an experience of God is because he is different, because he is totally other. The signs of his presence are part of this world, but he is the great "Beyond" in the midst of life. It is only with time and with growth that one is able to see through, to penetrate the signs in which God comes to us, the sign that is Christ, the sign that is the Church, the sign that is the Word of God in sacred scripture. The experience of God is unique. It is something that we cannot communicate, at least adequately. We can't even communicate our interpersonal experiences to each other. These are incommunicable, subjective realities that are our own. When the Person we are relating to is the infinite God, what do we expect? We should expect to feel nothing, to see nothing;

yet in faith we know there is a real experience. We call it the Christian experience. It is something and yet it is beyond words; it is nothing.

One with God

How do we know if we are in contact with God in our prayer? How do we know if we are going beyond formulas and imagery and concepts? The meeting must be beyond psychological mechanisms and on the level of the spirit, which is the very depth of our being. This is where God comes to us, even though he identifies his presence in visible signs. How do we know that we are getting beyond the signs and experiencing this God in his transcendent reality? *Time Magazine* recently recorded the difficulties of translating the liturgy into some native South Sea tongues. In New Guinea a typical greeting is: "I am here and you are there." The Hail Mary is translated: "Mary, you stay right there." Isn't this a description of a lot of our prayers? We have been criticized for identifying God "out there" and "up there," and so often we make our prayers, our vocal prayers and our liturgical prayers, even our meditation, as if God were a million miles out in space. This is no experience of God, even though it is words and feeling. God is not out there! God is the very ground of our being. In a sense, God is part of us, or better, we are part of him, because "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts, 17). Through his grace we are in touch with him.

Prayer must realize contact with God, otherwise it is illusion, otherwise it is self-hypnosis, or autosuggestion. But we must not judge this contact by feeling or magnificent concepts or ideas. They are no real indication that we are really at one with God, because the authentic contact is a state of being more than

a state of psychological experience. Real prayer is like an adult marriage relationship compared with adolescent love. Adolescent love is somewhat shallow generally, and yet is filled with enthusiasm, words, affections, and external expressions. The tried and true love relationship between married people is a real relationship. This is real contact. The forms whereby we attempt to come in contact with God are not the most important thing. What is immanent in them is more important than their appearances. Yet these forms should speak to us. This is why we have the reforms in the liturgy. The liturgy is supposed to put us in contact with God. It is the source and the summit of our encounter with God. Yet oftentimes the liturgy does not speak to us, because it is a foreign language or uses materials and expressions that don't speak to us. Yet the important thing is that the liturgy stimulate and perfect in us the life of grace. It is not enough that we feel God "near" in our liturgical celebration or that we enjoy the sense of community. We must go beyond even these sensations.

God Is Where We Find Others

Our test for our prayer is the test Our Lord gave us for our love. The test is our love for each other. Ultimately, the only way of assuring ourselves that we are in contact with God is that we have developed a deep relating to one another. Cardinal Newman said this a long time ago. Many people are saying it today. God is attained by our going to him through each other, by our revealing ourselves to each other in true manly or womanly love and regard for each other. When we really do engage in deep human relationships, it is a short step to a similarly deep relationship with God. Or is it not more accurate to say that God is attained in such human relationships, even if his name is not mentioned; that Person is touched in persons? Many people today think that we experience God only in such

horizontal relationships with people. God is where we find them. The only valid experience of God would be the experience of each other in common work, in common liturgy. This is truly experience of God, provided the love really goes out to the other person as person. We need not treat each other as mere signs of the Lord for this, but it is very possible not to have a supernatural, transcendental approach in our worldly work, namely, when we use others to serve ourselves, rather than place ourselves at the service of others. Only when we are acting out of charity are we experiencing God in our worldly occupations. In other words, when we are unselfish, we are experiencing God.

Living the Presence of God

The discussions today about the death of God theology are occasioned largely by the fact that many people are not able to experience God in their lives. "God language" means nothing to them, "God" is not real. An ethical code in imitation of Jesus is all that is possible or necessary, some think. Jesus is real, we can imagine him and especially we can imitate him. In this approach Jesus is not a person, Jesus is "a place to be" and the "place to be" is beside one's neighbor. So the death of God theologians—or at least one of them, Dr. Hamilton—developed the ethical substitute for a very abstract and theoretical teaching about experiencing God. This is not a valid solution in our opinion. We want to imitate Christ and we do want to be realistic about the practice of charity, but at the same time we are firmly convinced that even the world-come-of-age does not exclude God or take him out of the picture. In fact, a really mature Christianity is living in the presence of God. This means living for God, acting for God and thereby in a mysterious but real way truly experiencing God.