

TASTE AND SEE: THE BODY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

• José Granados •

“The space opened in man by the bodily senses and affectivity is the space in which God’s Word has let himself be experienced in fullness.”

“O taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps 34:9), exclaims the psalmist, while St. Peter says to the Christians, “you have tasted the kindness of the Lord” (1 Pt 2:2–3; cf. also Heb 6:4), and Paul speaks of sharing “the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:4). Each of these expressions serves as a confirmation that Christianity is not a cold reflection on a purely spiritual idea, but is rather a living experience of God that embraces the whole of man’s being. As Jesus said, according to a *logion* preserved by Origen: “those who draw near to me draw near to fire.”¹

We may ask, however, in view of these expressions, whether and how it is possible to have an experience of the transcendent God, the God who seems to be above and beyond any possible human experience.

In its contemporary usage the word “experience” refers primarily either to the experiments of positivistic science or to the subjective feelings of the individual. In the first case, it is difficult to see a connection between experience and transcendence in the

¹Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 4, 3; English translation: *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 105 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 56.

latter's etymological sense of "going beyond." The scientific experiment, in fact, is always under the control of the one who conducts it. The conditions and expected results are settled in advance, thus eliminating any possible novelty. Robert Spaemann has spoken in this regard of the homogenization of experience that characterizes modernity.²

The second interpretation—experience as a subjective feeling that cannot be communicated to others or defended in the public square—does claim a participation in the divine, but only as taking place in the depths of the individual's interiority. This kind of understanding fails to answer a crucial question: how can we make sure that what appears in us is not our own imagination, a mere projection of our desires? Is God still present in us in his transcendence, or has he been reduced to our own interior tastes? How can we tell the difference between a true and a false experience of God?

The original German word for experience (*Erfahrung*) conveys the idea of someone who travels throughout the land and emerges enriched by the knowledge he draws from the different regions he sees. It is precisely this capacity to learn from a living encounter with a reality that transcends the person that is lacking when experience is seen either as an experiment or as the purely subjective feeling of the individual. The Cartesian dualism that separates soul and body and so divides the objective from the subjective realm makes experience as *Erfahrung* impossible. In fact, this idea of experience as exploration of the world is closely connected with the corporeal condition of man, for it is in the body—through bodily affectivity and the senses—that the human person engages in the world and participates in it. The link between experience and bodiliness turns out to be fruitful for understanding the meaning of man's contact with transcendence. As I will argue, it is in the body that the truth of such an experience can be discerned.

This is a topic of great importance for Christianity, which claims that God has manifested himself in an unsurpassable way in the flesh of Jesus. Through the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, a new meaning of bodiliness appears in the world. St. Paul presents the body as the place of God's presence in man (as the

²Cf. R. Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität?" in *Philosophische Essays* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 232–60.

Temple of the Spirit: cf. 1 Cor 6:19) and of man's glorification of God (cf. Rom 12:1). Thus, it is not only that God comes to us in the body, but it is also through our body that we move toward him.³

In the following we will delve into this connection between body and experience in order to point out some criteria for discerning the true experience of the divine. The link between body and experience will be considered according to two related viewpoints. First, we will deal with the relationship between experience and affectivity: do our affections allow us to feel God's presence and activity in us? Second, we will focus on our bodily senses and their capacity to grasp the transcendent: can we hear God, touch him, see his face? These two dimensions of bodily experience will point, in a third stage, to the interpersonal encounter as the privileged place where the experience of the divine enters into man's world. In its turn, the interpersonal encounter will help us develop another important dimension of experience, its connection with time. We will conclude by pointing out the novelty the Incarnation brings to this connection between experience and corporeality.

1. Spirit and affectivity

In Scripture, the experience of the divine is an experience of God's Spirit. Accordingly, Paul summarizes the core of this experience with the words: "the Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:16). But what is this Spirit and what does his communication with us mean?

Modernity has understood the concept of "spirit" primarily as mind, as the strict opposite of matter. Descartes locates the most original experience of human life in the thinking subject and accordingly describes the human spirit in terms of self-consciousness and knowledge. Wolfhart Pannenberg argues against this identification of spirit with mind, both from the viewpoint of contemporary anthropology and from the biblical notion of spirit.⁴

³Cf. Adolphe Gesché, "L'invention chrétienne du corps," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 35 (2004): 166–202.

⁴Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Geist und Bewußtsein," *Theologie und Philosophie* 79 (2004): 481–90.

In the Bible the Spirit is seen as a force that, similar to the air or to the wind (cf. also the Latin *spirare*, the Greek *pneuma*), fills the world, providing it with a dynamic movement toward the Creator. Like the air, the Spirit is invisible; like the air, the Spirit pervades the whole breathing organism, bestowing life upon it. His action can be compared, adds Pannenberg, to a field of force that, while not material, pervades the whole of a material space.

The Spirit's operation is manifold: he hovers above the primordial waters as a sign of God's dynamic presence in Creation, he bestows life upon plants and animals, and he acts with singular intensity in the human being. Throughout the history of Israel he distributes his gifts upon the People: he inspires the artists who build the Temple, the wise men who utter proverbs, and, above all, the prophets who pronounce divine oracles.⁵

According to this vision, the Spirit's activity in man is not viewed above all in the person's intellect and will. In fact, *ruah* can be translated also as "emotion" or "passion," and his favorite place of operation is the heart. Certainly, the heart is not to be understood here as the source of romantic feelings. For the Bible, the heart is the center of man's being (of his understanding and decisions) inasmuch as he is placed in the midst of the world and in relationship with other beings. In other words, an anthropology of the heart reminds us that the deepest core of the human person lies in his capacity for relationship. Thus, the heart is at the same time the depths of man and his openness to the world. As such, it becomes the proper place for the Spirit—as the intimate presence of the divine transcendence in the world—to dwell.

Pannenberg shows that this biblical vision accords with contemporary anthropology, which insists that self-consciousness (the "I think") is not the primordial foundation of man's identity. Precedence is given rather to the realm of affectivity, which allows for a primordial co-presence of man and his world. The development of the child's consciousness is for Pannenberg a good proof of this precedence. Before being able to say "I think," the child possesses an initial awareness of himself and the world, a world centered around the presence of the mother. This world is not placed "in front of" the child, but constitutes the realm wherein he

⁵Cf. Carlos Granados, "El Espíritu de Yahvé y el dinamismo de la creación en el Antiguo Testamento," *Anthropotes* (2010) (forthcoming).

dwells, making a sort of symbiosis. Affectivity, says Pannenberg, transcends the difference between subject and object, or better, it does not know this difference.⁶ The “I” awareness develops only against the background of this primordial symbiosis with the environment. Because of this initial communication, the “I” always understands itself in the form of relationship. It is because of this precedence that we can say: we are known before we know; we are chosen before we choose.

What are the depths of this encounter, which opens up in affectivity, between man and his environment? The primordial communication between man and his world is not exhausted by any one concrete object that man desires. The satisfaction of a specific urge does not close off the person’s horizon of affectivity, nor does it remove affectivity’s invitation to discover reality. This fact shows that the openness of affectivity is unlimited: the heart is always restless. Pannenberg places here man’s primordial contact with the divine, which in this view is not just the wholly Other, but the welcoming and all-embracing presence, immanent as well as transcendent. The basis of religious consciousness is the foundational trust and confidence in which this presence is perceived and lived out, as well as the sense of vocation that grows in this soil.

It is here—in this openness of man toward his world, which constitutes his heart or affectivity—that the divine Spirit finds space for operation. The Spirit, in this view, does not separate man from his corporeality, for he operates precisely in the corporeal presence of man in the world. The Spirit helps develop man’s self-awareness by immersing him more profoundly in the world that welcomes and beckons him onward. Moreover, since the connection with the world is never abstract but is always lived out in the concrete interpersonal relationships that surround the child’s development from the outset, the Spirit is always a Spirit of communion. Pannenberg speaks in this regard of the Spirit of a family, of a religious community, of a nation, and so on.

From this point of view, we can now return to Scripture in order to illustrate how the heart is the Spirit’s place of activity and

⁶In this regard, cf. also Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), especially the fourth chapter, which is devoted to affective fragility.

manifestation.⁷ It suffices to think of the prophets, men of the Spirit, who communicate God's speech because they first live it out in their own affectivity. The word of God comes out from the prophet's mouth through a vital identification with the God of the covenant. If the prophet is able to utter God's message, it is because he is in an affective communion with Yahweh, because he rejoices when God rejoices and is sad when God is sad.⁸ Only in this way can his oracle illuminate the story of the people, which is a story of their relationship with Yahweh.

Of course, this precedence of affectivity does not mean that the prophetic experience is irrational. As a matter of fact, the entire experience of the prophet is ordered toward the utterance of the word (*logos*). Thus, affectivity does not mean a lack of *logos*, but rather assures us that this *logos* is not an abstract one, that it is not separated from the actual love of the prophet for God and his People. From the prophet's life a word (*logos*) matures, a word that is born in his flesh and is able to explain the history of Israel in light of the covenant.

What does this connection with the body mean for the question of how to discern an authentic experience of the divine? By being rooted in corporeality, man's experience of God will never consist in the total luminosity of the enlightened mind. One can experience God only by renouncing the self-sufficiency of an isolated existence. God's light appears in man's openness to the world, in his receptivity to the encounters with others, in his availability and vulnerability. As a result, this experience will belong to others as well and will be shared by others. Here we find the foundation of its universality, linked to a key element of Christian experience: a true experience of God is possible only if one belongs to Christ's body, which is the Church. As Irenaeus of Lyons said: "where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and all grace."⁹

⁷Cf. Patrizio Rota Scalabrini, "Il corpo: passione di Dio e dell'uomo. Elementi di una teologia biblica del corpo nell'Antico Testamento," in *L'io e il corpo, Quaderni di studi e memorie* (Milan: Glossa, 1997), 83–137.

⁸Cf. Pietro Bovati, "Il corpo vivente. Riflessioni sulla vocazione profetica," in *Così parla il Signore. Studi sul profetismo biblico* (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 77–104.

⁹Cf. *Adv. Haer.* III, 24, 1 (Sources Chrétiennes 211, 474).

2. *The spiritual, bodily senses*

We turn now to a second crucial element of the bodily experience of the world: the senses. Can they provide us with an experience of the divine? Or should we renounce them in order better to enter into contact with God? The Christian tradition connects the bodily senses to the experience of the divine.¹⁰ As Augustine says in his *Confessions*:

You called, and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹¹

This text belongs to the tradition of the spiritual senses. It is true that these senses are seen as belonging to the Spirit, and not directly to the body. When Augustine loves his God, he does not love “the sweet melody of all kind of songs, nor the gentle odor of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh.” And yet, when he loves his God, “there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace”¹² This relationship means that there is a connection between the spiritual and the bodily senses. This connection means that the bodily senses are open to transcendence, and that the spiritual senses grow out of the bodily ones, analogically preserving the latter’s structure of connection with reality.

The technological mindset has popularized an understanding of the senses as passive receptors that receive signals coming from the surrounding objects and then send them to the human brain.¹³ A

¹⁰On this topic, cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik. Schau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), 352–410. Eng., *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

¹¹Cf. *Confessions* X, 27, 38. English translation by H. Chadwick (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 201.

¹²Cf. *Confessions* X, 6, 8 (Chadwick, 183).

¹³Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being. I: Reflection and Mystery* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), chapter 7: “Feeling as mode of participation.”

different account of perception is possible once we accept that there is a primordial affective communication between man and his environment, a communication arising from his corporeal presence in the world. In this view, the senses are not primarily opposed to their objects, but are always-already embedded in the world.¹⁴ The Cartesian division is thus overcome at the level of the senses, which is the only way it can be healed in the realm of consciousness as well.

To pursue this approach, we will take as our guide Romano Guardini, who, in an essay devoted to the senses and the religious experience, conducted a phenomenological analysis of the act of vision, showing how different it is from the way a photographic machine stores images.¹⁵

When we see a mineral, so goes Guardini's argument, we do not gather a series of particulars (color, shape, weight) that we then put together in order to arrive at the complete form of the object. Rather, what we see in the first place is the stone itself in its wholeness. The particulars appear to us only in a second moment, after we accomplish a certain detachment from the stone. The same fact can be observed in the vision of a plant or an animal. What we grasp in them is a living form, even before we concentrate on the particulars in order to describe them. This precedence of the form reaches its zenith at the sight of a fellow human being. Guardini, referring to a physician who said that in his many years of practice he had never seen a single soul, argues that, to the contrary, what one sees when looking at a human face is mainly the soul, and only in its light does one perceive the body, embedded, so to speak in the splendor of the soul. Paradoxically, both our own body and our neighbor's body are hidden, in their materiality, from the field of perception, in the same way that the written letters of a word recede when we read to allow us to see the word's meaning.

Guardini uses these analyses to pose a question: is it possible to contemplate the divine origin of things with our bodily eyes? The example he uses here is that of a man-made object. The eyes immediately grasp the difference between this kind of object and a natural one, without the need for further reflection. The eyes can

¹⁴Cf. Gustav Siewerth, *Der Mensch und sein Leib* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1953), 28–30.

¹⁵Cf. Romano Guardini, "Das Auge und die religiöse Erkenntnis" in *Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis: Drei Versuche* (Würzburg: Werkbund, 1958), 11–35.

perceive, in the concreteness of the form they grasp, that this object has an author. In an analogous way, says Guardini, the eyes are able to see the created character of the world, the fact that it refers beyond itself, that the ultimate ground of its visibility can never be totally disclosed, the fact that it has an Author. According to Guardini, this is the meaning of Paul's statement about the visibility of God in creation (cf. Rom 1:20). We see God with the eyes of the mind only because we are able to see him with the eyes of the body too.

At this point Guardini has to face an obvious objection. How is it that many people, when they see, do not perceive this divine connection? It is here that Guardini introduces the link between the eyes and the heart. In his view, the whole material world is permeated by the Spirit to different degrees. However, one can only perceive the Spirit's presence if one's own spirit enters into a kind of consonance with the Spirit that animates the world one sees. To perceive, then, is to enter into the field of action of other beings; it requires man's openness to them, a welcoming receptivity of their presence, and a generous availability to their requests. Sense perception, Guardini argues, always requires a free engagement of the person. Thus, there are many different ways of seeing: I can look at something or someone out of curiosity or in order to control it; I can also see in a receptive way, moved by a desire to be fulfilled by the truth of things. When I do so, then I am seeing from the heart, that is, from an initial openness to the world, from the acceptance of a call that comes from each being and invites me to discover its ultimate truth.

Of course, this link applies to the vision of God with particular intensity. To see God with the eyes of the body is reserved to the pure of heart, that is, to those who, accepting with gratitude the welcoming presence of reality, allow their vision to reveal each being in its entirety. One can see God only with the heart, that is, from one's foundational openness to existence, an openness rooted in one's corporeality. Without this participation, the vision of the fullness of reality remains closed to the human being. In this light we can discern a further dimension of man's experience of the divine. This experience is never an abstract consideration that forces man to go beyond the world or away from it. To the contrary, it is found in the midst of his concrete, everyday existence.

3. Mediation through the personal encounter

Affectivity and sense experience both open up man's life to transcendence, to the encounter with God. This openness, however, is not free of ambiguity. Man's encounter with the world, the fact that his own identity is measured according to his connection with reality, can also be experienced as a threat, as the exposure of his being to the impersonal forces of nature. If this were the case, corporeality would not be experienced as a blessing but rather as a curse to be avoided. A different relationship to the body would appear and, consequently, a different relationship to the divine as well.

As an example of what we mean, let us take the biblical story of Exodus. While waiting for Moses to return from the mountain, Israel experiences the desire to see God in order to apprehend his mystery. The episode of the golden calf is not a case of the People turning toward an alien god. In fact, what Israel says while adoring the calf is: "this is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 32:4). The sin implied in this approach, then, is the attempt to grasp Yahweh's essence, to put him within clear boundaries in order to control his manifestation. Israel cannot bear God's absence, his silence and distance, his incomprehensibility; it wants to have him in sight and at hand. We find another example of this mistaken connection between human senses and God in the hunger experienced during Israel's pilgrimage in the desert. Like the child who puts everything in his mouth because he wants to make an immediate contact with it and taste it, so Israel complains to God and asks him for immediate fulfillment of its physical urges. But the true experience of God requires a detour, a wandering through desert lands, in obedience to a voice that hides the manifestation of the speaker. In other words, it requires faith, the realization that man "does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Dt 8:3).¹⁶

¹⁶What takes place here is the attempt to make of the body an absolute. Nietzsche's praise of the body matches the content of this experience. The philosopher wants to undermine the dream of enlightened reason by exalting the body: "I, you say, and are proud of this word. But the greater thing—in which you do not want to believe—is your body and its great reason: it does not say I, but does I . . . Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown wise man—his name is Self. In your body he dwells, he

What Israel does not understand is that the bodily experience of the world needs mediation if it is to attain a true experience of the divine. It is in this regard that we can speak of the humility of the body. We will show in the following how this mediation takes place through the interpersonal encounter that man's corporeality makes possible.

If affectivity roots us in an initial confidence in the goodness of the world, if our senses allow us to grasp the invisible as a welcoming gaze that surrounds us, it is because man is illumined by the primordial experience of a personal encounter that dispels the ambiguity we mentioned above. The child does not feel himself at the mercy of the environment because the environment is given, first of all, by the welcoming womb and embracing arms of the mother. Something analogous can be said of the subsequent experiences through which life develops.

Paul Claudel illustrates this connection between corporeality and love in one of his plays. *Pensée*, a young blind woman without a father who feels herself alone in the world, says to the man she loves:

Orian, do you understand what it means to be blind? My hand, if I raise it, I cannot see it. It exists for me only when someone takes it and gives me its feeling. While I am alone, I am like someone without a body, without a position, without a face. Only when someone comes, takes me and embraces me in his arms, only then I exist in a body. Only in this way can I know my body. I don't know it if I don't give it up.¹⁷

The body is known only when received by another and given up to him. True human experience takes place in the correlation between the encounter of love and the perception of one's own body. Let us examine the two terms of the circular movement (a) from the body to the truth of love and (b) from love to the truth of the body.

is your body. There is more reason in your body than in your finest wisdom" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 30). While highlighting the meaning of bodiliness and its novelty with regard to reason, Nietzsche does not allow for a meaningful connection between the two. The body and the *logos* remain alien to each other.

¹⁷Cf. Paul Claudel, *Le Père humilié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1920), 104.

a) What the body discloses to us is our constitutive opening to others, the fact that our identity is always found in relationship. This fact illumines the meaning and truth of love. Because it is rooted in the body, love is not something accidental that takes place randomly in our life: it touches the core of our identity.

b) On the other hand, because man's being in the body is perceived in light of an interpersonal encounter, he understands that his corporeality is not an existentialist "being thrown in the world." On the contrary, his corporeality is the being received and accepted that constitutes the background for his capacity to act. In light of the personal encounter, the body is shown to be meaningful because it is able to express itself in the language of love. In addition, because love takes place in man's life as a call to accept the other person, he learns that the openness of his body to the world does not allow for the shortcut of immediate satisfaction, but rather initiates a long journey toward mature communion and friendship.¹⁸

The interpersonal relationships opened up by the body are manifold. We will briefly describe some that are of singular importance for the constitution of the person. They are a mediation in which the body allows for the experience of transcendence, in the form of love and in accordance with love's order.

The foundational relationship that constitutes man's identity is the one he establishes with his parents, in whom the child finds a reflection of the Creator's presence. Correspondingly, the corporeal image of birth is used in the Bible to express Israel's relationship with God. The People has been raised up by God and nurtured by Yahweh in the desert (cf. Ex 19:4; Dt 32:11). This image corresponds to the metaphor of the primordial waters, from which the People is born: the waters of the Red Sea and of the Jordan River, which will later become the waters of Christian baptism. The prophets will deepen this perspective with their accounts of a personal vocation that begins in their mother's womb (cf. Jer 1:5). For example, when Jeremiah wishes to give some proof of the divine origin of his word (that is, when he wants to discern the value of his prophetic experience), he refers not to a miraculous sign that would confirm his mission but to God's formation of his body. The body

¹⁸On this regard, cf. the work by Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Lebensphilosophie und Existenzphilosophie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009).

is a witness to God as the foundational beginning of life who is always present though never wholly graspable.¹⁹

This mediation continues through the bodily encounter of nuptial love: it is this metaphor that constitutes the thread of Israel's experience of the covenant and is expressed particularly in the writings of the prophets. In addition, this encounter is open to the coming of a new life, where the experience of filiation reappears from the point of view of the one who generates. Father and mother give to the child an existence that does not belong to them, thus becoming symbols of the foundational origin.

The encounter of man with the other (in the form of filiation, of nuptial love, and of paternity and maternity, as well as of brotherhood, sisterhood, friendship, etc.) offers him the key coordinates for discerning his experience of transcendence. First, since his journey is rooted in the experience of filiation, in which the first glimpse of a transcendent origin is revealed to man, Christian discernment is never anxious but is rather rooted in the certitude that God loved his creature first and will always sustain him. Second, since God's presence is such that it calls man to welcome the other and to the gift of self, the experience of the divine is never discerned in isolation, but always in the context of a personal encounter with others, in the midst of a community. Third, since the encounter with God is one of fruitfulness, which extends toward the future and overcomes the barriers of death,

¹⁹On the connection between God's fatherhood and corporeality, cf. Angelini, "Corpo proprio e forma morale," in *L'io e il corpo*, 205–37; 236: "La legge è soltanto negativa. Il senso della promessa infatti, rispettivamente l'istruzione positiva a proposito della via, è custodito altrove rispetto alla legge. È custodito nelle forme dell'esperienza grata originaria, la quale è gravida di una promessa. In tal senso, possiamo dire che la promessa è custodita anzitutto nelle forme dell'originaria esperienza 'somatica,' intesa questa quale denominazione sintetica del momento in cui io sono come dato a me stesso, e non posso invece disporre di me in proprio. La prescrizione 'onora il padre e la madre' in particolare, l'unico precetto della seconda tavola che abbia enunciazione positiva, deve essere intesa appunto quale rimando a tale origine che mai si lascia tradurre adeguatamente in parola. Ma al di là della forma letteraria dell'enunciato, ogni precetto negativo rimanda a tale evidenza positiva non dichiarata dal precetto stesso. Pensiamo tipicamente al 'non commettere adulterio': esso non dice positivamente la qualità dell'agire fedele al patto di alleanza con la sposa o con lo sposo; semplicemente sbarra la strada che taglia il patto."

discernment always demands the generous desire for transformation into a new creature along the journey toward a fruitful mission.

The rhythm that opens up here unveils an important feature of experience: its temporality. The personal encounter takes the form of filiation, sponsality, and fatherhood, essential components of human experience. As a result, no experience of the divine can be discerned without passing through the detour of time, in which these coordinates of the personal encounter are grasped. All discernment of the experience of God takes time because it needs to mature in time.

4. *Experience of God and time*

Experience, by being rooted in the body, becomes an experience in time. Because man is in time, he is always outside himself, never in total possession of his own being. Both the past and the future, though part of the person's identity, escape his direct possession, for they lie beyond his own grasp and direct control (the past as closed, the future as open and indeterminable). In this regard St. Augustine speaks of time as *distentio animi*, the dispersion of the soul, its lack of unity.²⁰ Temporality denies the possibility of an experience that would be totally transparent to the mind and completely under the subject's autonomous dominion.

This fragmentation of experience in time does not, however, invite man to renounce his quest for meaning. Man's dispersion in past and future, which can be read as mere division, also reveals the radical openness of his life to the world and others. Because his life opens up toward the past, he can recognize his coming from another, through which he belongs to a family; because he is open to the future, he can expect the novelty and richness of each new

²⁰Cf. *Confessions* XI, xxvi, 33 (CCL 27, 211). Thus, the connection between time and experience does not refer only to man's need of time in order to gather experience (as the experienced doctor is the seasoned one), but more fundamentally to the very structure of the experience, dispersed in time. This connection between time and experience is not only an extrinsic one, due to our limitations, like a link that could, given enough technical advances, be suppressed. To the contrary, time is an essential constitutive component of our experience, for it enables man's life to open up to transcendence and determines the way this openness takes.

personal encounter and experience the generous joy of generation. In other words, when happily connected with the interpersonal encounter, time makes man's existence greater by including his time within the time of others, by making his time a time that is shared. This means that temporality, as a fundamental structure of experience, receives its light from the different relationships that constitute man's identity: man's being child, spouse, and parent.

These fundamental experiences illumine the way man relates to transcendence. The openness of his life toward the past reaches an ultimate fatherly origin, which constitutes both the immemorial (what cannot be explicitly remembered) and the unforgettable (because it is always present as the foundation of our memories).²¹ There is, then, a presence of God in our memory (the Augustinian *memoria Dei*), which allows us to perceive our past history in light of God's fatherhood. Rooted in this primordial memory, our knowledge of God opens up toward the future, which contains both his fidelity to his own promise and the novelty of his ever greater manifestation.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, a master in the discernment of spirits, understood the importance of this link between time and the experience of the divine when his battle wounds forced him into retreat and meditation. During this time, he learned to distinguish between different kinds of joy and sadness. Those joys produced by his knightly dreams, he said, were powerful for a while, but then went away and left him sad. God's consolations, to the contrary, resisted the trial of time and granted him a lasting joy.²²

The God of the Covenant is not perceived in the isolated instant. God inhabits the present because he is remembered and because he is expected to come. Only in this way can he appear both as immanent (because man is his own past and future) and transcendent (because man's past and future are never fully grasped). Thus, temporality reveals important aspects of the experience of the divine. A true experience will refer man to a foundational origin from which he comes, and will take the form of memory. Its truth

²¹Cf. Jean Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1–39; 78–98.

²²Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola With Related Documents*, trans. J. F. O'Callaghan (San Francisco: Harper, 1976), 24.

will appear through a continuous rereading of man's own history in the light of his Origin. On the other hand, a true experience will always open up the future in the form of a fruit, of a growth beyond oneself that springs from one's rootedness in this foundational Origin.

5. *Id quo maius experiri nequit*

We cannot describe *a priori* the depths of the space of experience that man's bodily presence to the world discloses. This is indeed a fundamental rule of experience, which is dependent on its being rooted in bodiliness. Experience can never be exhaustively described because it always bears the possibility of novelty, of the manifestation of a richer experience that forces us to define it anew. It can always open up toward wider horizons.

Experience, according to what we have said, is open to God from the outset and allows man to see and touch him. However, that this space could be opened in such a way as to contain the personal presence of God, that the love manifested in it could be the very love that sustains the world—this is beyond any imaginable anticipation of man's experience. Precisely this surprising presence constitutes the good news proclaimed by Christianity. The space opened in man by the bodily senses and affectivity is the space in which God's Word has let himself be experienced in fullness: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" (1 Jn 1:1–2).

The eternal Word, the one who is the continuous reference and response to the Father, has entered into the body, into this space where experience takes the form of constitutive relationship to one's origin in the transcendent God. Here the experience of the body harmoniously corresponds to the being of the Eternal Son. And so we can affirm that the body is not only a microcosm in which the whole of material reality is recapitulated, but is also a

“micrologos,” the aptest place for the coming of the Word (Logos) of God among us.²³

Since experience, embodied as it is, is never isolated, Jesus’ own experience of the Father can be communicated to us. “Have among yourselves the same sentiments as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), says St. Paul, moved by the desire that “I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil 3:10). Thus, the capacity of the senses to see the divine is confirmed (cf. Jn 14:9: “he who has seen me has seen the Father”) as well as God’s power to fulfill man’s affectivity (cf. Rom 5:5: “the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us”).

God, said St. Anselm, is *id quo maius cogitari nequit*, that being greater than which nothing can be thought. In the Incarnation, by becoming flesh and encountering us, he has become also *id quo maius experiri nequit*, that event greater than which nothing can be experienced, that is, encountered bodily in our space and time.²⁴ For, as Charles Péguy puts it in *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*: “You see, you eat directly the good God, you are nourished directly by God. And there is nothing closer than touching. There is nothing closer than eating. Than the incorporation, the incarnation of eating.”²⁵ □

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²³Cf. Antonio Orbe, *Antropología de San Ireneo* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1969), 117: “Microcosmos en lo que atañe al mundo sensible, vendría a ser el cuerpo humano un ‘micrologos,’ resumen de las virtudes del Verbo.”

²⁴Cf. Sergio Paolo Bonanni, “Quo nihil maius fieri potest, ovvero: il tempo superato. Percorsi schellinghiani e riflessione cristologica in Walter Kasper,” *Lateranum* 65 (1999): 223–70.

²⁵ Cf. Ch. Péguy, *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d’Arc* (Paris, Gallimard, 1944), 35–36: “[V]ous voyez, vous mangez directement le bon Dieu, vous nourrissez directement de Dieu. Et il n’y a pas plus près que de toucher. Il n’y a pas plus près que la nourriture. Que l’incorporation, que l’incarnation de la nourriture.”