

# EXPERIENCE OF GOD

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**G**OD REVEALS himself in words that men can understand. He comes to us in time and space, in movement and process. He meets us in our world with its concerns and problems, its good and evils. The accordeon-like movement of God's action, compressing and extending through history, calls us to correspond with his will by consolidating or stretching in unison with him. The sign, therefore, of authentic personal experience of the living God is the conformity between what we hear him saying to us in our hearts and what he reveals externally through the signs of the times. This union of faith and action is made difficult because it occurs in that realm where we find ourselves hard of hearing and dim of vision, if not deaf and blind, and sluggish in response.

This article will explore with a developmental systems-model some characteristics of God's call in our age, and some of the difficulties in response that man is presently meeting.

God first revealed his typical way of calling his people to movement when he said to Abraham: 'Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you . . . Abraham went as the Lord directed him, and Lot went with him. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran'.<sup>1</sup> The key to understanding this passage, for the purposes of this paper, is given in the epistle to the Hebrews: 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going'.<sup>2</sup> Now, if there is anything that is predominant in the signs of our times, both in our personal lives and in our historical movement, it is that we are painfully, acutely aware that we do not know where we are going. God allowed Abraham seventy-five years of consolidation, and then abruptly called him to extend himself from Haran into darkness. It was radical, unexpected, and made him reach beyond reason to faith. He did not know where he was going, and that call to trust was, for Abraham, the hallmark of the authenticity of his experience. These dimensions of Abraham's vocation are also true in our times.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 12, 1. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 11, 8.

God reveals himself as a God of process, of time and history. He calls for a trust that is absolute and utterly personal. He says to each: 'I who love you will care for you, and I want your love for me to show itself by trusting dependence, and by going to the place that I will show you'. Hence the experience of God is in fact an on-going series of experiences, each one of which must be left behind in order to meet him anew. Since life with God means living and moving with him, the relationship will be accompanied by a kind of continual grieving for the loss of God, as well as by the continual temptation to settle into any one experience and call it final. This temptation is especially strong after the first encounters with God, which seem so wonderful and full of the promise of repose and fulfilment. Then somehow we find ourselves alone, perhaps confused, and wondering if the meeting were real at all. If we are faithful, we can grieve over the loss of God, knowing that there is no turning back, no recapturing the bliss of Haran or Tabor; and we can go forth again.

We have just been describing the process of conversion, or *metanoia*. It is a process that extends over time and is experienced in many different ways with varying degrees of intensity or vagueness; but the rhythm is the same for every person who meets God and for the community of man as a whole. It is God himself who has revealed that this is the way he will meet us.

The process of experience of God is analogous to the progressive stages of human development, from learning basic trust to intimacy, union, and interdependence. Each stage must be assimilated, lost, grieved over, then combined with all the previous stages so that it becomes the base for further integration. If a person gets locked into any one stage, or regresses to previous more comfortable and apparently more secure positions, growth stops and a pathological condition develops. For example, when a child is learning to walk, the mother holds him while he takes his first steps. A relationship is formed within which the child feels very supported and secure. Then the mother steps back and the child feels bewildered and abandoned. Doubt and a sense of betrayal are very real. If the child takes several steps by himself, he can come to understand that his mother has faith in his ability to walk by himself. Confidence grows and the child believes that he is trusted and can trust the care of his mother in a period of extension when he is without the previous support. For a while the mother catches the child before he falls and a new dependency grows. However, a time comes when

the child is allowed to fall, and again the sense of betrayal and loss of protection occur. Part of this process of growth is learning that all is not lost by a mistake. A new level of confidence and trust should emerge from the experience when it has been reflected upon and accepted. Similarly, we progress through life consolidating gains, losing, grieving, trusting, gathering all past experience, and extending. There is no stopping. Moreover, all of these aspects of the growth-process go on simultaneously on different levels. So we are at the same time losing in one respect, grieving over something else, and consolidating some gain. On the spiritual level, for instance, we are both grieving over the death and loss of Jesus and rejoicing in his resurrection. There is no rest unless a person chooses to stagnate psychologically or spiritually. The iron law of development is that it is through leaving behind, a kind of dying, that we come to life.

When God possesses the memory, growth comes out of encounter and departure. St John of the Cross speaks of this purification of the memory as necessary so that the faculties of the soul may focus on the action of God.<sup>3</sup> All the elements of distrust must be progressively removed so that the soul may grow in intimacy with God. St Ignatius describes the same process in the rules for the discernment of spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

... let him who is in desolation labour to hold on in patience . . . let him consider that he shall soon be consoled . . .

... let him who is in consolation think how he shall carry himself in the desolation that will come on afterwards, gathering new strength for that time.<sup>4</sup>

This is the language of process and of the confident acceptance and anticipation of growth through alternating experience.

The psalmist is continually praying in the same manner. He recalls the wonderful deeds of God in the past, knows that he cannot go back to them, affirms his belief in the hidden action of God in the present, and hopes for the future. God himself, through Isaiah, cries out against the idolatry of settling down in any facet of the relationship with him: 'Remember not the things of the past, the things of long ago consider not. See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'<sup>5</sup> God is speaking here of himself in the language of faith-in-process. One of the reasons that the mystics have such a hard time describing their experience of God

<sup>3</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book III, ch I-XV.

<sup>4</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 318, 320, 321, 323.

<sup>5</sup> Isai 43, 18-19.

is that they are aware of the impossibility of trying to capture a love-relationship that is constantly evolving, and for that reason is dark and inexpressible. A cloistered nun recently described her personal experience of this same reality:

If one takes days as a whole together they seem much alike, but how many myriads of tiny differences from one to another. So it is, I guess, with my soul: myriads of nuances of his love intertwined in each moment, and yet the general aspect seems much the same.<sup>6</sup>

God demands both of the individual and of the community that they set out on the journey and leave the conversion-experience behind in order to be aware of the 'myriad nuances'. The signs of this call to the world today are also myriad. Many prophetic voices are calling for a more radical public witness of our commitment in the form of true poverty, labour for peace, and self-sacrificing charity to the poor of God. Insistently in recent years, the magisterium of the Church has called to the rich nations to dispossess themselves of the affluence they enjoy because of their oppression of the poor. We believers are being called to join all men of good will to reform the sinful structures of our society. Here again is the voice of the prophet calling upon Israel to cease oppressing the poor, the orphan and the widow. This call is being made in the name of God, and is a strong indication of the direction he is taking. A nation or church or person who professes to be serving God today must seriously examine what God they are following if they do not hear or heed the prophets' voices, or if they even help to silence or to dilute these voices.

God's vocation to us is as radical and unreasonable as the demand he made to Abraham to give all away and go to a new land. Such a summons can only be heard where there is faith and an unwavering commitment not to rest in an autistic complacency or a false confidence inspired by our previous experiences of God's love for us. The disciples could have remained on the mount of the transfiguration, but if they had, they would have found it a sterile, barren place, because God in the person of Jesus had gone forth in commitment to serve his people, to walk the long dusty roads to Jerusalem and his death. He had been strengthened by the experience on Tabor, but he did not rest there. In fact, he even told the disciples to forget about what had happened until later, when they would be better able to remember and see it in the context of history

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<sup>6</sup> Discalced carmelite in correspondence with the present writer, March 2, 1973.

and process. The process is always the same: grieving over the loss of God, commitment of service to his people, rediscovery of God, risk of death, hope in the resurrection. There is no room for nostalgia for the past experience. God is a God of the here and now. He is the giver of daily bread. He condemns the man who hoards his riches. That contemporary prophetic voices are almost universally ignored is to be expected when one considers the unhappy history of God's appeals to his people. However, today the voices are not being ignored in some sectors of the third world, among the poor themselves, who look in amazement at those of us who are in a position to do something but who are not moving; and yet we all claim to be listening to the same God.

### *General systems*

A disturbing voice is also being spoken in the expression of those men of our age who often profess not to believe in God, but who are seeking the unity of mankind in thought and in action. This humanitarian striving sounds very much like a prophetic call. Conscious of the inter-relatedness of all phenomena, modern thinkers are taking a systems-approach to problems rather than isolating and considering the parts individually. Solutions are being sought in terms of ecological balances and *gestalts* in the attempt to remedy deviations in the functioning of the systems. In living systems such as the human, the being functions on many levels simultaneously and is a member of many interacting systems. For example, a man is a finely balanced biological system with many sub-systems all exercising a mutually causal effect on each other. A deviation in any one of the parts of the system influences all the other parts. In fact, the deviation cannot be properly understood separated from its influence on the other parts, and its being influenced by them. It is clear that men who are working to improve the human condition are eagerly calling upon all the sciences to provide their perspectives for a more integrated view of the system of the world. Those who have faith in God believe that he is the ultimate system, the unifying force of all reality. From a systems point of view, the words of St Paul sound very scientific as well as mystical:

In him, everything in heaven and on earth was created, . . . all were created through him, and for him. He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being. It is he who is the head of the body . . . It pleased God to make absolute fulness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the

heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross.

God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fulness of time; namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth<sup>7</sup> into one under Christ's headship.<sup>7</sup>

Hence men who are thinking and working to solve many world problems are being led toward the knowledge of God through their ever-expanding reflections on unifying systems. While they may say that a believer's private experience of God is only of marginal importance to their main concerns, and may even be held suspect, a cosmic yet intensely personal awareness of God is quite intriguing to them. These men are aware that there are intimations of a transcendent unifying principle in the purposefulness of natural systems and their mutual interdependence. It is the task of believers to translate these intimations into realities on the levels of theory and practice.

A prophet in this age, as in every age, is one who can interpret the signs of God's action in time into language that men can understand. The prophet's message will have credence to the extent that he can combine true knowledge of men, their needs and their language, with God. Yet, since the prophet is not himself in a static state, his awareness of himself is that of one who is committed to process in relation to others who are also in process. He knows that he must move because he has been called by God to move, and because he is in relationship to other men who must also move. He is a conscious member of the people of God which is a pilgrim community.

The analogy of the mystical body is apt here. It is a symbol of an integrating, unifying system in which part cares for part, while at the same time the whole is living, growing, changing and doing. What scandalizes men and makes it hard for them to believe in a dynamic God is the example of a body that is neglecting itself. Then it is a system out of balance, where deviance seems to predominate. It is a body in which some parts are indulging themselves at the expense of other parts. The witness of the rich members of the body of Christ feeding off the poor members calls into serious question the authenticity of the experience of God, at least in the lives of the rich members. The consequences of this kind of systems-thinking are radical and seem to converge with the way God moves, if we take scripture as a norm. Ezechiel, especially, was called upon to perform

<sup>7</sup> Col 1, 16-20; Eph 1, 9-10.

symbolic counter-cultural actions to call Israel's attention to its unfaithfulness.

The real effect of a prelate being driven in his own limousine to a news conference to protest abortion, while another part of the body is starving in the streets of Latin America because of the system that has provided the prelate with his car, is incalculable in this day of the global village. Socially and politically his protest is nullified by his insensitive example. Spiritually, the situation is a traumatic insult to the mystical body, that is, it is sin. It is not enough to say that the sign does not have to go where it points. Such an attitude betrays a lack of commitment to and unity with the process of the system. In short, to harbour this attitude is to separate oneself from God, who is no longer in the expected place, but who has moved on. The image of the prelate is used to accentuate the point. In fact, the whole community and each of us in it is being called to examine ourselves and give living prophetic witness. Those who seem to be speaking most clearly to these issues, in addition to the magisterium of the Church, are the theologians of the third world who are labouring to develop a theology of liberation.

... the new theological thinking now occurring in Latin America comes more from the christian groups committed to the liberation of their people, than from the traditional centres for the teaching of theology. The fruitfulness of reflection will depend on the quality of these commitments.

If we look more deeply into the question of the value of salvation which emerges from our understanding of history – that is, a liberating praxis – we see that at issue is a question concerning *the very meaning of christianity*. To be a christian is to accept and to live – in solidarity, in faith, hope and charity – the meaning that the word of the Lord and our encounter with him gives to the historical becoming of mankind on the way towards total communion.

The product of a profound historical movement, this aspiration to liberation is beginning to be accepted by the christian community as a sign of the times, as a call to commitment and interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Conversion at the core of a person's being is the basic experience of the believer. It is an experience that changes the heart from stone to flesh.<sup>9</sup> It is a call heard in faith which demands that the hearer 'give all away in order to come and follow'. The test of the genuineness of the call coming to the christian community from so many

<sup>8</sup> Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A Theology of Liberation* (New York, 1973), pp 102, 49, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek 36, 26.

sectors is the similarity of our reactions to those disciples of Jesus: 'Then Jesus looked at him with love and told him, There is one more thing you must do. Go and sell what you have and give to the poor . . . After that, come and follow me. At these words the man's face fell. He went away sad, for he had many possessions'.<sup>10</sup> If salvation is bound up with liberating praxis in the context of historical process, as cited above, the response must surely be: 'Who then, can be saved? To which he replied, Things that are impossible for man are possible for God'.<sup>11</sup> There is an essential note of conflict to the call which is often noted in the gospels, and almost as often quickly passed over. 'I have come to light a fire on the earth. How I wish the blaze were ignited! I have a baptism to receive. What anguish I feel till it is over! Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? I assure you the contrary is true; I have come for division'.<sup>12</sup> The conflict within man comes from our attachment to the familiar and secure, and our timidity in the face of what seem excessive and unreasonable demands.

It is important that the agents of conversion understand and be committed in faith to process and development. In the language of general systems:

... the survival of any living system (here defined as any self-maintaining entity, from closely bounded units like the cell to loosely bounded units like the family) depends on two important processes. One is morphostasis, which means that the system must maintain constancy in the face of environmental vagaries. It does this through the error-activating process known as negative feed-back; the simple house thermostat is usually given as an example. The other process is morphogenesis, which means that at times a system must change its basic structure. This process involves the positive feed-back loops and is deviation amplifying, as in the case of a successful mutation which allows a species to adapt to changed environmental conditions.<sup>13</sup>

Since man is free and master of his own change, understanding the signs of the times and reflecting prayerfully on the movements of the Spirit will enable the agent to determine how in any given period and level of structure he is being called upon to act. Thus, on the levels of consolidation he will act in a deviation-countering way, and on the levels of extension he will act as a catalyst of change in a

<sup>10</sup> Mk 10, 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> Lk 18, 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Lk 12, 49-51.

<sup>13</sup> Hoffman, Lynn: 'Deviation-Amplifying Processes in Natural Groups', in *Changing Families* (New York, 1971), p 290.



deviation-amplifying way. Both these processes can be at work simultaneously in the same agent on different levels with respect to person, community, nation, church or globe. The adage that 'all that is needed for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing', that is, maintain the *status quo*, is an example of how deviation-countering activity on the wrong level can in fact be sinful. God is asking us to become aware of changed environmental conditions, to discern his call in and through them, and to act as agents of our own liberation in truth. Jesus speaks of himself as the true prophet and agent of historical development. 'Lord, said Thomas, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus told him: I am the way, and the truth, and the life'.<sup>14</sup> Jesus speaks directly to the issue of truth and liberation from sin in the context of Abraham: 'If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free'.<sup>15</sup>

### *Modern currents of spirituality*

It follows that some of the currents of modern spirituality should be looked at closely in the light of what has been said. There is, for example, a rapid growth in the popularity of privately-directed retreats. Rising from this experience is the deeply felt need for on-going spiritual direction to consolidate and extend the fruits of the retreat. This direction is necessary, since, as St Ignatius says in the eighth rule for second week discernment:

... the spiritual person ... ought to look with much watchfulness and attention to discern the proper time of such actual consolation from the following, in which the soul remains aglow and favoured with the flavour and remnants of the consolation that is past: because often in this second period, by her own proper activity, working upon habits and consequences of concepts and judgements, she comes, either through the good spirit or through the evil spirit, to form various purposes and opinions, which are not given immediately by God our Lord; and therefore they must needs be very well discussed before entire credence is given to them and they are carried into effect.<sup>16</sup>

It is in the period after the retreat when one is on the level of spiritual consolation that the temptation exists to 'privatize' the experience and to cling to the spiritual 'turn-on' of the retreat. There is evidence that this situation is actually happening. It is a

<sup>14</sup> Jn 14, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Jn 8, 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 336.

temptation to a call to a species of spiritual complacency that baptizes the *status quo* of a plentiful life with a secure future basking in the glow of God's sanction. It should be kept in mind all the time that the majority of our brothers live in circumstances of life so precarious that they do not even have the leisure for the luxury of any kind of 'spiritual' experience. A citation from a theologian of liberation, referring to ecclesiastical and political disfunctioning systems, can apply equally to a similarly disfunctioning interior life when the parts are out of balance.

It is interesting to note that when there was no clear understanding of the political role of the Church, the distinction of planes model [strict separation of spiritual and temporal] was disapproved of by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. But when the system – of which the ecclesiastical institution is a central element – began to be rejected, this same model was adopted to dispense the ecclesiastical institution from effectively defending the oppressed and exploited and to enable it to preach a lyrical spiritual unity of all christians. The dominant groups, who have always used the Church to defend their interests and maintain their privileged position, today . . . call for a return to the purely religious and spiritual function of the Church. The distinction of planes banner has changed hands. Until a few years ago it was defended by the vanguard; now it is held aloft by power groups, many of whom are in no way involved with any commitment to the christian faith. Let us not be deceived, however. Their purposes are very different. Let us not unwittingly aid the opponent.<sup>17</sup>

A purely 'privatized' spirituality, then, can have disastrous effects in the mystical body and can hinder justice in the world. On the level of privilege alone, it is evident that there is high prestige accruing to those who are in the vanguard of the retreat, spiritual direction, discernment of spirits and charismatic movements. Those who are being lionized should be very much on their guard against being seduced away from proclaiming the harsher realities of the christian life. On the other hand, the spiritual-political activists and those who are insistently calling for radical reform, even revolution, of the oppressive structures of our society may be personally admired even though they do not have much institutional support. As long as they remain on the fringe of the christian community they remain showpieces to the world, the 'token' radicals of the Church.

Let us suppose for a moment that a retreatant made a directed

<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *op.cit.*, p 65.

retreat and told his director that his meditation of the Two Standards had led him to the conviction that he should take radical political or social action against the unjust social structure of his country. What would the director's reply be? We might find a clue in the directions of Ignatius to the retreat director. Since Ignatius felt that religious life was a more radical way of living the christian commitment than marriage, and therefore safer for salvation, he said that clearer signs from God were required for the retreatant to make an election for marriage than for religious life.<sup>18</sup> Hence, *mutatis mutandis*, greater indications of the spirit might be required for the less radical change than for the greater.<sup>19</sup>

We have seen that experience of God entails in this age, as in every age, the process of progressive detachment and setting forth into the unknown. This personal pilgrimage is a passage through the stages of growth in trust toward the union of intimacy in love. Continuity is provided by the memory, the agent of faith-guided reflection, which shows us that God's action is evolving, not static. The same function is served for the community by the prophet. A systems theory is one model for understanding levels of personal and community faith-involvement in the world. This model provides a point of convergence with modern thought, and can be used to describe the mutual interdependence of social systems and structures and the mystical body of Christ. The model also gives direction to considerations that input on one level has effects on other levels as well. Prophets' voices as well as the magisterium of the Church are calling on believers to take a world view in which political and social structures and faith structures are interdependent. Spirituality, concerned with the experience of the relationship between God and man, must take these calls seriously as the authentic signs of God's action in the world pointing the direction for believers to take. In the words of St John:

I ask you, how can God's love survive in a man who has enough of this world's goods yet closes his heart to his brother when he sees him in need? Little children, let us love in deed and in truth and not merely talk about it.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Autograph Directories of Saint Ignatius Loyola* (Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, New Jersey), p 8.

<sup>19</sup> Cf *Spiritual Exercises*, 189: 'For the amendment and reformation of one's own life and estate'. The section ends with the words: 'For let each one reflect that his advancement in all spiritual things will be exactly in proportion to the degree in which he goes out from self-love, self-will, and self-interest'. Cf also 337-344, 'Rules for Almsgiving'; and 351, the sixth of the 'Rules for Scruples'.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Jn 3, 17-18.