

1. The quest for love, a quest for God

To pray is to make a choice. It is to decide to be attentive to our experiences of God that are as ordinary and regular as our breathing, but that, like our breathing, can happen without us attending to them. To pray is to take time to attend to God. We know the importance of spending time with people who are significant to us. We know, too, that the way we relate has a lot to do with the feelings, thoughts and memories, which are part of our shared experience. The same can be said of prayer.

Prayer and the importance of our concept of God

There is no doubt that the quality of our prayer is radically affected by the associations we have when we speak of 'God'. It is important to examine this matter, especially today when so many intelligent and thoughtful people declare themselves atheists. Even more troubling, every day we witness people calling on God to justify behaviour that is destructive, irrational, or just plain silly. This is surely not unrelated to the growth of atheism.

When our horizons are limited to the closed culture in which we are reared, our concept of God can go largely unchallenged. Today, when so many contradictory images of God crowd in upon us, confusion is rife. Some deal with the confusion by opting for agnosticism: they put aside the question of God and get on with life as best they can. The problem with this option is that it gives up on making any ultimate sense of things, and closes the door on many profound human experiences. The other option is to attempt to sort through the confusion and seek to find a direction that makes sense and that enriches our own lives and the lives of others. May I share with you some of my own early experiences? I do so hoping that it may help you recall your own.

I remember as a child asking why sometimes there was plenty of damp sand with which to build our castles, while at other times the sand was covered with water which had come up close to the grass where we had spread our picnic blanket. The tide was always on the move. The answer to my question fascinated me. My eyes were directed away from the sea and the land to the moon, scarcely visible in the broad daylight. The earth and the moon, I was told, experience an attraction to each other. The sea being 'lighter' than the land could give in to this attraction more readily. What I was watching was the sea constantly swelling up towards the moon, the tides shifting as the earth turns on its axis. Had I thought in terms of attraction, I may have thought that the sea and the land were attracting each other. It would never have occurred to me to look up. Yet the fact is that the attraction of the sea and the land for each other is but an expression of something deeper shared by both: an attraction to something quite other, something beyond the grasp of either.

I remember as a young man of nineteen experiencing my first deep friendship. It was with a fellow student in the seminary where I, along with sixty or so other students, was preparing for the priesthood. I experienced the friendship as a love that caused me to feel whole, as my heart and mind and spirit went out to him and through him to everything and everyone around me. I thank God for the wise guidance of a spiritual director who

approved of our friendship. We both knew that this was an expression of an attraction that embraced us while drawing us beyond ourselves. It was an experience of a love that was calling us to penetrate with our minds and hearts beyond ourselves and what we shared. This friendship was a grace that helped to shape my heart.

It also led me inwards, and I came to know what prayer could be. Each day, for many months, the morning hour of meditation would pass in timeless communion as somewhere in the depths of my being I knew that a mystery was being enacted in me of which I was much more than a spectator. I was, along with the whole of creation, yearning for deeper communion with God, but God was not 'outside'. God was at the heart of my being. I had only to be there at the heart to be at home with God.

After some months, my spiritual director advised us to discontinue the closeness of our friendship. I assume that he was concerned that we were seeing too much of each other, with dangers to ourselves and to the community. Following such advice was not without pain, as you can imagine, but we knew that genuine love must be sensitive to others, and our obedience led to a deepening of prayer as well as to a fuller commitment to the community. The 'tide' ebbed, though the friendship is still there nearly fifty years later. The attraction of the 'moon' continued to draw us both.

I remember a winter's night the following year. I had been pondering for many months the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas on how creation participates in the being of God. This particular evening I was sitting alone. The tree beside me had shed its leaves. Its branches were silhouetted against the cold sky. I was overwhelmed by an experience of belonging: to the tree, to the sky, to the universe. At the same time I felt more starkly myself. I did not experience the belonging as a losing of myself in some kind of identification with the universe. I was not the tree; but we shared a yearning to grow together towards the mystery in which the whole of the universe is involved. The tree was reaching up to the heavens, and so was I. The memory of the peace of that communion keeps coming back to me, as does the yearning.

What is love?

Was it love that I was experiencing in these various experiences? I believe so. I was learning that love is being part of something that is other than myself, but in such a way that I become more fully my own distinct self in being in love. I was learning that love is not a melding into an obscure oneness in which distinctions are lost. The more love is pure, the more each of us is enabled to emerge in our precise difference. And the more we do this, the more profound and fulfilling the love-communion that is given and received. Nothing is at rest. Everything is becoming. Love is an experience of our interconnection, 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 owning of oneself, 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 – the sea and the land, the moon and the world, my friend and I, and the leafless tree – everything is drawn towards the Other in whose being we all participate. I was learning that to love is to commit oneself

to be with others as they continue to grow towards the fullness of their special individuality.

This is not possible without some degree of genuine self-love. Indeed, Paul claims that the whole of the law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour *as yourself*' (Galatians 5:14). He was echoing Jesus (see Mark 12:33), who was himself drawing on a tradition found in the Hebrew scriptures (see Leviticus 19:18). Loving oneself involves a recognition of the fact that whoever I am and whatever has happened to me, I am capable, in some way and to some degree, of receiving love and of offering my unique self in love to others. To love is not to be so falsely full of ourselves that we think we can be independent and that we can use others to build up our own false ego. To love is to resist another temptation, which is to think that we can grow by holding others back to be part of ourselves. There is no place for this holding back. Others are part of us. They do belong. But we must learn to respect others in their unique otherness, in their difference from ourselves. Co-dependency is not love. No, we belong to each other because we are all involved in a journey of love, and we are meant to make the journey together, energising each other to become the unique person we are capable of being while sharing our uniqueness with each other.

Love is not something we find, or something we fall into. It 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. Who has not experienced the attraction of love? The pain we experience when love is denied or taken away is itself a witness to our natural and radical sense that we are made for loving. The slightest taste of true love engages that longing, often in quite painful ways. We know that we are not meant to live in isolation. We are not self-contained. 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.

We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *outer* world. Others do this when they think they are loving us, but we know that they are not really connecting with us. If others are failing to connect, are we sure we are not failing in the same way? Learning to love truly is a life journey.

We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *inner* world. We meet people who do a lot of 'loving' things, who speak a lot of 'loving' words. Yet we sense that they have little self-knowledge. They seem to be striving, but it is not coming from their heart. A little reflection alerts us to the truth that we, too, suffer from this. Learning to love, learning to connect heart to heart, is a life journey.

Sometimes we connect with neither the outer nor the inner world. When this happens we are left feeling distracted, frustrated and out of touch, not to mention the hurt we can cause to others, however unwittingly. But when we pursue this attraction in ways that do connect, we experience a sense of belonging, a feeling of being partially satisfied and in

touch. This is love, and the intimacy of the love varies according to the significance to us of the communion we experience.

Though love involves thoughts and feelings, it is not a thought or a feeling. It is the experience of being actually in communion with our own reality and with the reality of the other. True love is anything but an escape into a world of fantasy. The truer our love the more real and more complete our connection with ourselves and with the world around us. Though we fail in love, we must continue to trust our longing for love. We fail in love because we have not been in touch with our own reality or the reality of another. We must not let failure cause us to despair of discovering love, for we can learn from our failure, and the call to love is always there directing us towards the truth of who we are and the truth of the other.

Experience teaches us that it is not always easy to stay in touch with our heart. This is especially so when our heart is hurting. We are tempted to fill our emptiness in ways that do not come from our heart. We can find ourselves driven by lust, or pride, or the felt need to exercise power over another. Our need for security can lead us to want to control another rather than engage in the risk of loving. We are tempted to use others in ways that are not sensitive to their hearts. We find ourselves breaking the glass to get at the wine. Our relationships may wear the mask of love, but that is what it is: a mask. Our hearts – our deepest selves where we experience a profound yearning to love and to be loved – are not engaged. We are living in an unreal world.

I have focused 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).

Love: a sacred encounter

Let us now examine some 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. My aim here is not to ‘prove’ the existence of God the way one might prove the existence of something by providing incontrovertible evidence that must convince anyone willing to attend to the evidence provided. The transcendent God cannot be put under a microscope. My aim is to invite you to attend to aspects of your own experience that might persuade you to continue to explore the mystery and not to dismiss it because it does not deal up the ready evidence that our empirically trained, scientific minds have come to expect.

Let us look first at our yearning for communion, the yearning that drives all our connections with reality. It is clear that 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. When the yearning is partially satisfied we rightly conclude that it is

not something that is merely subjective. We know that we are not living in a world of fantasy. We know that we are truly in communion with something real.

However, we also know that our yearning is not fully satisfied. We long for a love that is unconditional, unrestricted, and complete. Our limited experience of love gives us reason to trust our yearning. Is it not reasonable, then, to trust that there exists a Reality that accounts for the ultimate longing which we experience, a Reality which is its ultimate object, and which can fully satisfy us? Why would our yearning be real and trustworthy in partial matters, but ultimately be unreal and deceptive? Why would we not explore the direction in which our experiences are pointing just because they point to a Reality that transcends our present experience and so remains mysterious and beyond definition? This is the Reality that we call God. Furthermore, in light of what we have already said, since prayer is the name we give to this exploring, should we not expect prayer to be an experience of love?

Coupled with our yearning for love is our experience of desiring to know. We keep learning to trust this desire, too, as we discover more and more truth. Yet our desire to know, impelled by our desire to love, is also limitless. Partial knowledge always leaves us unsatisfied. We want a fully satisfying explanation of reality. We want all our questions answered. That our desire to know can be satisfied in small ways encourages us to trust that there exists a Reality that can satisfy our yearning for ultimate truth. It is this Reality that we call God, and, since prayer is communion with God, should we not expect prayer to be an experience of truth?

When we turn our gaze away from our longing and focus instead on that which we come to know and love, we realise that reality is not a compilation of discrete, unconnected, individual entities. Everything is in some way interconnected. Modern science impresses this truth upon us, from astronomy to ecology and biology. This interconnectedness of being points to the existence of a Being in which everything participates and which is the ultimate reason for the interconnection that we experience. This raises the question of God. Furthermore, since prayer is communion with God should we not expect our prayer to bring us to a more profound communion with the world and with our real selves?

Another dimension of every thing and of every person that we know and love is that when we ask why they exist we have to look beyond them to find the answer. I am not concerned here with the question of why they *came to exist*. Obviously trees grow from seeds and babies need parents. I am saying that if something now exists, there must exist *now* a Being that fully accounts for this fact. The limited objects that we experience do not in themselves satisfactorily explain why it is that they are *now* existing. They are, as the philosophers say, contingent. Nor is our question satisfactorily answered by pointing from one contingent (not self-explanatory) being to another whose existence also needs explanation. Ultimately, there must exist *now* a Being which provides the ultimate and fully satisfactory reason for the existence of everything that exists, and which, unlike everything else we know, does not require the existence of some further being to account for its existence. This is the Reality that we call God. God is the creating source, the sustaining ground and the final goal for all that we experience, including ourselves.

Should we not, then, expect our communion with God (our prayer) 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.

Faulty concepts of God

There are many concepts of God that are handed down in the intimacy of the family and in the public life of most cultures. These concepts arise from our desire to make sense of experience. Some concepts express true insight and stand up to careful investigation; others are the result of oversight, and express a misunderstanding that upon careful reflection should be rejected. If we find accurate and inaccurate concepts in all other areas of human thinking, we should not be surprised to find that concepts of God not only vary from culture to culture and from person to person, but that they represent a mixture of insights and oversights, of understanding and misunderstanding. After all, our concepts of God aim to express our most profound insights into what reality ultimately is. No human concept can encompass God. The best we can do is to choose between contrary concepts the one that expresses better our experience, and so points us better towards the mystery.

People differ markedly in the meanings and values that they associate with the term God. Because God is not just another thing or the sum of all things, certain forms of Buddhism conceive of God as 'No-thing'. Because of the experience of relating to God in personal ways, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Moslems and many others conceive of God in personal terms.

In recent centuries, every concept of God has come under increasing suspicion. There was a time when the existence of lightning was taken as proof of the existence of the sky-god Zeus, and when the powerful, irrational feelings that seem to take over our psyche were judged to be the result of the action of vengeful supernatural beings. There was a time when victory in war was understood as proof of divine approval, while defeat demonstrated divine disapproval. For good reasons such misconceptions have been rejected. The rejection, however, has gone so far that today God appears to some to be nothing more than a category invented to cover whatever we do not yet understand. With the methodical and cumulative acquisition of knowledge in many areas, some argue that the very idea of God is a leftover from a now unacceptable naïveté.

There is no doubt that certain conceptions of God are clearly erroneous. People rightly reject a God who is envisaged as an extra, existing outside our world and history and experience, who controls things from the outside, as it were, and is directly responsible for whatever happens, intervening in our history at will, or in answer to prayer understood as a magical power. The history of religious practice, in earlier times and still in our own day, frequently reveals a so-called God who is glorified at the expense of humanity. Some people seem to feel the need to put humanity down in order to raise God up. What is more, this God seems in large measure to be a projection of human need and human wishful thinking, or human avoidance of the harshness of reality. Rather than face up to reality, we seem to want to invent the kind of God to whom we can escape. Rather than face the here and now and do what we can about it, we seem to want to escape to a hereafter where everything will be as we wish things were here. There is no point in

speaking of any God who does not require of us that we face the whole truth of our real limits, but also of the real greatness of being human. Any serious inquiry about God must be one that leads to a better understanding of and communion with our actual selves and our real world.

We are rightly suspicious of a God who serves to support vested interests. We still hear God being used to support the ideology of military and economic victors over the vanquished. We still experience the rich and learned, and those in possession of power of all kinds, speaking and acting in the name of 'God', when they are seen to be propping up their own position. Such a God is constantly being discredited and we have no desire here to carry on the charade. Who can take seriously a God who supports apartheid, or patriarchy, or hypocritical piety, or a refusal to accept tried and tested facts in any sphere? The treatment meted out to Galileo in the name of God is more common than we might dare to admit. If there is value in talking about God at all, it can only be about a God in which everything participates, and therefore a God who supports the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of everything that exists, a God of truth and of justice.

Freud worked with people with seriously dysfunctional psyches. Some of their religious attitudes were little more than a jumble of infantile illusions. His findings alert us to the need to ask ourselves how free we are of such illusions? Let us be committed to name them as such when we are fortunate or diligent enough to discover them. Any claim we might make to relate to God is worthless if our relationship fails to draw us on to maturity by clarifying our identity, deepening our intimacy and enlarging our capacity for generating the love that provides the only environment in which we and others can grow.

It is clear that all our concepts of God are precisely *our* concepts. They enjoy, therefore, all the strengths of human intelligence and imagination; but they also necessarily suffer from all the weaknesses. In recent centuries, some have gone beyond criticising incorrect conceptions to reject any and every conception of God as unnecessary, unhelpful and irrelevant to genuine human living and progress in knowledge. Others, while granting the need for constant refinement of our concepts of God, hold that the claim that God exists cannot be written off simply as human projection and distortion. They hold that the claim is based on an authentic, if often unreflective, response to real human experience, and that there is a Reality, albeit one upon which we cast our projections and which we distort. They see it as a fundamental and serious error to discard the real God along with our distorted concepts.

Does rejecting the many false conceptions of God justify the rejection of a God who, while transcending every limited being and the whole universe of limited beings, is immanent in everything? Does it justify rejection of a God who is the ultimate Reality in which everything real participates, the Being that is the reason for anything making sense, the One who is constantly sustaining, inspiring, informing and enlivening everything? Teilhard de Chardin speaks 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. Only within the perspective of ultimate Reality can we come to a proper understanding of ourselves and of our world, and to a proper way of living in it. The history of human involvement with God has its negative face, as we have already indicated. False conceptions of God continue to wreak havoc in the field of human thinking and human living. The distortions and their effects can scarcely be exaggerated. The positive face is that of the human beings we acknowledge and revere as saints. And there are hosts of them in every country, in every culture, and in every generation.

What we need here, more than anywhere, is a commitment to the quest that incorporates a careful and honest reflection on the lives of those who inspire us by the obvious fruit of their own commitment. We need also to learn from our own and other people's mistakes to purify our concept of God by paring away ideas that have led to a distortion of a truly human life. We can learn from the goodness, the love and the overall quality of the humanity of others to respect the insights into God that inspired them. It is possible to live our daily lives without being engaged in this quest for God. However, admiration for what is beautiful and commitment to values that demonstrably enhance our experience in the world invite us to explore the question of God.

We cannot expect to achieve a completely satisfactory answer, for to do that we would need to have complete comprehension of everything that exists. Whenever we have a new experience, whenever someone new comes into our lives, we discover something more about God. However, we can continue to refine our understanding by eliminating error and learning to modify the direction of our thinking and of our choices, inspired by the wonderful people who have gone before us and who accompany us on this most exacting and most fruitful of journeys.

Jesus, the symbol of God

Different religious cultures look to different people for their inspiration. As someone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, I take him as my guide and will be presenting him as a guide throughout this book. When I speak of prayer, I am reflecting on the communion with God which I and others have experienced, inspired by what Jesus revealed about God as being a God of love. His revelation brought healing and meaning to many in the first century world and, when lived by holy men and women, it has continued to bring healing and meaning to people of all cultures ever since.

This book is written for those who have chosen to pursue the quest for ultimate meaning. We must not allow ourselves to be put off by those who claim to know God but whose lives betray a distorted pursuing of power or a rejection of others whose search seems to take them along a different route. If we are going to be turned off by charlatans or by the discovery of our own failures we will never pursue anything. Let us rather be inspired by people whose lives are judged beautiful by any human standards and let us join them in undertaking this most important of quests.

We would be foolish to overlook the sheer beauty with which the human race has been enriched by those who have allowed themselves to be caught up in the quest for the divine, and who have expressed their communion with God in art of all kinds, especially in the art of loving. Every experience of love is a limited communion with God. Every

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

In 1934, in an article entitled *The Evolution of Chastity*, Teilhard de Chardin expressed the following hope: ‘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’. We cannot hope to harness these energies if we are not in communion with God. Prayer is not an optional extra. It is the breathing of our soul, more essential to human living than the action of our lungs. It is in prayer that we will experience the most satisfying of loves, in which the Heart of all reality speaks to our heart. It is in prayer that we yield to love. It is in prayer that we learn to follow our yearning for deeper communion with God.