

## Chapter One. Heart speaking to heart

### I. What is prayer?

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Carmelite, is acknowledged as one of the great teachers of prayer. She defines prayer as: 'friendly communication, and frequently solitary conversation, with him who we know loves us' (*Life*, 8.5). In another place she offers the following advice: 'It is for you to look at him; he never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3).

Prayer is essentially a personal response to the mysterious communication which God initiates with each one. Since we cannot define God's initiative, we cannot define what a person's response should be. We each have to find our own way of responding to God's loving invitation to communion. We each have to find our own way of praying. At the same time there are some general principles which can guide us in our response, and we can learn much from the teaching of those, like Teresa, who have journeyed in prayer and who have given expression to what they have learned along the way.

One such person is John of the Cross whom Teresa chose to help her in her Carmelite reform. He writes: 'The language which God hears best is silent love' (*Maxims on Love*, n.53). Therese of Lisieux, a young Carmelite sister who died at the end of the nineteenth century, and who has recently been declared a doctor of the Church for her role in bringing many people to an understanding of the essence of the Christian life, including prayer, writes: 'Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy' (*Story of a Soul*).

Ruth Burrows, a contemporary English Carmelite, has this to say: 'True prayer is a giving of self to God, an opening of the self to God' (*Before the Living God*, page 101). In another work she writes: 'Prayer is our saying Yes to God who is bending to us, offering us love, inviting us to intimate friendship' (*Living in Mystery*, page 96). A Carmelite Magazine carried the following statement concerning prayer:

'Prayer is a conversation, not an interview. Its purpose is friendship, not gain. It is a dialogue, not a monologue. It involves listening as well as talking. It requires silence as well as sound. God can talk to us by an earthquake, or by a gentle breeze. He can talk to us without the noise of words. He can talk to us equally well while we are talking to Him. Not only is he listening to what we are saying, but he has already told us what we are telling Him. He hears what we are saying. He hears what we are not saying. He hears what we are unable to say. And He answers in his own way from within our thoughts and our words. He can bypass the ear and the imagination and the intellectual concept, and give us to understand his meaning beyond the reach of words. He has no need to come in through the ear. He is already in our heart and knows its content.'

I have begun with statements from Carmelite women because of the wonderful contribution they continue to make in teaching us how to pray. However, everyone who has ever responded to God (including you the reader) has something to say on this most wonderful of subjects. Let us listen to an English mystic, Julian of Norwich, the first woman writer of the English language and a contemporary of Chaucer: 'The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God knowing that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need.' We might find help, too, in the following statements from current writers:

'Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things. And that this invisible world is both the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ... Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world's surface ... The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being's life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible. Not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God's creative word, God himself.

Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said "When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven." This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity. I use the word "immensity" on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God.'(Anthony Bloom, *Courage to pray*, pages 5-6).

'Mornings and evenings. The traditional times for prayer and the singing of birds, times of graceful light whereby the heart may envisage its poetry and describe for us what it sees. But how do we find the mornings and evenings within? How do we establish and behold them and be affected by their gentle atmospheres and small miracles? How do we enter this healing twilight? The matter requires our imagination. In particular, it requires the aspect of our imagination we have come to know as prayer.

We pray. We imagine our way inwards and downwards, and there, with heartfelt thoughts or words we declare our fears and our yearnings; we call out for love and forgiveness; we proclaim our responsibility and gratitude. The struggling, grounded soul speaks to the higher spirit and thus we exist in the mornings and the evenings of the heart: thus we are affected and changed by the qualities we have created within ourselves. Might not prayer then be our most accessible means to inner reconciliation, a natural healing function in response to the pain of the divided self and the divided world? Might not prayerfulness be part of our survival instinct belonging more to the wilderness than to the church. And just as we have become somewhat alienated from nature and its cycles, could it be that we are also estranged from our instinctive capacity for prayer and need to understand it afresh from the example of the natural world?

The person contemplates the tree. The tree sends its roots beneath the surface, seeking nourishment in the dark soil: the rich "broken down" matter of life. As they reach down and search, the roots hold the tree firmly to the earth. Thus held and nourished, the tree grows upwards into the light, drinking the sun and air and expressing its truth: its branches and foliage, its flowers and fruit. Life swarms around and into it. Birds and insects teem within its embrace, carrying pollen and seed. They nest and breed and sing and buzz. They glorify the creation. The tree changes as it grows. It is torn by wind and lightning, scarred by frost and fire. Branches die and new ones emerge. The drama of existence has its way with the tree but still it

grows; still its roots reach down into the darkness; still its branches flow with sap and reach upward and outward into the world.

A person kneels to contemplate a tree and to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life. The person imagines mornings and evenings in a great forest of prayers, swarming and teeming with life. The person is learning how to pray'(Michael Leunig, from *The Prayer Tree*).

Having shared these brief glimpses into our subject, let us examine at greater depth the origin of prayer. It lies in the wonder of God's self-revelation, for the initiative in prayer always comes from God. It is God who invites us into divine communion, and God does so by revealing himself to us and attracting us to respond. When we do respond we find ourselves engaged in prayer.

## **II. God reveals himself in his Word**

From the outset let us be clear on the fact that God remains beyond ('transcends') everything which we are capable of directly experiencing. God cannot be identified with anything of which we have immediate experience. This is not to say that God does not directly communicate with us nor are we saying that we do not experience God. We do experience God, but only insofar as God is expressed and revealed in a limited way in everything that exists. Creation may be compared to the colour in a stained glass window. We would not see the colour if there were no light, but without the stained glass the light itself would be invisible. It is seen only insofar as it is picked up by and expressed in the stained glass. In Paul's words: God is 'understood and seen through the things that he has made'(Romans 1:20).

It is the universal presence of God that explains the inter-connection of all things. It is God who is creating everything that is, bringing it into existence moment by moment, energising everything and binding everything into a single universe through mutual love-attraction. We might speak of the gravity of grace and we can say that it is God that we experience in every experience, but not God in God's own being, but only God as expressed in a limited created way in what we directly experience.

When we experience movements of thought and feeling that engage our yearning for communion with God, the One for whom we long, the One who is the source of all that is, it is important to realise that it is our own thoughts and our own feelings which we directly experience, not the God who communicates with us in and through them. When we experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God, it is important to realise that it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience, not the God who reveals himself to us in them and attracts us through them. When we read the words of the Bible written by the actual historical people who were inspired by God's Spirit, it is important to realise that it is their limited words that we directly experience, not the transcendent God who inspired them.

The inner movements and the outer realities engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, reveal something of the beauty, and participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God they are not to be identified with God. 'God' is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. 'God' is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns to know and to be in communion with this God. However, since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in all these experiences.

John the evangelist reminds us that ‘No one has ever seen God’(John 1:18). This truth is reiterated by all who have reflected on the nature of our religious experience, as is exemplified in the following sample quotations.

‘If you have understood something, then know that it is not God that you have understood. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something else, not God. If you thought you could understand God even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts’(Augustine, d.430, *Sermo* 52, vi, 16).

‘I have never seen you, Lord my God, I have never seen your face.’

(Anselm of Canterbury, d.1109, *Proslogion*, 1).

‘Nothing the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God.’

(Meister Eckhart OP, d.1327, *Sermon* 42).

‘Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that your faculties can comprehend and your senses feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to Him.’

(John of the Cross, d.1591, *Sayings of Light and Love*)

‘In divine communications, the soul experiences neither God nor God’s action, but only the movements produced within by that divine action.’

(Henri Grialou [Marie Eugène OCD, d.1967] *I want to see God*, page 353).

‘Everything we know about God should lead us to God, but when we stand before God we should leave all this knowledge behind, however true and rich it may be.’

(Anthony Bloom, *Courage to pray*, page 22).

Everything around us is created and sustained in existence by God. God is the ‘heart’ of all that exists, for creation is a participation in the very being of God. The closer we are in touch with anything that exists the closer we are in touch with God. We grow in union with God not by escaping from the world, but by penetrating to the heart, for God is at the centre of all that God has made. In the New Testament we read: ‘All things came into being through God’s word’(John 1:3). ‘In him we live and move and have our being’(Acts 17:28). ‘In him all things hold together’(Colossians 1:17). At the same time, God is the ‘beyond’ of everything, for God is not identified with creation, but transcends it. The closer we come to the heart, the more we are taken beyond into mystery.

Let us look first at creation and reflect on it as a ‘word’ of God, that is to say, as God’s self-expression and self-communication. In the prologue to his Gospel John writes: ‘All things came into being through the word of God, and without this word not one thing came into being’(John 1:3). Reflecting on the beauty of creation, Augustine writes:

‘But what is my God? I put my question to the earth.

It answered, “I am not God”, and all things on earth declared the same.

I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, “We are not your God. Seek what is above us”.

I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air and all that lives in it replied,

“Anaximenes is wrong. I am not God”.

I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me,

“Neither are we the God whom you seek”.

I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that come through the door of the senses,

and I said, "Since you are not my God tell me something of my God".  
Loud and clear they answered, "It is God who made us!"  
I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things.  
Their only answer was their beauty' (*Confessions* x.6).

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, expresses this truth in his poem *God's Grandeur* (1887):

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings'.

Teilhard de Chardin often gives expression to the mysterious attraction to God which we experience in experiencing creation:

'The true union that you ought to seek with creatures that attract you is to be found not by going directly to them, but by converging with them on God, sought in and through them. It is not by making themselves more material, relying solely on physical contacts, but by making themselves more spiritual in the embrace of God, that things draw closer to one another.'

(*Writings in time of war*, page 143).

'By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. "In him we live". As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it' (*The Divine Milieu*, page 89).

When we examine the various religious movements in the world, we came up against obvious distortions and projections. We observe human needs being projected and human pathology attempting to find an escape. However, for all their imperfections, at the heart of religion there is this constant attempt to respond to the attraction of the divine. This was recognised by Justin, an early Christian writer. In his second open letter to the Roman emperor in defence of Christianity, he values the wisdom found in the religious writers of Rome and attempts to present Christian wisdom as bringing this wisdom to its flowering:

'Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well,  
they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word.  
But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ,  
they often contradicted themselves.  
Whatever things were rightly said among people are the property of us Christians.  
For next to God we worship and love the Word

who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.

The Word became human for our sakes,

so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing.

For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way through the sowing of the Word implanted in them.

But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing,

and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from him' (*II Apologia*, c.160AD).

We find a similar understanding in Irenaeus, a contemporary of Justin:

'He who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God,

and always acknowledging the same Word of God

(although he has but now been manifested to us)

and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God

(although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times)

will know that he [the Son of God] descends even from the creation of the world to its end

upon the human race simply as such, from whom those who believe God and follow his word

receive that salvation which flows from him' (*Against Heresies* [c.180AD] IV,33.15)

This same Irenaeus has a wonderfully positive image for the various ways in which human beings give expression to the divine. He writes: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation' (AH IV,14,2). To leap immediately over to modern times, let us listen to Pope Paul VI:

'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable "seeds of the Word" and can constitute a true "preparation for the Gospel", to quote a felicitous term used by the Second Vatican Council and borrowed from Eusebius of Caesarea.'

(*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.53)

While recognising in the various religions of the world a response to God's self-communication, it is the conviction of Christianity that God's self-communication reached its perfect human form in Jesus of Nazareth. It was he who clarified for us in his person and in his teaching who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love. In the prologue to his Gospel, John expresses it in this way:

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is in the embrace of the Father, who has made him known' (John 1:14,16-18).

This conviction is expressed again and again throughout the documents of the New Testament:

'In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:14).

'Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3).

Pope John-Paul II expresses it this way:

‘In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who he is’ (*Mission of the Redeemer*, n.5).

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus - the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father - that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcome. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus’ Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus’ body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God’s love. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks his word and communicates himself to the world. We find this truth enunciated in the New Testament: ‘God has put all things under the feet of Christ and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Since God is present in everything that we experience, the depth and intimacy of our communion with God depends on the depth and intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong. Of special importance is our communion in love with those who have given themselves over to the attraction of grace and allowed God to permeate their being.

### **III. God reveals himself and comes to us in his Spirit**

God is love and God creates us for union with Himself. Grace draws us from the insecurity of our egoism towards God who is at the heart of our lives. When we respond to this divine invitation, we are drawn to share the life, the prayer-communion of Jesus himself, and so the divine intimacy of the life of the Trinity. This is spoken of as ‘supernatural’ because it is not something we can initiate or achieve of our human powers. It is God who transforms us into himself by drawing us into ever more intimate communion. Transforming union happens as we allow ourselves to be drawn into divine communion by Jesus’ own Spirit of Love. Paul writes: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

To the Samaritan woman Jesus promised: ‘The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (John 4:14). On a later occasion Jesus promised that rivers of life-giving water would flow from the heart of those who believed in him. John adds the following comment: ‘Jesus was speaking of the Spirit which those who believe in him were to receive’ (John 7:38-39). At the last supper we hear Jesus say:

‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’ (John 14:23).

‘As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them’ (John 17:21,26).

That God dwells in those who open their hearts to receive him is a constantly recurring theme in the writings of the mystics. Theophan the recluse, a Russian monk, writes in *The Art of Prayer*:

‘Descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you. The prayer takes a firm and steadfast hold when a small fire begins to burn in the heart. Try not to quench this fire, and it will become established in such a way that the prayer repeats itself. Then you will have within you a small murmuring stream.’

John of the Cross writes:

‘The Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden in the innermost being of the soul’(*Spiritual Canticle* 1,6).

‘God dwells in us and favours us with his love. He says to the soul “I am yours and for you. I am delighted to be what I am, so as to be yours and to give myself to you”’(*Living Flame* 3,6).

‘Enter within yourself and work in the presence of your Spouse, who is ever present loving you’

(*Maxims on Love* n.11).

‘O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your beloved is and where you may find him so as to be united with him. He dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without him’.

(*Spiritual Canticle* 1,7).

There is a danger here that we might think that because God is present in the centre of our own being we might need to withdraw from the world to be in communion with God. We have already seen that God is at the heart of everything that exists. We cannot be in communion with God if we are out of touch with our own heart. In the same way to the extent that we cut ourselves off from the world we are cutting ourselves off from God. Writing in the early years of the third century, Origen has this advice:

‘Praying without ceasing means uniting prayer with the works that it is our duty to perform and joining appropriate action to our prayer, since virtuous deeds and the fulfilment of what we are commanded to do are included as a part of prayer. If praying without ceasing means anything humanly possible, it can only mean this: that we call the whole life of a holy person a great synthesis of prayer. What we normally call prayer is only a small part of praying.’

(*On Prayer* 12.2).

The fourteenth century German Dominican, Meister Eckhart, writes:

‘If you believe that you receive God more in inwardness, prayer, sweet rapture or in the special graces of God than at the fireplace or in the stable, you are doing nothing else than taking God, winding a cloak about his head and thrusting him under a bench. For whoever seeks God by following one devotional path only will gain that path but miss God who is concealed within it. But whoever in seeking God renounces all particular devotional ways will grasp God as he is in himself. Such a person will live with the Son and will be life itself’(*Sermon* 5).

‘Many people withdraw from the crowd and wish always to be alone, finding peace in this and in being in church. Is this the best thing to do? No, it isn't. ... Those for whom things are right truly have God as their companion, and whoever has God truly as a companion is with him in all places, both on the street and among people, as well as in church or in the desert or in a monastic cell. No one can hinder the person who possesses God aright. Why is this so? It is so because such people possess God alone, keeping their gaze fixed upon God and thus all things become God for them. Such people bear God in all their deeds and in all the places where they go, and in is God alone who is the author of all their deeds. If we keep our eyes fixed on God alone, then truly he must work in us, and nothing, neither the crowd or any place, can hinder him in this. And so nothing will be able to hinder us if we desire and seek God alone, and take pleasure in nothing else’(*Talks of Instruction*).

While acknowledging the truth of this, we also acknowledge the special importance of interior communion with God and so of the inner journey of interior prayer. God is present at the heart of creation, but unless we are in touch with God at our own centre we will miss his presence in creation and we will find ourselves dissipated and distracted in the whirl of things and events that happen around us and to us. For only to the extent that we are centred in God can we avoid being lost among the flotsam and jetsam of this world.

The inner journey is not, in itself, more important than the outer journey. What is important is to be in communion with God as we journey. In all our experiences it is important that our heart be awake and sensitive to the divine presence. If I am cluttered inside, my communion with God will be disturbed. Hence the importance of interior prayer and the focus of these reflections on our inner journey. Discovering God within and being sensitive to the movement of God's Spirit in our minds and hearts makes possible a more intimate interior communion with God. It also makes possible a closer communion with God in our outer experiences. The fourteenth century Rhineland mystic Johannes Tauler has this advice:

'Each time you are granted the solemn moment of recollection, leave your outer forms of devotion to one side if they become a hindrance to you, for inner prayer is precious divine life. Concentrate upon what leads you most to love, for instance the life, the sufferings, the divine wounds of Christ, God's essence, the Blessed Trinity, the power, the wisdom, the goodness of God, the good things which he has done for you. Whatever stirs you most, go with that, full of gratitude, into the ground of your soul, and wait for God there. Doing this with love enables us to receive God much more effectively than any outer spiritual exercise. The more inward something is, the better it is, for the external things derive their value from what is within. It is as if you had a good wine which was strong enough to change a whole tun of water into the best wine. It is the same with the life within, a single drop of which can lend our life of external devotion a higher value' (*Sermon 39*).

We all know what it is like to be distracted, to be out of touch, to be lost. We know how easily we get caught up in the outer world, and lose or fail to find ourselves. If this is descriptive of our whole life, we are indeed in a desperate situation. It was Jesus who asked the question: 'What is the point of winning the whole world, if you forfeit your life? Is there anything which is worth exchanging for life?' (Mark 8:36-37). As individuals and as a culture we can be quite brilliant in our ability to discover, use and even, to a degree, understand the external world. How good are we at coming to know and stay in touch with ourselves? Our deeds, our involvement, our engagement with the world and with other people are truly ours only when what we do comes from within.

To discover ourselves and to live authentic lives we must undertake an inner journey, a journey into the realms of the soul. Many people give us advice on how to do this. The advice we receive can be quite conflicting and confusing. Much of it is good and much of it of little or no value. Teresa of Avila gives her answer and it is simple, direct and uncompromising: she tells us that the way to make the inner journey is to pray. If we are praying, other things can help. If we are not praying, all the advice and all the methods in the world are at best a way of filling in time. At worst they are further ways of deceiving ourselves. Teresa tells us that if we want to get to know ourselves we must learn to pray, and she is an acknowledged master in showing us how to do it.

Jesus invites us to pray always (Luke 18:1). To enjoy such prayer we commit ourselves to make space in our lives to focus on God within. The purer our inner gaze and the more intimate our inner communion the more we will recognise God's presence in the world as well as God's Word (God's self-communication) coming to us in and through every creature, every event and every encounter.

Constantly aided by God’s Word, especially by the Word-made-flesh, we focus on God’s Spirit and so on our life in the Spirit (our ‘spiritual life’): our listening to God within and our responding in love to God; our communion with God within our own being in the experience we call prayer. At the same time we do not forget that this focus allows the Spirit to tune our being ever more sensitively to God’s Word. When, through our communion with God’s inner Spirit, we experience an echo of God’s Word that comes to us from outside, we are vibrating to the divine harmony. We are giving ourselves over to the gravity of grace drawing us to the heart of the Father.

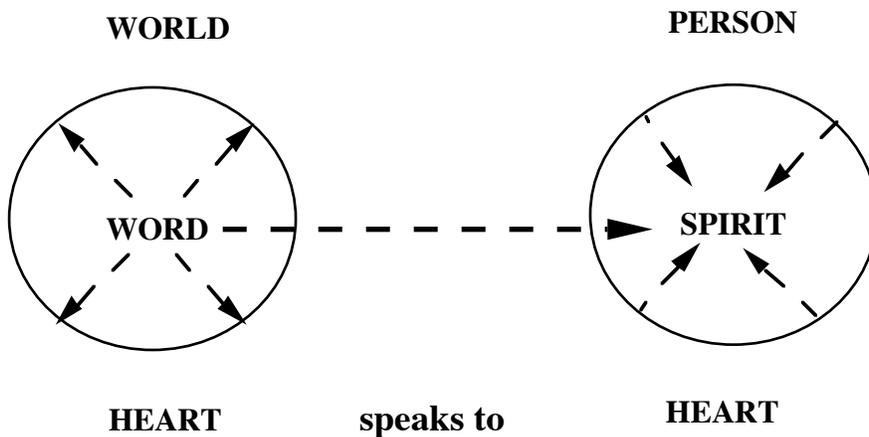
Saint Augustine speaks of how he was searching outside himself. Then, through the grace of God, his senses opened him up to the world in such a way that he became aware of the divine. His heart/soul became engaged.

‘Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you!  
 For you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside  
 and in my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made.  
 You were with me but I was not with you.  
 I was kept from you by those things,  
 yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all.  
 You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness.  
 You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness.  
 You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now pant for you.  
 I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you.  
 You touched me and I have burned for your peace’ (*Confessions* x.27).

To share in such a religious experience, we must care for our soul: we must respect our heart.

‘Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is.  
 Your soul often forewarns you. It is better that seven watchmen in a tower.  
 While you heed your heart, beg the Most High to guide you in the path of truth’ (Sirach 37:13).  
 ‘More that all else, keep watch over your own heart, since there are the wellsprings of life.’  
 (Proverbs 4:23)

We are to listen humbly and attentively to others, listening for God’s Word. But we must remember that God dwells within us and God respects our heart/soul. When God speaks his Word to us, we will know, for the Spirit within will say Yes to what we hear. Heart will be speaking to heart.



We have to stop giving in to distraction. We have to stop being too busy, for we will end up destroying our heart. We have to stop heeding the many voices that call us without caring for our soul. We have to stop running away from our soul/heart. Let us listen again to Augustine:

‘Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?  
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?  
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord!  
It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart!  
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.  
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.  
Come back! Return to the heart ... See there what you can learn about God,  
for the image of God is there. In your inner self dwells Christ.  
In your inner self you are being renewed after God’s image’(*Tractates on John* 18.10.1).

If we are attentive to God’s Spirit in our hearts, we will hear God’s Word in creation. The Irish poet, Joseph Plunkett (d.1916) experienced Christ, the Word-made-flesh, in creation:

‘I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.  
  
I see his face in every flower;  
The thunder and the singing of the birds  
Are but his voice – and carven by his power  
Rocks are his written words.  
  
All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,  
His cross in every tree’(Joseph M. Plunkett, 1887-1916).

The French Jesuit palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin (d.1955) speaks in a similar vein in the final words of his *Divine Milieu* (1927):

‘Raise me up, then, O matter, to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantment can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come.’