

04. Experiencing love: a sacred encounter



Ettore Masina, Jesus of Nazareth, Libreria Borgo, Rome, 1977.

To love is to commit oneself to be with others as they continue to grow towards the fullness of their unique individuality.

This is not possible without a genuine self-love.

Indeed, Paul claims that the whole of the Jewish law ‘is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’ (Galatians 5:14; compare Mark 12:33).

Loving oneself involves a recognition of the fact that I, whoever I am and whatever has happened to me, am capable, in some way and to some degree, of receiving love and of offering my unique self in love to others.

Genuine belonging finds expression neither in the denial of difference nor in creating a dependency.

Love is not something we find, or something we fall into. Love is something we create when we recognise our belonging, delight in the other, and commit ourselves to respect the mystery of our own being by daring the journey into our own heart, while we journey into the heart of the world and while we are with others in their becoming. When this commitment is mutual, love becomes that precious gift called friendship.

Our experience of love never provides full satisfaction, for there are depths to our heart and to the world that remain to be explored. The inner well seems bottomless. Our yearning seems limitless. Our longing for love seems inexhaustible.

Love is communion with reality. The truer our love the more real and more complete our connection with ourselves and with the world around us.

We must trust our longing for love. Love is not something we can control. If the person we love withdraws love, there may be nothing we can do. Sometimes we fail in love because we have not been in touch with our own reality or the reality of another. We must learn from our failures, but we must not despair of discovering love.

Experience teaches us also that it is not easy to stay in touch with our heart. We experience other distracting desires. Following them leads us into relationships that wear the mask of love but that prove distracting.

We have been focusing on our common human experience simply to demonstrate why it is that love, and our yearning for it, generates our primary energy for living. If we understand this we will be encouraged to be more creative in our loving, and more committed to purifying the springs of our yearning so that we will learn to love ‘with all our heart and mind and soul and strength’ (Mark 12:30).

The more authentically we follow our most profound yearning for communion, the closer our connection with reality. This connection reaches its peak in the experience of love.

Let us now examine three key aspects of our yearning and of the reality with which we find ourselves in communion.

Each of these aspects points to the existence of a transcendent and immanent God: transcendent, because we are not God, nor is any other object of our direct experience; immanent, because we and everything around us exist only because we participate in the being of God.

Whether we realise it or not authentic human love necessarily involves communion with God. It is a sacred encounter.

1. Our yearning for communion.
2. Our experience of wanting to know.
3. Everything is in some way inter-connected.

Another dimension of all the objects that we know and love is that while they in fact exist, we have to look beyond them if we are to find a sufficient reason for their existing. Nothing we know and love is self-explanatory.

The reality which provides the ultimate and fully satisfactory answer to why everything exists, and which, unlike everything else we know, does not require the existence of some further being to account for its existence, is the reality which we call God.

God is the creating source, the sustaining ground and the final goal for all that we experience, including ourselves. We can expect our communion with God to bring us to a realisation that all we are and all we have, including our connections with reality, are gifts coming from the source of all existence.

It is Love, the Love that is God, that sustains everything in being and that binds everything together.

Teilhard de Chardin spoke of 'God' as 'the heart and the beyond of everything.' Whatever errors are present in the ways in which 'God' is envisaged, the great religions of the world are right to continue to speak of 'God' and to explore ways of relating to this ultimate Reality 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

The pursuit of truth in any field will suffer from fundamental distortions if 'God' is overlooked.

Every experience of love is a limited communion with God. Every experience of love, therefore, is a sacred encounter when our heart is awake and attentive to our communion with God. The experience of being awake and attentive to our communion with God is the experience we call prayer. Since God is love, we can expect prayer to engage us in a love-communion.

This is how prayer was experienced by the fourteenth century English mystic, Julian of Norwich:

She prays: 'God, of your goodness, give yourself to me, for you are in love with me' (*Showings*, chapter 77).

'Mercy is a sweet, gracious operation in love, mingled with plentiful pity, for mercy works, protecting us, and mercy works, turning everything to good for us ... Mercy is a property of compassion that belongs to motherhood in tender love ... Mercy works, protecting, enduring, vivifying and healing, and it is all of the tenderness of love; and grace works with mercy, raising, rewarding, endlessly exceeding what our love and labour deserve, distributing and displaying the vast plenty and generosity of God's royal dominion in his wonderful courtesy' (*Showings*, chapter 48).

A work on mystical prayer from the same period includes the following: ‘I tell you this: one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do’ (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, page 60).

Teilhard de Chardin wrote: ‘Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire’ (*The Evolution of Chastity*, 1934).

We cannot harness these energies if we are not in communion with God, if we do not pray.

We are now ready to look more closely at the experience of prayer itself and we begin by stating that since God remains transcendent, we should not be surprised to discover that the primary experience of prayer is not one of rest in the possession of God, though, as we shall see, there are moments when we do have such an experience, however imperfectly. In the early stages of our journey into our heart (into the inner crystal castle) our primary experience of prayer is longing.

Perhaps the best way to reflect upon this truth is to listen to the prayers of longing found in the Scriptures and then to some of the great masters of prayer in the Christian tradition as they share their experience with us. Let us go first to the psalms, savouring their words in an attempt to pick up similar longings coming from our own heart.

‘O GOD, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, O God.
I thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1).

‘O God, you are my God, I seek you, I thirst for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory’ (Psalm 63:1-2).

‘I long, indeed I faint for the courts of the GOD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God’ (Psalm 84:2).

‘Let the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.
Seek GOD and God’s strength;
seek God’s presence continually’ (Psalm 105:3-4).

‘I stretch out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land’ (Psalm 143:6).

‘I yearn for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you’ (Isaiah 26:9).

‘When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart,
I will let you find me, says your GOD ...
and I will bring you back to the place
from which I sent you into exile’ (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’
Let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’
Let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.
The one who testifies to these things says,
‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen.
Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Revelation 22:17, 20).

Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Romans* 6,1-2

‘He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God’s; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for the things of this world, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, “Come to the Father”. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love.’

The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics (Ignatius 1991) Vol 6, 1967, 205

“We ‘raise up our soul’ (Psalm 25:1; 86:4; 143:8) by yearning for God (Psalm 119:20), thirsting for God (63:1; 143:6), losing the ground under our feet as we hang on God’s words (Psalm 119), pressing our soul against God (Psalm 63:8; 119:31), leaning against God’s breast silently, weaned in the spirit of childhood (Psalm 131), looking fixedly at God as a servant looks to the hand of his lord (Psalm 123:2), constantly admitting our need of grace (Psalm 51:7; 130:2; 143:1), being satisfied with the imperishability of God’s love (Psalm 103:17) instead of stopping short at the realisation of our own perishability (Psalm 37:2; 39; 90:5), and being ready to interpret the puzzling process whereby creatures come into being and pass away as the breathing in and out of the breath of God (Psalm 104:29-30)”

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395):

‘God wants the delay in pleasure to set fire to our desire, so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek God continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring God ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following God. The contemplation of God’s face is an endless walking towards God ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’ (*Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles*, 801).

Augustine

‘I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for, by inspiring me to long for you, you prepare me to receive you’ (Confessions 13.1).

‘Desire itself is your prayer, and if your desire is continuous your prayer is unceasing. For the apostle did not say in vain: Pray without ceasing. Is it possible that we should unceasingly bend the knee or prostrate our body or raise up our hands, that he should tell us: Pray without ceasing? There is a prayer that is unceasing. It is interior; it is desire. Whatever else you do, if you desire life that is eternal you do not cease to pray. If you do not wish to stop praying, do not stop desiring. Your unceasing desire is your uninterrupted voice. You will grow silent if you stop loving’ (On Psalm 37:14).

Augustine

‘The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot yet see. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when you do see, you may attain fulfilment ... By delaying the fulfilment of desire, God stretches the soul, and by this expansion God increases its capacity ... This is our life: to be exercised by desire. But we are exercised by holy desire only in so far as we have cut off our longings from the love of the world. We must empty that which is to be filled ... Let us stretch ourselves out towards God so that when God comes God may fill us. “We shall be like God, for we shall see God as God is’ (Treatise 4 on the First Letter of Saint John).

Gregory the Great (d. 604)



‘Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary of Magdala continued seeking Jesus when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: “Mary!” ... as if to say: “Now recognise the one who recognises you” ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him’ (Homily 25).

In his commentary on the Book of Job, Pope Gregory I writes:

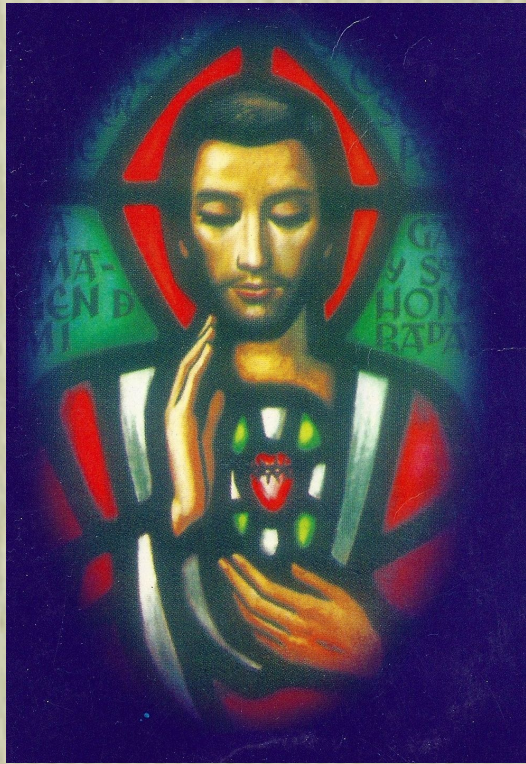
‘The Bridegroom hides when he is sought, so that, not finding him, the Bride may seek him with a renewed ardour; and the bride is hampered in her search so that this delay may increase the capacity for God, and that she may find one day more fully what she was seeking’ (Moralia V.6).

In a conversation with God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109), writes:

‘Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in God. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for God and, having locked the door, seek God out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: ‘I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek ... What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ...

Anselm continued

‘Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you’ (Proslogion chapter 1).



‘By you, O Lord, I have desire; by you let me have fulfilment. Cleave to God, O my soul, and never leave. Good Lord, do not reject me; I faint with hunger for your love; refresh me with it. Let me be filled with your love, rich in your affection, completely held in your care. Take me and possess me wholly, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit are alone blessed to ages of ages. Amen’ (Anselm, from Meditation on Human Redemption).

Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153).

‘If you find that it is good to cling close to God [Psalm 73:28], and if you are so filled with desire that you want to depart and to be with Christ [Philippians 1:23], with a desire that is intense, a thirst ever burning, an application that never flags, you will certainly meet the Word in the guise of a Bridegroom on whatever day he comes. At such an hour you will find yourself locked in the arms of Wisdom; you will experience how sweet divine love is as it flows into your heart. Your heart’s desire will be given to you, even while still a pilgrim on earth, though not in its fullness and only for a time, a short time ... And if you persist with prayers and tears, he will return each time, but only to disappear soon again and not return unless he is sought for with all your heart.

Bernard of Clairvaux (continued)

‘And so, even in this body we can often enjoy the happiness of the Bridegroom’s presence, but it is a happiness that is never complete because the joy of the visit is followed by the pain of his departure. You are his beloved and you have no choice but to endure this state until the hour when you lay down the body’s weary weight, and, raised aloft on the wings of desire, you follow the One you love wherever he goes’ (On the Song of Songs, Sermon 32:2).

It is not that God departs, it is that we can’t hold on forever (in this life) to the experience of God’s Presence.

Bernard of Clairvaux (continued)

‘The psalmist says: ‘Seek God’s face always’ [Psalm 105:4]. Nor, I think, will we cease to seek God even when we have found God. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart’s desire; and when we happily find God our desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. So it is that joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by God’s absence, for God is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present’ (On the Song of Songs, Sermon 84,2).

Teresa of Jesus

Teresa of Jesus tells us that if we wish to grow in prayer we will need the eyes and the heart of an eagle. She warns beginners that great desires for God can mask illusions and pride. The answer, however, is to be found in humility, not in the blunting of desire:

‘Desire from me what you want to desire, because this is what I want: for all my good is in pleasing you’ (17th Soliloquy).

John of the Cross:

‘God’s favours and visits are generally in accord with the intensity of the yearnings and ardours of love which precede them’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 13, 2).

‘God does not give grace and love except according to our desire and love. The more we desire and love, the more God gives’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 13,12).

It is not God who gives grace abundantly or sparingly. God wants each of us to ‘live to the full’ (John 10:10). The measure of God’s gift is the measure of our openness to receive.

John of the Cross:

‘Since we live with that driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatsoever is burdensome and disturbing’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 17,1).

‘The waters of inward delights do not spring from the earth. One must open toward heaven the mouth of desire, empty of all else that might fill it: “Open wide your mouth that I might fill it” [Psalm 81:10]’ (*Letter, 18th November 1586*).

John Donne

‘Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me’ (Holy Sonnets v).



To begin a life of prayer we must be attentive to the invitation of God whose Spirit is drawing us into the very centre of our being where God has made a home.

To persevere in prayer we must, with awakened and attentive heart, stay in touch with our longing for God, a longing that is itself a gift of grace. The pull of this longing will draw us into the heart of God.



George Viredaz from an icon of Christ and Saint John
Dormition Abbey, Jerusalem. Used with permission.