

CONSECRATED IN LOVE

‘God is love’(1John 4:8)

‘I will give them a heart to know me’(Jeremiah 24:7)

Human experience points to love as the nature of Being and therefore of God

We have a natural urge to want to know, but we discover that everything which we come to know is contingent, that is to say, it is not self-explanatory. It exists, but does not have within itself sufficient reason for its existing. There must be a sufficient reason and so there must exist a Reality which not only accounts for its own being but which is also the creating source, the sustaining ground and the final goal of all that we experience, including ourselves. It is this Reality which we call ‘God.’

Our urge to know is itself propelled by our longing to be in communion with all that is. For we are made for love. Love is an experience of our inter-connection, our communion with everything else that is also becoming. And what are we becoming? Our goal is not a loss of our unique self and personality. On the contrary, it is a fuller and fuller owning of our self, but in communion, not in isolation. Love is the experience of that creative energy that impels us to grow, and to grow in communion with everything that is. The other remains other, but another to which and to whom we belong. And this is because everything we experience is drawn towards the Other in whose being we all participate, the One ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’(Acts 17:28).

We are attracted outwards to ever more intimate communion with the world around us, and when we experience love (the word we use for this communion), we are attracted inwards to plumb the depths of the inner world which love discloses. Our experience is that our instinctive desire to be in love (to give and receive love and to enjoy communion) connects us to reality. Our desire, however, is limitless. If there is no object that can satisfy this desire, it is in the final analysis absurd. In the choice between absurdity and Mystery why not choose Mystery which points to the existence of the infinite One with whom ultimately we long to be in communion: the one we call ‘God’? In the famous words of Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you’(Confessions I.1).

As Saint Paul states: ‘Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made’(Romans 1:20). However, there are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive. For God cannot be observed directly and put to the test and be subject to our comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called ‘god’ who controls the world from outside; the so-called ‘god’ who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called ‘god’ who upholds vested interests and justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions.

Rejection of false gods, however, does not justify the failure to explore the implications of our experience and to open ourselves to the mystery revealed there. We must remember, however, as we explore the question of God, that all concepts of God without exception are exploratory ('heuristic'). They are born of longing and shaped by religious experience. In conceiving God we dare to reach beyond what we do know to the transcendent mystery. In all areas of discovery, concepts are best fitted for defining and eliminating wrong approaches. This is especially true of our concepts of God. They assist in keeping us on the right track, facing the right way; they do not contain the journey's end; they cannot define the Infinite. God remains on the mountain; no golden calf, no set of words, can substitute for him and for the surprise and demands of God's presence and action in our lives. It is right to speak of God, but we must pray that we make some sense, and not too much nonsense as we do. This is expressed clearly by one of the church's earliest theologians: Clement of Alexandria, writing about the year 200 AD:

We reach some slight understanding of the Omnipotent; not that we understand what it is, but rather what it is not...He cannot be named. If at times we do, in an applied sense, name him, either the One, or the Good, or Mind, or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator, or Lord, we do so not as giving out his proper name; rather, because we do not know his proper name, we use these other beautiful names in order to focus our thought on them, and prevent it from going astray. For although these names taken singly do not signify God, taken all together, they suggest the power of the Omnipotent... It is by the grace of God, and only through his Word, that we come to understand the unknown God himself. This is the meaning of Paul's 'to the Unknown God' recalled by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles[17:23].

– Clement of Alexandria Stromata v,12,82

The writings of Jesus' disciples demonstrate that because of their experience of Jesus they came to a new way of conceiving God and so to a new appreciation of creation. To believe that there is only one God is to believe in the interconnectedness of everything; it is to believe that there is one source of everything; that everything that exists participates in the being of this one God; that every insight into the truth by anyone is an insight into God; that all people, whatever their race, enjoy revelation, because all owe their being to this one Creator and Sustainer of life.

This is confirmed by the experience of Jesus' disciples

'They will look upon the one they have pierced'(John 19:37)

At the heart of Jesus' experiences he knew that the word of God to him was one of love. He experienced a corresponding movement of love in his spirit and he understood God as the one who loved him (his 'Abba'). Jesus showed this in the way he treated others as sacred and drew them into the communion of love which he experienced.

Jesus' disciples experienced this especially in the way Jesus continued to trust and to love throughout his ordeal on the cross. Even the centurion was impressed: 'When the centurion, who stood facing him, saw the way Jesus died, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"'(Mark 15:39).

Jesus showed what we human beings are and can be. He also demonstrated his faith in God as a God of love. Paul could write of Jesus: 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful; he cannot deny his own self' (2Timothy 2:13). God loves us as we are, not as we would like to be: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). It is this faithful love of God that enables us to move from where we are into closer and closer communion with God.

Jesus' disciples experienced Jesus as God's focal word. Because of the love given them by Jesus and because of the spirit of love that Jesus poured into their hearts, they came to know God as love, revealed in Jesus the lover, and experienced in the spirit of loving that welled up from within them. The world is not created out of nothing. It is created out of love. Catherine LaCugna writes:

The reality of Jesus is given in his being-from, being-with and being-for others
... He epitomises in himself communion of the divine and the human.

– God for us (HarperSanFrancisco 1991) page 293.

The Spirit is the freedom of God permeating, animating, quickening, incorporating, affiliating, engrafting, consummating the creature out of love. The movements of the Spirit of God cannot be controlled, domesticated, or regulated, but the presence of the Spirit can clearly be observed where there is *koinônia* [communion in Jesus' love] (page 299).

Trinity : God-Word-Spirit

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. Once again, LaCugna:

The doctrine of the Trinity is a theory about the essence of God revealed and bestowed in the person of Christ and in the permanent presence of the Spirit (page 334).

The purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is to affirm that God who comes to us and saves us in Christ and remains with us as Spirit is the true living God (page 380).

The perfection of God is the perfection of love, of communion, or personhood.

Divine perfection is the antithesis of self-sufficiency. Rather it is the absolute capacity to be who and what one is by being for and from another. The living God is the God who is alive in relationship, alive in communion with the creature, alive with desire for union with every creature. God is so thoroughly involved in every last detail of creation that if we could truly grasp this it would altogether change how we would approach each moment of our lives. Everything that exists manifests the mystery of the living God (page 304).

Perichôresis, embodied in inclusiveness, community and freedom, is the “form of life” for God and the ideal of human beings whose communion with each other reflects the life of the Trinity (page 273).

The freedom of the deified human being consists in being free-for, free-towards others, poised in the balance between self-possession and other-orientation. The free human being is free from fear, from compulsions and obsessions, from the need either to dominate or to be dominated, free from the cycle of violence, able to encourage the fulfilment of another’s happiness and, in the process, to achieve growth. The free human being is free for hospitality to the stranger, non violence towards the oppressor, and benevolent regard for every single creature that exists (page 290).

Some twenty or so years ago I was chaplain at the University of NSW. One day the gardener popped in to my office and asked me to explain the Trinity to him. Fortunately I had enough sense to pause and to ask him first how he saw it. In a way that nicely avoided abstraction, he went straight to the heart of the mystery by speaking of the Trinity in terms of Dance.

The way he saw it, he said, was that the Father is the Dance, the Son is the Dancer and the Spirit is the Dancing. We come to know and see the Dance when we come to know and watch the Dancer. We experience the Dance when we are drawn by the Dancer into the Dancing. One could speak of God as Life, of Jesus as the one who lived this life and of the Spirit as the experience of living. Perhaps best of all one can speak of God as Love, of Jesus as the Lover who incarnates this love, and of the Spirit as the experience of Loving that we enjoy because of Jesus.

The Christian teaching concerning God as Trinity goes further than this. It expresses an astonishing insight into the very being of God himself. We cannot expect to be able to grasp God’s being with our tiny minds, but, thanks to Jesus, we are sure that God is such as to be able to experienced by us in the way we have described. It is a recognition of the truth that God is not an almighty isolated being. We say that God is love. We know that when we experience love we long to be fully united with the one we love. With us, the union is always imperfect – there are always barriers to full communion. The God whom we experience as transcendent originating Source, as Word, and as Spirit is One through perfect unity in love.

Knowing that God is Spirit reminds us to be attentive to the divinely inspired movements

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of our own heart: movements of longing as we yearn for closer communion with God whose Spirit inspires us; movements of wonder and praise as we rejoice in God being with us. It reminds us to be sensitive to these movements in every man and every woman. Knowing that God is Word reminds us to be attentive to the words and actions through which God speaks to us, and the words and actions through which we respond to God. We learn, too, to reverence the sacred ground of each person's Spirit, and be attentive to each person's Word, as together we journey towards God who is the Source ('Father', 'Mother') of all. Knowing that God is Father reminds us to open our hearts to God's love and to treat every other person as our brother or sister.

John speaks of our intimate communion with God in terms of the Indwelling of the Spirit, of Jesus himself and of the Father. Jesus promises:

I will ask the *Father*, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ... You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and *the Spirit will be in you*. I will not leave you orphaned; *I am coming to you* ... You will see me; because I live, you also will live ... 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 14:16-23

Addressing each and every Christian, John of the Cross writes:

O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your Beloved is and where you may find and be united with the One you love. Your Beloved dwells within you. You are yourself God's tabernacle, God's 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 God.

– Spiritual Canticle 1,7

This is the essential meaning of Christian Baptism in which Jesus shares with us his own baptismal experience of God. The same Spirit that came down upon Jesus comes down upon us, and God expresses his delight in us as he expressed his delight in Jesus: 'You are my son, the one I love; in you I take delight' (Luke 3:22). The risen Jesus is sharing his divine communion with us: 'I will take you to myself so that where I am you may be' (John 14:3). Paul writes:

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me;
and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God
loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

You belong to him ... to bear fruit for God ... in the new life of the Spirit.

– Romans 7:4-6

Those who live according to the Spirit, set their minds on the things of the Spirit ... You are in the Spirit if the Spirit of God dwells in you ... If Christ is in you ... your spirits are alive.

– Romans 8:1-11

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the baptised as those who have been 'enlightened',

have ‘tasted the heavenly gift’, have become ‘sharers of the Holy Spirit’, have ‘tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come’ (Hebrews 6:4-6). We have already noted the priestly dimension of the life and ministry into which a Christian is baptised.

Sacramental consecration to Christ

While it is correct to define the ordained priesthood in terms of ministry (LG, n. 18; PO, n. 2), it is essential to remember that no ministry in the Church can be reduced to a way of relating among the members of the Christian community. All ministry, including that of the ordained priest, comes from Christ. It is a grace which flows from a special consecration to him. Who the ordained priest becomes through the consecration of ordination is the source of what he is able to do.

It is because of who the ordained priest is graced to be by Christ that he is missioned to do what he does.

Through the sacrament presbyters, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head.

– PO, n.2

The priest, by virtue of the consecration which he receives in the sacrament of Orders, is sent forth by the Father in the mediatorship of Jesus Christ to whom he is configured in a special way as head and shepherd of his people, in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit, in service of the Church and for the salvation of the world.

– PDV, n.12

Priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd.

– PDV, n.15

In the Church’s tradition, the ordained ministry is referred to as “sacrament” [Catechism n.875], since this ministry those sent by Christ, by God’s gift, effect and offer that which they themselves can neither effect nor give ... The minister of Christ does not substitute for him but relies on him and allows him to act in and through him.

– PTCM, page 52,53

This special sacramental consecration to Christ is the ultimate source of the priest’s confidence:

No one should be discouraged, as we are doing God’s work. The God who calls us is the same God who sends us and who remains with us every day of our lives.

– PDV, n.4