



The “experience” of God

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In a culture that attaches a lot of importance to experiences, some people ask themselves the question, whether it is possible to experience God or to experience His grace. First of all, I will introduce you to some biblical texts, where the importance of having an adequate experience of God is revealed. Secondly, I will explain the concept of experience. I will explain what some authors call “transcendental experience” and the religious experience we have through faith. As a particular instance of this faith, I will explain what the mystics call the “dark night”. Then, I will explain the possibility of being certain of our state of grace as a personal experience of God’s presence in our soul. Finally, I will make clear the relationship between our experience of God, given by faith, and the need for a correct formation of conscience.

1. The experience of God in some biblical texts

To begin with, I have chosen two biblical texts, where we experience God’s presence. The first is a Psalm, the second the famous dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in the Gospel of St. John. 3:8. In Psalm 34:8 is written the following: “*Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus; beatus vir, qui sperat in eo*” (“O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him”). This Psalm is a prayer of thanksgiving from David, who was persecuted by Saul and had to flee from him. It is a song of praise because God has conquered

his enemies. This verse speaks about the possibility of being able to “taste”, “to have an experience of God”, which is the meaning of the Hebrew verb (*taamu*). The pious man, or man in general (*geber*), is able to have an experience of the goodness of God. The Vulgate translates the Hebrew “*tov*” as “*suavis*” (“good”), God is good. “Only God is good”, Jesus says to the rich man (Mt. 19:16).

The believer can have an experience of this goodness (“*gustare*”) and can see (“*videre*”). Thus, we see in the Old Testament, as illustrated in this Psalm, the possibility of being aware of God’s action through a kind of experience, perceived not only by the intellect, but by man in his being as a whole, which is involved in the experience. This psalm stands in relationship to the first letter of St. Peter, chapter 2 verse 3: “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (εἰ ἐγεύσασθε ὅτι χρηστὸς ὁ κύριος). The Greek verb γεύομαι means “taste”, “partake of”, “enjoy”, and the adjective “χρηστὸς” means “useful”, “worthy”, “good”. The idea portrayed here is the same as what we saw in Psalm 34. The difference here is that it is applied to Christ, while in Psalm 34 it is applied to God.

Let us look at another New Testament text, in which we can see the action of the Spirit in the soul of the believer. It is about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In chapter 3 verse 8 of St. John’s Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it chooses; you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Here Jesus speaks about the Spirit and he uses the comparison of the blowing of the wind. One does not know why the wind blows in a particular direction, but one can “hear” it. In this passage, the verb for a sensitive action, a human experience, is “to hear” (ἀκούω), that means not only “to hear”, but also “to understand” and “to learn”. In this particular case, it is more physical; the wind is heard. But you need an interpretation to better understand the action and the direction because there are parameters which remain unknown to you. Man born of the Spirit is similar; he can have spiritual experiences. He can know that these experiences comes from the Spirit, but he needs to interpret them in order to under to understand better the action of God in the soul.

Thus far, we have verified two examples, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New, which show that it is possible to have a kind of experience of God that goes beyond rationality. But

several questions arise here. What value can we give to these experiences? Do these personal spiritual experiences really translate into a real presence of God in the soul? If so, what kind of presence? Is it possible to experience grace? What relationship can we establish between experience and ontology? Is it necessary to make that distinction? These questions are more important than ever today because man gives great weight to experience. For this reason, it is imperative to know how much we can rely upon these experiences. Obviously, it will be impossible to answer all these questions in this article, but at least I will try to give some indications which will put us in the right direction.

2. The concept of experience

In order better to understand the question and to answer it, we need to recall the meaning of the concept of “experience”. The term “experience” comes from Greek and refers not to theoretical knowledge, but rather to immediate and direct knowledge. We acquire the former through abstraction and reflection, the latter through sensations, feelings, emotions and affections. “Experience” can have several meanings. It can denote the wisdom that a man obtains through an approach towards reality that gives him the capacity to seem life and the world with deep insight.

In ancient Greece, “experience” was this kind of knowledge, that which came from a vital “sympathy” (or “being in tune with”). Homer describes how Proteus, the great god of the sea, can become everything *νῆγ ἀτναπ* (“ὄνομες”), since he can assume the form of all things¹. To know is to become. Other Greek philosophers, such as Heraclitus, Empedocles and Xenofanes, also hold that experience comes from the fact that it is possible to become the thing which is known. Philosophers like Parmenides and Anaxagoras reflected upon the nature of experience. For Aristotle, experience is the knowledge of particular things, given through sensations. The memory stores these sensations and the intellect is capable of creating, in the first place, art, then knowledge of the universals and the causes (but still in reference

¹ The Odyssey, IV, 417-418.

to the particular experience), and, finally, science or knowledge of the first principles, which are pure and are independent of the senses².

The rupture of the unity of knowledge brought about in modern times led to the total separation between experiential and intellectual knowledge. Empiricism, which recognized experience as the only valid source of knowledge (Locke, Hume), emerged in this context. Rationalism, on the other hand, gave all epistemological value to reason. Kant sought to reconcile these two extremes by providing a rational justification for experience, acknowledging that an a priori concept is hidden within every act of experience. Experience is not merely constructed on the basis of, but is regulated by, the objective conditions of reality. In this sense, “the possibility of experience is the ultimate criterion of the legitimacy of every form of knowledge and of every *a priori* form of knowledge”³. However, at the same time, Kant argued that, in a way, reason constructed this sensitive knowledge. In so arguing, he devalued the role of experience. German idealism continued in this rationalistic vein by considering experience not as something proceeding from outside the subject, but as a kind of subjective intellectual construction. It was Husserl who afforded to experience a key role in contemporary philosophy. For him, reality is grasped by conscience as an intentional object and this is done precisely through experience (*Erfahrung*). “The simple experience in which the world of life is given to us is the ultimate foundation of all objective knowledge”⁴. Objective knowledge is formed via the inter-subjective relation of experiences.

The ontological question is to know what relationship experience has with being (*esse*). Philosophy tries to understand the “*datum*” that experience offers. This “*datum*” comes from reality and only the intellect can grasp it. But, the “*datum*” has a richness that comprehension ignores. Theoretical metaphysics cannot contain the integral experience of reality. There is a kind of metaphysical experience that grasps reality as reality, in relation to being (*esse*). This experience can be called a “transcendental experience”. Modern philosophy, however, has often reduced experience to an experience of phenomena or to immanent experience, in which the ultimate boundary of reality is al-

² *Metaphysics*, 981, a. Cf. G. GIANNINI, M.M. ROSSI, A. PIERETTI, *Esperienza*, in *Enciclopedia Filosofica*, Vol. IV, Bompiani, Milano, 2006, pp. 3633.

³ Cf. G. GIANNINI, M.M. ROSSI, A. PIERETTI, *Esperienza*, *art. cit.*, p. 3635.

⁴ *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, Den Haag, 66.

ways relative, including the absolute itself. We shall speak about that under the next point.

To summarize, while no univocal concept of experience exists in philosophy, we can say that experience is a kind of knowledge which prepares for intellectual knowledge and which gives us direct contact with reality (datum), but which the intellect has yet to test.

3. Religious and transcendental experience

When we apply the concept of experience to religious knowledge, we are confronted with different situations, dependent upon differing kinds of experiences. But, in general, we may suppose that the same concept of experience used in philosophy may be used also in theology, with God being the object of knowledge in the latter case. The major problem of using this concept of experience in theology is that God, in and of himself, is not the object of sensitive experience because He transcends what is physical. So, it is legitimate to ask whether or not direct contact with God, who is not sensible, is possible. In this case, the experience of God is a particular instance of experiencing what is not material. How can we experience what is not sensible? This is a very perplexing problem for anthropology and for metaphysics, and also for us, who exist in a universe of visible and invisible things.

In order to attempt to offer a solution to this enigma, let us take a moment to consider what modern theology calls the “transcendental experience”. The most prolific author on this topic is probably Karl Rahner. In his book, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, he defines this concept in these terms: “The knowledge of the knowing subject is a subjective, a-thematic ‘with-knowledge’, present in every act of spiritual knowledge, in a necessary and ‘in-eliminable’ way, as well as in its openness to the infinite largeness of the whole possible reality”⁵. The transcendental experience surpasses all categories. It forms part of the structure of knowledge, since in it both the final structure of the object known and of the subject itself is revealed.

The “transcendental” experience is valid not only for knowledge, but also for will and for freedom. This kind of experience, since it is

⁵ Cf. I. SANNA, *La teologia come esperienza di Dio. La prospettiva cristologica di K. Rahner*, Queriniana, Brescia, 1997, 118.

transcendental, cannot be fitted into categories because it goes beyond them, as we have said. For Rahner, theology requires the transcendental experience to be able to present the events of salvation in their specificity. Theology should reflect upon what revelation makes known not only in a neutral or purely rational way, but also in its wholeness. In other words, the theologian should assimilate the faith by comprehending the revealed datum and also through his personal experience of faith. In this sense theology is also “situated” in the conscience of the individual. This method is called the “indirect method”, since it includes the consideration of the existential situation of this concrete individual.

How is it possible that we can have a “transcendental experience”? Or better still, how is it possible to ascend to the supernatural realm, while still in the “natural” world? First of all, we must certainly recognize that grace permeates the natural world, for denying such a fact would cause a serious rupture between the natural and the supernatural and would create a division of sorts between God the Creator and the God the Savior. We must, therefore, accept a fundamental union between these two worlds. Creation and covenant are deeply related. But, at the same time, we have to make a distinction between nature and grace; although they are intimately connected, they remain distinct. From the very beginning of creation, God offered grace to our human nature. Creation and redemption in Christ imply a world in which grace is present in a mysterious way because God willed it so, despite its being an apparent metaphysical impossibility⁶. We can reach this supernatural world especially by means of the faith, as this implies an act both of the reason and of the will. These two worlds, natural and supernatural, are united, yet distinct. Their union comes from above, and, to have a complete vision of these two worlds, we need the vision that comes from above, the vision of faith.

4. The experience of God by faith

Our being is characterized by its openness to God and by this transcendental experience. However, the normal channel that makes this possible is, as we have said, through the act of faith. What kind of experience can we have in an act of faith?

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

In the act of faith, the subject has access to a reality that he cannot see, but that, nevertheless, he accepts. He is able to perceive the presence of one who is both Friend and Creator. In the same act, the believer experiences himself as such, as one who believes. He knows that what or whom he is accepting does not proceed from his senses, although there is no contradiction between the two forms of knowing. He experiences himself as the subject who performs this unique act, but, at the same time, as one who experiences the presence of God in a way that surpasses the normal capacities of the intellect and of the will. He uses his intellect and his will, but he also knows with his "heart". In a certain way, he enjoys a kind of "sixth sense", which enables him to experience the Presence of God.

In faith, we have a singular experience of Good. Again, this experience is not physical, because our senses cannot have a direct experience of God. Nevertheless, the believer knows that God is there. In short, through faith, he knows that He is there, although the senses cannot give him a direct experience of God.

Until the Second Vatican Council, many theologians avoided employing the term "experience" to describe the knowledge of God through faith. They feared that they could fall into a liberal-protestant position, such as that of Schleiermacher, who placed excessive emphasis on the intuition or feeling of God as an essential element of the act of faith. Other modern authors also insisted too much on the strength of feeling in the act of faith. Yet others, like Newman, recognized that the dogmatic principle of faith did not contradict faith-experience. Kierkegaard was also very influential in re-establishing, in religious philosophy, the value of individual experience in the act of faith. In the 20th century, authors like E. Husserl, A. Whitehead, M. Blondel, M. Scheler, K. Jaspers, G. Marcel, M. Heidegger and H-D. Gadamer, as well as Catholic theologians such as J. Mouroux, H. Bouillard, Y. Congar and K. Rahner, have reserved a privileged place for experience in the act of faith. Some important philosophical currents and a deeper knowledge of other religions have followed the same line of thought, showing the central place of experience in the phenomenon of religion.

In the Second Vatican Council, the Constitutions *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dei Verbum*, presented the value of experience in the hearing of God's Word. Number 8 of *Dei Verbum* says that there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and of the words of faith that are

handed down by tradition. This occurs through the believer's contemplation and "through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience. Here the text speaks of the spiritual reality of faith, as experienced by believers (*"ex anima spiritualium rerum quam experiuntur intelligentia"*). In our time, the Magisterium has no fear of using the word and the notion of "experience" in official texts. In fact, Pope John Paul II used this word frequently. For example, in his catecheses on human love, he uses expressions like: "experience of the body"⁷, "the experience of shame", "experience of guilt"⁸, "experience of innocence"⁹ and "experience of the heart"¹⁰. In these Catecheses John Paul II gives human experience a new value for theology. He says that "human experience is ... to some extent, a legitimate means for theological interpretation [...]"¹¹. Experience has a valuable place in theology, although it cannot stand alone. A theological interpretation is necessary, which also implies recourse to philosophy as an instrument for correct thinking.

It is interesting to note that, in the Christian tradition, the act of faith is always related to the situation in history, to a personal experience. In the Old Testament, the patriarchs, the prophets, kings and people alike had numerous personal experiences of God. Likewise, in the New Testament, the apostles and the other disciples had a personal experience of Jesus, which would serve as the basis and the foundation for their subsequent passing on of the faith, through the guiding action of the Holy Spirit. "The post-apostolic tradition can be considered as the collective memory of the privileged experiences, which constitute the founding revelation, which finds its definitive and unsurpassed climax in Jesus Christ"¹². The Christian experience has been transmitted to later generations through the different traditions.

The commonplace human experience of direct contact between subject and object also play a fundamental role in the human experience of the act of faith in Jesus Christ. Natural science begins with experience. However, in science, experience converts into experiment,

⁷ 16 January, 1980; 30 January, 1980, 6 February, 1980.

⁸ 6 February, 1980.

⁹ 6 February, 1980

¹⁰ 26 July, 1980.

¹¹ 26 September 1979.

¹² G. O'COLLINS, *Expérience* in Dictionnaire de Théologie Fondamentale, R. Latourelle-R. Fisichella, Bellarmin-Cerf, 1992, 456.

which the scientist himself “initiates” in order to test a hypothesis or a theory that he is seeking to prove.

In the life of man, experiences need a further interpretation. Likewise, the experience of faith requires an interpretation. It is a kind of comparison between what dogma states and what reason affirms. It is at this point that spiritual discernment begins. In every normal act of faith, at least a minimal experience of the Trinitarian God is present. It moves us closer to the fullness of God, as Being (the Father), as the meaning of the truth (the Son), and as the fullness of love (the Holy Spirit). But, these experiences of God through the act of faith vary according to the character, psychology, culture, education, sensitivity, level of intelligence, temperament, etc., of the believer. Each person has a personal experience of God through his act of faith, which can be described to others in some way, but which, at the same time, remains very personal and non-transferable.

5. Mystical experience

A particular case of the experience of God is what spiritual writers call the “mystical experience”. Some authors present mystical experience as something totally separated from the normal experience of God and of his grace. However, lately, through the studies of Moroux and of K. Rahner, many authors have begun to consider that mystical experience is a particular case of the experience of grace¹³. Mystical experience itself is described by means of a special metaphorical language. Dionysius the Aeropagite’s writings explain that, in the end, this description tends towards silence, due to the inexpressible nature of the experience, something incapable of being communicated in human language. This experience attempts to describe the soul’s deep union with God, in which the specific essences both of God and of man are maintained distinct. God, who “is beyond everything”, comes to meet man and, at the same time, he respects his essence because he is his Creator. Mystical experience is one of spiritual union encountered through word and through silence. The person feels as if he is submerged in God’s presence, as in a great ocean, whose depths are unfathomable to the human mind.

¹³ F. ASTI, *Teologia della vita mistica*. Fondamenti. Dinamiche. Mezzi, LEV, Città del Vaticano, 2009, 303-305.

The language is uncomplicated and is full of comparisons, metaphors and images, since simple conceptual language does not fully express the nature of this experience. This experience endows the person with an interior unity, with a new harmony between his corporal and spiritual dimensions, and with an increased desire for a fuller union, which is transforming.

The inexpressible nature, the first feature of mystical experience, is followed by a new way of knowing. Reason plays a role in this new form of knowledge, but it is not alone. This new form of knowledge is simultaneously darkness and light. St. John of the Cross describes it as the “*noche oscura*”, the dark night. The reason’s apparent lack of light is suddenly illuminated by a new and very splendid light, which the human intellect alone cannot understand, although this light is not completely foreign to it. St. Bonaventure describes this supreme experience as a surrender of “all intellectual operations, so that the peak of affection is completely brought to God and transformed into Him”¹⁴. We are referring here neither to Descartes “clear and distinct ideas”, nor to rational concepts, God in his totality is grasped in this new light. This kind of knowledge is also secret, since one knows God in a new way, not found in the normal faith experience. Conceptual knowledge, our normal way of knowing reality, is surpassed. Yet, the mystic is unaware of how this knowledge is possible because never before had he experienced this new way of knowing.

Although this form of knowing is obscure and dark, and although doubts regarding the reality and the reliability of this knowledge may accompany the experience, there is, at the same time, an inner certitude. Man perceives that God is truly present and that it is neither his imagination nor a hallucination. “The soul, perceiving that she is in God’s hands, feels moved by God to repay his love”¹⁵. On the other hand, the person may have doubts as to whether this new form of knowing is merely the effect of an altered state of mind or a figment of his imagination. The soul may experience a void or a total annihilation, but God may also grant the soul a deep peace and the interior certitude of the reality of his presence¹⁶.

¹⁴ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII, 4: “*In hoc transitu, si sit perfectus, oportet quod relinquatur omnes intellectuales operationes, et apex affectus totus transferatur et transformatur in Deum*”.

¹⁵ F. ASTI, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

¹⁶ S. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Noche Oscura*, I, 10, 6.

Another characteristic of mystical experience is *passivity*. This passivity is not to be understood as a lack of activity in the spiritual faculties; rather, it refers to the fact that this whole experience is not the fruit of one’s own efforts, but that it is a gift from God. Man is incapable of producing this experience with them means at his disposal. He can only accept and welcome the gift. St. Bonaventure confesses that, in this experience, “[...] there can be nothing by nature, a limited amount be industry, a little be inquiring and much by unction; little must be given to the tongue and most to internal gladness; little must be given to word and to writing and the whole to the Gift of God [...]”¹⁷. The subject passively corresponds to the action of God, like a sponge that absorbs the waters of divine grace and presence. The gift is supernatural, but the particular mode of action respects human nature and man’s faculties.

While mystical experience is personal, it has also important social and ecclesial implications. The gift is given to one person, but normally it is intended to produce abundant fruits for the whole Church. The true mystic accepts the Church’s judgment regarding his own life and experience; this humble acceptance authenticates the subjective experience. Furthermore, these experiences are also related to a particular mission given to the person to be performed within the Church and at the service of the Church. Often, the inspired works relate to the suffering, the poor, and those needing God’s presence in a special way.

We can see some of these elements of mystical experience in a work of a Spanish philosopher, Manuel Garcia Morente, in which he relates his mystical experience of God. He was an atheist when he had this experience. Later, he decided to enter the seminary and felt the need to describe the details of this experience to his spiritual director. He relates that he had been going through a particularly difficult moment in his life. He had left Spain during the civil war, but his two daughters remained in the country. Naturally, he feared for their lives and struggled with feelings of guilt for having left them alone. He was in a hotel in Paris, reflecting upon his situation. It was the middle of the night, some time between 29th and 30th April, 1937. As he was

¹⁷ *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII, 5, “...nihil potest natura, modicum potest industria, parum est dandum inquisitioni, et multum unctioni; parum dandum est linguae, et plurimum internae laetitiae; parum dandum est verbo et scripto, et totum Dei dono...”

smoking outside on the balcony, he suddenly felt a strange presence inside the room. He describes it as follows:

“They were broadcasting French music on the radio, the finale from a symphony by Cesar Frank, then a piano piece, the *Pavanne pour une enfante défunte* by Ravel, then an orchestral piece, Berlioz’s *L’enfance de Jésus* ... When it was over, I turned off the radio, so as not to disturb the state of blissful peace into which that music had submerged me and then, incapable of putting up any resistance, images of Our Lord, Jesus Christ’s childhood began parading about in my mind. In my imagination, I saw him walking, while holding the Blessed Virgin’s hand, or sitting down on a stool and looking at St. Joseph and Mary, with eyes opened wide in amazement (...) And then, little by little, a vision of Christ began to grow in my soul, the man nailed to the cross, prominently overlooking a vast landscape, an infinite plain, swarming with men, women and children, over whom Our Crucified Lord’s arms extended. And Christ’s arms grew and grew and seemed to embrace the whole of suffering humanity and to cover it with the immensity of his love. And the cross rose and rose until it reached the sky and filled the entire scene and upon it many climbed upward ...

The small clock on the wall struck twelve. The night was serene and very clear. An extraordinary peace reigned in my soul. And here, there is a gap in my memory, which is normally so meticulous. I must have been sleeping. My memory picks up again the thread of events in at the moment when I awoke after feeling an inexplicable fright. I cannot say what I felt exactly: fear, anxiety, apprehension, confusion, an intuition that something immense, terrible and inexpressible was about to happen there and then, in that very moment, without delay. I stood up, trembling all over, and I threw the window open wide open. A puff of fresh air whisked my face. *I turned my head towards the interior of the room and I stood petrified. He was there. I didn’t see Him. I didn’t hear Him. I didn’t touch Him, but He was there.*

There was no more light in the room than the light of an electric lamp, one of those tiny ones, and the light of one or two night lights in a corner. I didn’t see anything. I didn’t hear anything. I didn’t touch anything. I didn’t have even the slightest sensation, but He was there. I remained immobile, stiff from emotion. And I perceived him. I perceived his presence with the same clarity with which I perceive the paper upon which I am writing and the letters, black on white, that I am tracing, but I had neither a sensation of sight, nor of hearing, neither of touching, nor of smelling nor of

tasting. Yet, I perceived him there, present, with total clarity, and I hadn't the slightest doubt that it was He, since I perceived him, although without sensing him. How is this possible? I don't know, but I do know that He was present and that I, without seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting or touching, I perceived him; the evidence was absolute and unquestionable. If anyone asks me to prove that it wasn't him or that I was delirious, I will not have anything to respond, but, as soon as my memories come back to me, the unyielding conviction that it was He will surge up because I did perceive him.

I don't know how long I remained immobile and hypnotized before his presence. Yes, I do know that I didn't dare move and that I wanted all that - his being there - to last eternally, because his presence flooded me with so great and intimate a joy that nothing is comparable to the super-human delight that I felt. It was like a suspension of all that has weight in the body. When did his stay there finish? I don't know that either. It finished, in an instant, it disappeared. A thousandth of a second before, He was there and I perceived him and I felt flooded with that super-human joy that I mentioned. A thousandth of a second later, He was no longer there. There was no longer any one in the room. I was already gravitating heavily towards the floor and I felt my members and my strength being sustained by the natural force of my muscles¹⁸”.

Garcia Morente describes his unexpected experience of Christ, a mystical experience, that has all the characteristics mentioned above: inexpressible, a clear and new form of knowledge, inner certitude and passivity. During the years of his education, he was much influenced by authors such as Kant, Bergson, Spengler, Scheler and Hartmann. He tried to describe what had happened to him in a very objective way. However, he could never express the totality of the experience because it was inexpressible, but, at the same time, this new form of knowledge was clear, although it had not entered through the senses. He could not doubt. He had not done anything to create it. He was just there, listening to the beautiful compositions of Frank, Ravel and Berlioz.

Mystical experience grants a new form of knowledge. These experiences are very strong, but, at the same time, they last only for a

¹⁸ M. GARCIA MORENTE, *El «Hecho extraordinario» y otros escritos*, prólogo de Antonio Millán Puelles, Madrid 1986, **

limited amount of time. The person feels and knows that he is in contact with God, but, on the other hand, he experiences a certain level of doubt. The security and certitude that were experienced are not a personal invention or a creation of the imagination, but, at the same time, they are matched by the fear that the mind could be capable of creating such a beautiful experience.

6. The “dark night” (*noche oscura*)

Sometimes the experience of God, even among those who have had other mystical experiences, is accompanied by a feeling of his total absence. This is the case of the “*noche oscura*”, as experienced and described by St. John of the Cross. The mystic explains that this “night” involves a two-fold purification, sensible and spiritual. The “night” of the senses is “bitter and terrible to the senses”; the second is harder to find something with which to compare “because it is awful and frightful for the spirit”¹⁹. In this “night”, the soul feels as if it is in a kind of darkness and it receives only very briefly the light of contemplation. This night is not easy to describe. It is a kind of negative experience, but it is an experience nonetheless. It is a mixture of dryness, unrest, distress, and feelings of powerlessness. The soul is not able to fix the mind on any particular object, although she has a great desire for God. St. John compares this state to the burning of a log. First of all, the fire dries the log; then, it becomes dark and emits a bad odour. In the end, it glows and gives off heat. In the same way, God purifies the soul and, in so doing, proves his purpose of bringing the soul nearer to him. In this type of experience, the soul finds displeasure in other creatures, feels no consolation, is more conscious of its own imperfections and sins, and finds itself incapable of discursive meditation. God can also permit terrible temptations against faith, hope, charity, chastity and other virtues like patience and peace of soul. He suffers persecutions and misunderstandings to occur on the part of men. St. John of the Cross was not the only one to have suffered this dark night of the soul. In recent times, Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta also suffered such a trial. She wrote the following to Fr. Neuner on January 8th, 1965:

¹⁹ *Noche Oscura*, I, 8.

“As for me, what will I tell you? I have nothing, since I have not got him whom my heart and soul long to possess. Aloneness is so great. From within and from without, I find no one to turn to. He has taken not only spiritual, but even human help. I can speak to no-one and, even if I do, nothing enters my soul. If there is a hell, this must be one. How terrible [it] is to be without God: no prayer, no faith, no love. The only thing that still remains is the conviction that the work is His, that the sisters and brothers are His. And I cling to this as the person having nothing to cling to [but] straw before drowning. And still, Father, I want to be faithful to Him, to spend my life for Him, to love Him not for what He gives, but for what He takes, to be at His disposal”²⁰.

Mother Theresa feels she has nothing. She longs to possess God, but she feels that God is not with her and that causes deep pain in her soul. It is the pain that the lover experiences and suffers in the absence of the beloved. A feeling of solitude enters the soul, one of being alone, without the Beloved. With this solitude comes great suffering, since we were created for communion: “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). When man is alone, there is no communion and thus he cannot reach the plenitude of this being. If such is true with reference to communion with another human being, then how much more so is it true with reference to man’s relationship with God? Someone, like Mother Theresa, who has given herself totally to God and yet who does not experience God inside her, finds “no-one to turn to”, both “from within and form without”. She suffers that original solitude, which had moved Adam to ask God for a helper (Gen 2:18). Theresa feels as if she lacks all spiritual and human help. She does not find God in her soul and she cannot express this anxiety to anyone, because it is difficult to speak about it and to express it adequately in words. She feels nothing in her soul, as if it were totally void, without substance, isolated and incapable of being united to the supreme love, which is God. This is what makes her write such a horrifying sentence: “If there is a hell, this must be one”. In a certain way, she feels like she is in hell, where God’s love does not reign, where God is far away, where love does not exist. She exclaims: “How terrible [it] is to be without God: no prayer, no faith, no love”. This is like the soul’s descent into hell, a kind of complete abandonment on God’s part, as

²⁰ B. KOLODIJCHUK, M.C., *Mother Teresa. The private Writings of the “saint of Calcutta”*, Double Day, New York-Toronto-London-Sydney-Auckland, 2007, 249-250.

expressed in the words of psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest.” (22:2-2). St. Matthew records these words, spoken by Christ on the Cross (27:45): “On you I was cast from my birth and since my mother bore me, you have been my God” (Ps. 22:10). As we know, the psalm balances this terrible cry of the suffering person with a profound sentiment of hope. “For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him” (Ps. 22:24-25).

Yet, in the midst of such a terrible interior situation, one thing consoles Theresa: “The only thing that still remains is the conviction that the work is His, that the sisters and the brothers are His”. She does not find consolation in herself, but in her faith in the work that is God’s doing and in her sisters and brothers who are signs of His presence, a presence that she does not feel in her heart.

It is important to note that in all of this, the will is not affected: “And still, I want to be faithful to Him, to spend my life for Him, to love Him not for what He gives, but for what He takes, to be at His disposal.” This is a key characteristic of this experience of dryness or of the “*noche oscura*”; despite the tribulations of the soul, the will continues to be open to choosing to love, which confirms the truth of this phrase of St. John of the Cross: “Love lies not in feeling great things, but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved”²¹.

7. The certainty of being in a state of grace

A theme related to the experience of God is the certitude of being in a state of grace. This theme was treated already by the Council of Trent, in order to answer the Reformers’ doctrine of *fides fiducialis*, which carried with it the certitude of being saved. Luther claimed that only a lack of faith could cause a loss of grace.

“Every sin is mortal. The fact that a sin is not a sin for one depends on Christ, who saves, and who has expiated sins with his

²¹ *Dichos de luz y amor*, n. 115, in SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ, *Obras completas*, BAC, Madrid, 1989, p. 51.

death. For him who does not believe in Christ, not only are all his sins mortal, but his good works becomes sins as well.- the believer is guilty of the same sin, just as grave as the unbeliever, but for the believer the sin is forgiven and it is not held against him, but for the incredulous it is retained and it is held against him ... The believer recognizes that sin is pardoned in Christ, who has expiated sin with his death. From here, despite having sin, he continues to be righteous. The unbeliever, on the contrary, remains unrighteous”²².

For Luther and for other Reformers, the act of faith necessarily implied the certitude of being in a state of justice (and in the case of Calvin, the certitude of being predestined). For Luther, the act of faith not only includes the dogmatic content, but man’s total abandonment to God’s mercy as well. This kind of faith is due mainly to God’s work in us, rather than to our work and our efforts to gain merit. In order to be perfect, faith should include the certitude of salvation. The “Decree on Justification” of the Council of Trent condemned this doctrine, declaring that no-one can doubt God’s mercy and the efficacy of Christ’s merits and of the sacraments. But, at the same time, “considering one’s own weakness and bad dispositions, he has reason to fear for his own [state of] grace (“*de sua gratia formidare et timere*”), since no-one can know, with the certitude of faith and free from error whether he has obtained God’s grace”²³.

The Council of Trent does not put into question the mercy of God and the efficacy of redemption, but it underlines the frailty of man after original sin. One is not “unrighteous” if he has a prudent or motivated doubt about his own state of grace, for example, if there are some signs which move him to come to that conclusion. The Council in no way seeks to promote a state of unrest about one’s own state, nor does it determine the degree of certitude that we can have about our own state of grace. The Council wanted to avoid creating a new problem within the different Catholic theological schools of the time, which offered different explanations on this matter. The Council states that the believer can have a practical certitude of being in a state of grace, but it excludes the possibility of the certitude of faith, which would rule out any prudent doubt.

²² In *Epistolam ad Galatas*, (Weimar), 40/2, 95-96. Quoted in *El Evangelio de la gracia*, M. Flick-Z. Alszeghy, Ed. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1965, 699 (personal translation).

²³ DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZER, 1534.

This doctrine is based upon a sound anthropology, namely recognizing man's frailty. The complexity of the human spiritual experience and of supernatural realities enters the picture as well. St. Thomas Aquinas treats this topic in the II-II of the Summa and he poses this question: "Whether or not man can know that he is in grace". He says that, by a special revelation, man may know if he is in a state of grace. But God normally awards this privilege to a person who is to accomplish a special work for the good of others. The second way to know whether a person is in a state of grace is "per se". According to St. Thomas, this is impossible because this kind of knowledge receives confirmation only from the proper principle ("*principium proprium*"). And in the case of grace, the proper principle is God Himself and, for us, this principle evades us"²⁴. So, the conclusion is that the "presence of God or his absence cannot be known with certitude"²⁵ ("*per certitudinem*"). But, there is a third way of knowing if God is present in the soul through grace and that is by "conjecture" ("*coniecturaliter*"). This conjecture comes by way of "certain signs" ("*aliqua signa*"). St. Thomas lists the following among these signs: the interior joy of God, not being conscious of having committed a mortal sin, and contempt for things of the world. The presence of God in the soul is perceived through the "experience of sweetness" ("*experientia dulcedinis*"). But, this kind of knowledge is imperfect and leaves room for doubt.

Although it is not possible to reach a "*certitudo fidei*" about the act of faith, it is nevertheless possible to attain a "practical certitude" regarding our state of personal justice and of grace. "This practical certitude is equal to very high degree of probability, that everybody considers a sufficient norm for human action, even when it concerns very important issues, if error, which is always theoretically possible, cannot be excluded through ordinary means"²⁶.

For Luther and other Reformers, the absence of this total certitude could lead the soul into a kind of state of anxiety, inhibiting the soul from living in peace. This is not Catholic teaching. In the Catholic perspective, there are occasions when it is normal that some doubts may arise in conscience and, after the invocation of God's help and a

²⁴ «*Principium gratiae et objectum eius est ipse Deus, qui propter sui excellentiam est nobis ignotus*». II-II, 112, 5 c.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ M. FLICK- Z. ALSZEGHY, *El evangelio de la gracia*, Ed. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1965, p. 712.

serious reflection, this person can reach a practical conclusion and, in this way, eliminate any positive doubt. Obviously, this operation implies a kind of purification, which concerns the last part of this article.

8. Religious experience and the formation of conscience

In relation to what we have developed so far, I would like to return to the possibility of having an experience of God. This time I will take the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the basis of my reflection. In it we read:

“Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith. We cannot therefore rely on our feelings or on our works to conclude that we are justified and saved. However, according to the Lord’s words, “Thus, you will know them by their fruits” – reflection on God’s blessings in our lives and in the lives of the saints offers us a guarantee that grace is at work in us and spurs us on to an ever greater faith and to an attitude of trustful poverty”²⁷.

In this number have an important assertion, affirming that the main way to access the supernatural world is by faith. In an analogical way, St. John of the Cross also assigns to faith the main power which unites us to God. For St. John, only faith is “the proximate and proportionate means for the soul to have union with God ... and therefore the more faith the soul has, the more he is united to God”²⁸. Man cannot know what the essence of his soul is by experimental knowledge, since “man has experience of his intrinsic principle by his acts”²⁹. But grace is not a natural part of his essence; it comes directly from God. In this sense, the Catechism says that grace escapes (“*subducit*” in Latin) our experience. Perhaps, the correct translation is not “to escape”, but “to withdraw from”. The supernatural does not allow itself to be grasped by the means we have because it is another world which we can enter, though not totally, nor without some complications. I think the apparitions of Christ show us an example of the difficulty of penetrating the supernatural world. In the apparition of Jesus by the

²⁷ 2005.

²⁸ *Dark night*, II, 9.

²⁹ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *S. Th.*, II-II, 112, 5 ad 1.

lake of Galilee, we can notice some of these elements, which show us how this new world, the world of the risen Jesus, was difficult for the disciples to understand. First of all, only the “disciple whom Jesus loved” recognized Jesus and said “It is the Lord” (Jn 21:12). When they were already on the shore and Jesus had prepared breakfast for them, “none of the disciples dared to ask him: ‘Who are you?’ ” (Jn 21:12). The Evangelist says that “they knew it was the Lord” (Jn 21:12), but, at the same time, he needs to repeat some of his characteristic gestures and to eat, in order for them to know that it really is him. This world of God, where the risen Jesus lives, has a degree of continuity with our world, but, at the same time, it has some traits which are specific to it and our senses cannot grasp its full depth.

Conscience is the natural means we have of perceiving God’s presence and his will. The Second Vatican Council gave a clear definition of conscience. “Conscience is the secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in its depths”³⁰. The tradition of the Church describes conscience in the context of moral judgment, but I think we can say that conscience is also the place where God reveals his law to man. But, conscience is not only a type of tribunal. It is also a place of revelation and of the experience of God. Conscience reveals the law of God and also the Lawgiver. In his *Grammar of Assent*, Newman says that conscience is more than a mere oracle of moral or aesthetic sense. Conscience is very near to what the word “heart” means in the Bible. “The Hebrew conceives the heart as the interior of man in a very broad sense. Besides feelings (2 Sam 15:13; Ps. 21:3; Is. 65:15, the heart also contains memories, thoughts, plans, decisions”³¹. Newman says that conscience is able to arouse very strong emotions in us, and normally we feel emotions towards persons, not towards things. There is Someone who is there in conscience and who evokes such strong feelings within us. “We certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away”³². Newman demonstrates that “conscience is

³⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

³¹ X. LÉON-DUFOUR, *Corazón* in *Diccionario de Teología Bíblica*, Herder, Barcelona, 1980.

³² H. J. NEWMAN, *Grammar of assent*, chapter 5, n. 1, Belief in one God. Cf. *La coscienza, manifestazione di Dio*, in *Newman. Opere. La coscienza*, a cura di G. Velocci, Jaca Book, Milano, 1999, p. 89.

a connecting principle between the creature and his Creator, and the firmest hold of theological truth is gained by habits of personal religion”³³.

Newman describes further how the work of conscience can be the source of a constant experience of God:

When men begin all their works with the thought of God, acting for his sake, and to fulfil his will, when they ask his blessing on themselves and on their life, pray to him for the things they desire and see him in the events of life, whether it be according to their prayers or not, they will find that everything that happens tends to confirm them in the truths about him which live in their imagination, varied and un-earthly as those truths may be. Then, they are brought into his presence as that of a Living Person and are able to hold converse with him, and that with a directness and simplicity, with a confidence and intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, which we use towards an earthly superior, so that it is doubtful whether we realize the company of our fellowmen with greater keenness than these favoured minds are able to contemplate and adore the Unseen, Incomprehensible Creator.

In other words, conscience is the natural instrument given by God, which we have in order to experience him. The formation of conscience is needed to form right moral judgments, to formulate them according to reason, in conformity with the true good, willed by the wisdom of the Creator”³⁴. It is required to overcome the many temptations we have in this life, but it is also required to have the right experience of God. We know that conscience is formed especially in the first years of life and continues during the whole of a man’s life. The role of good educators is essential for a good formation of conscience. Man needs the light of reason as well as the light of the Word of God, correctly interpreted by the Magisterium, to form conscience well. This formation, in all of its stages, should be conducted in an environment of prayer and of faith. In this task, “we are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others, and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church”.

In conclusion, we have treated a very delicate and subtle theological theme. It is a question of dogmatic, as well as of spiritual and of biblical theology. It is an important current issue for the new evan-

³³ H. J. NEWMAN, *Grammar of assent*, chapter 5, n. 1, *Belief in one God*. Cf. *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

³⁴ *Catechism of Catholic Church*, n. 1783.

gelization. This is so because evangelization presupposes the openness of man to the revealed message, but also to the external and internal conditions that makes it possible for the Word of God to be fruitful. To develop people's religious awareness and to form their consciences in a way which is adequate is a very important task. For new religious movements, the recognition of God's action at the level of community and of the individual is also important; to see whether God's presence is really there, whether there is a real experience of God and of his grace, or whether, on the contrary, it is no more than a subjective impression or emotion.

This is to an easy task, but it is a great consolation to know that, in discharging the enormous mission of preaching the Gospel, God has already prepared the hearts of people, so that the seed of the Gospel may be fruitful. He is present there and his action is powerful. The circumstances in which many people live today seem to be far from God's action in their lives; nevertheless, each human person, being made in God's image, can be open to the magnificent revelation of God in his conscience and is capable of having a true experience of his presence in their lives.

Sommario: *L'articolo presenta il tema dell'esperienza di Dio nella cornice di una cultura che dà un forte valore al vissuto. Dopo aver esaminato due testi, uno dell'Antico e l'altro del Nuovo Testamento, dove si mostra il valore che anche la rivelazione divina dà all'esperienza religiosa, si esamina il concetto dell'esperienza da un punto di vista etimologico e filosofico, e il bisogno di dare un'ulteriore interpretazione di tipo concettuale all'esperienza vissuta. Si analizza poi un particolare tipo di esperienza che è quella religiosa e anche quella che alcuni teologi del XX secolo hanno chiamato "trascendentale". In particolare si analizzano l'esperienza di fede e l'esperienza mistica in modo speciale una possibile particolare situazione di essa che è la chiamata "noche oscura". Si cerca poi di capire il valore da dare a un tipo particolare di esperienza che riguarda la certezza sul personale stato di grazia, che fu un tema di controversia con i Riformatori. Finalmente si mostra l'importanza della formazione della retta coscienza come strumento dato da Dio alla persona per dare una valutazione morale e religiosa alle proprie esperienze spirituali.*

Summary: *The article presents the theme of the experience of God in the framework of a culture which gives a high value to experience. After examining two texts, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New, in which we find clearly expressed the value which divine revelation gives to religious experience, we examine the concept of experience from an etymological and philosophical point of view, and the need to give a further conceptual interpretation of lived experience. We then analyze a particular type of experience that is religious experience, and also what some theologians of the twentieth century have called "transcendental experience". In particular, we discuss the experience of faith and mystical experience, in a special way a particular situation which may occur that it is called the "noche oscura" (dark night of the soul). We then try to understand the value to be given to a*

particular type of experience that regards the certainty of the personal state of grace, which was a subject of dispute with the Reformers. Finally, we show the importance of the formation of a right conscience as a tool given by God to the person in order to provide a moral and religious assessment of their own spiritual experiences.

Parole chiave: Esperienza di Dio, esperienza religiosa, esperienza vissuta, esperienza trascendentale, esperienza mistica, notte oscura, stato di grazia, retta coscienza.

Key words: Experience of God, Religious Experience, Lived experience, Transcendental Experience, Mystical Experience, Dark Night, State of Grace, Right Conscience.