Pentecost—The Descent of the Holy Spirit

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URING MY TIME at Santa Clara University in California, one of my professors believed encounter-group techniques would help us understand the ideas of the philosophers we were studying. He asked us to assemble on the lawn in the center of the university in order to experience the philosophy of René Descartes. We got down on our hands and knees, covered ourselves with sheets, and start chanting “I want, I want” as we crawled toward the sound of his voice. I thought the exercise was silly, but I went along with it.

We all started to bump into each other and eventually ended up in a tangle of bodies and sheets—still chanting “I want, I want.” When the laughter subsided, the professor asked us what we had learned from the experience. I was hard-pressed to give a positive answer and how it related to Descartes, but I did say we learned a little about how desires drive us. I am not sure if that is what he intended us to learn, but I felt I had put a positive spin on an otherwise questionable activity.

I reflect on this experience of years ago because desires and longing are a great part of my life. Desires do drive me. On a daily basis I experience the power of desire, whether it is for good or for evil. Often, I am unaware of which desire is driving me at the moment. And I say “driving me” because I often feel pushed along by a force of which I am not entirely conscious. I feel most driven when I spontaneously react to people or events in times of frustration. When I am able to get a hold of my self, I can see how my desires—for proving my point or exerting my will—have been driving me. At
these times, I often reflect on the words of St. Paul, so obviously penned from experience:

I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not what I want to do but what I hate. ...What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend. (Rom 7:15,19)

But desires also give me the energy to search for meaning in the midst of life’s difficulties. They encourage me to be generous when I would hold back and to be kind when I would rather not. Desires are the fuel for my life, giving me the impetus I need to live fully for God.

There are, also, desires that are less dramatic, that are quietly internal. They are expressed as longings for something beyond ourselves. They remind all of us that something is missing in our lives, that we are not complete or sufficient by ourselves. Often we experience these quiet longings in moments of prayer when we sense God’s tender love reaching out to us. They also arise in moments of loss when all that we have held dear seems to have disappeared and we feel bereft of all support and hope. We know that only God, who seems to be missing, can fill the emptiness we experience.

John of the Cross lets us know that our desires drive us and that they can drive us into the arms of God. Listening to him and to our own inner longings, we can move more closely into union with God:

One dark night / fired with love’s urgent longings
—ah, the sheer grace!—
I went out unseen / my house being now all stilled.
(The Dark Night)

Edward O’Donnell
ONE OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S many tales includes the sketch of a middle-aged man named Wakefield, living in London with his wife. After years of predictability, Wakefield simply steps outside his life to observe what would happen apart from his role in the plot. One evening he bids adieu to his family and walks out the door, not returning for twenty years. Renting an apartment in the next street, he spends his time watching a life he had known but of which he was no longer a part.

Year after year Wakefield tells himself that soon he will go back, but way leads unto way, and it becomes harder and harder to do so. Hawthorne at the conclusion of the tale comments: Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever.¹

The Christian Story

The Christian story is centered on individuals who are asked to step outside their role in a predictable plot.
Jesus is most intent that those he calls step aside from the predictable, not just for a moment, but for a lifetime. The woman taken in adultery is on a downward spiraling trajectory; it leads from forbidden love to certain death. Jesus says, “Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more—Step out of this role!” (John 8:11) Does she take up this opportunity to change the expected course of her life? We are not told.

To the paralytic who for countless years has lain beside the pool of healing but never able to find the right moment to climb in, Jesus asks the troubling question, “Do you want to be well?” (John 5:2-9) Do you want to step outside the role you have created for yourself—the role of a paralytic? A harsh question? Yes. Unavoidable? Absolutely.

The father of the epileptic boy confronts Jesus with a catalog of despair: the misery of his son, the fruitless search for help, the inability of the disciples of Jesus to heal. Chained to his part in the plot, the Father’s request for Jesus to intervene is laced with doubt, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus breaks though the litany of despair: “If you can! Everything is possible to one who has faith.” (Mark 9:14-23) Try on a new suit of clothes, Jesus says to him.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, fearful of what an open association with Jesus means to his meticulously fabricated credentials among his Pharisaic colleagues. Nicodemus is confronted with a hard alternative: “I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without
being born from above...You must be born from above.” (John 3:3, 6) The role Nicodemus now plays is no longer adequate; he must step aside, step outside the plot, choose an alternative life that will be like beginning again from birth, only this time, a birth into a new family of relationships. Will Nicodemus let go?

There are many others: Peter, James, John, Zacchaeus, Martha, Paul, Mary, Augustine, St. Francis, on and on. All these persons are asked by Christ to step outside the predictable plot of their lives—to live a new life of faith, to live responsive to God’s unpredictable call. This is the Christian story, this, and how we respond or fail to respond to the call to step beyond what has become both a comfort and a constriction in our journey.

**A New Birth**

But to risk this birth into a new way of living takes courage. We fear that we will become Wakefield who, once he lost hold of what was predictable, never again finds a foothold to clamber back into life. What will become of us if like the adulterous woman, we surrender our lovers? If like the paralytic, we give up our crutches? If like the father of the epileptic, we cast away the shield of our despair? If like Nicodemus the Pharisee, we cash in the respectability of our position? If like Peter and Andrew, we cast away the nets that guarantee a steady income? If like Martha, we dismiss the fixed gender role of our society? If like Paul, we surrender our obsessive hatred of the enemy? If like Augustine...
and St. Francis, we forfeit a life of pleasure and wealth? What will become of us if we give up the predictable plot of our lives for the unpredictable call of God? In *The Spiritual Life*, Evelyn Underhill remarks:

The spiritual life of [a person] does not consist in mere individual betterment, or assiduous attention to [one’s] own soul, but in a free and unconditional response to that Spirit’s pressure and call, whatever the cost may be.²

Midway through the journey of his life, Dante’s pilgrim wakes to find himself in a dark woods, having wandered off the straight path, losing his way in life. His journey back must take him through the very gate of hell, and over the gate is a blazing epigram that reads, “Abandon hope, forever, you who enter.”³ We fear that if we are not attentive to the path and lose way in our journey we will enter a gate through which all is lost. But we are seeing our lives from the wrong perspective. The Psalmist offers a corrective:

Where can I hide from your spirit?
   From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
   if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too.
If I fly with the wings of the dawn
   and alight beyond the sea,
Even there your hand will guide me,
   your right hand hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall hide me,
   and night shall be my light” —
Darkness is not dark for you,
   and night shines as the day,
Darkness and light are but one. (Ps. 139:7-12)
If God meets us not only in the light, but also in the darkness, not only in heaven, but also in our personal hell, then is darkness still as dark, is our hell still hell? To find God’s presence in hell is to realize that our farthest journey away has not taken us one step farther from God’s love and grace. At the deepest circles of hell we have come full circle back to God. If there is nowhere to flee from God’s presence, then there can be no venue apart from God’s grace and therefore there are no longer any hopeless people, places or predicaments.

The Life of Faith

But this is a life of faith, it is not a life of sight; that is, we cannot know the end from the beginning, we can only live the beginning of our new birth in faith and walk on. We cannot penetrate the enfolding fog; we cannot foresee the twists and turns in the plot until we are upon them. We can only make our choice to follow Jesus into a new way or we can choose not to follow, remaining in our predictable roles. We can only make our choice based on the strength of our faith or lack of faith in the storyline.

Only a resolute storyline can sustain us when there is a shift in the plot. The Psalmist writes, “Your eyes foresaw my actions; in your book all are written down; my days were shaped, before one came to be” (Ps. 139:16). And in this book of all our days, faith tells us there is only one storyline sustaining the twists and turns of the plot. Paul spells out the storyline, For I am convinced
that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39) There is no change in the plot that can ever separate us from the storyline of God’s love for us. We don’t always know the right clues that resolve the plot, but we do know that a good storyline saves the day.

The storyline, you see, is God’s affair, not ours. Underhill reminds us, [Our life] consists in being drawn, at His pace and in His way, to the place where He wants us to be; not the place we fancied for ourselves. Or more simply Proverbs calls to us, Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence rely not; In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your path. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

We are embraced by a love that will not let us go; we are encompassed by a light that follows all our ways; we are encountered by a joy that seeks us out in pain; and we are lead by a cross that lifts up our heads. We rest in that love; we yield to that light; we open to this joy; and we remain faithful to his cross.

This is the storyline that sustains us when there is an unexpected shift in the plot and unanticipated change in our roles: God’s love for us. With this as our storyline we can embrace the question, “What will become
of us?” What will become of us if like the adulterous woman, we surrender our waywardness? If like the paralytic, we give up our crutch? If like the father of the epileptic, we cast away the shield of our despair? If like Nicodemus, we cash in the respectability of our position? If like Peter and Andrew, we cast away the nets that guarantee economic security? If like Paul, we surrender our obsessive hatred of the enemy? If like Augustine and St. Francis, we forfeit a life of pleasure and wealth?

What will become of us if we give up the predictable plot of our lives? The answer is: we will become like Christ. Ah, a good storyline saves the day.

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NOTES


ST JOHN OF THE CROSS in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* gives us the picture of a soul setting out on a journey. It is led into a dark night; it begins the ascent of a mountain. This is the attitude of quest; the soul is seeking God. Fearfully and with much imperfection, the soul begins to climb upward, through thicket and bramble, over steep cliffs and crags, across shaded mountain ravines—guided by Divine Mercy but still with no clear perception of the gleaming summits above.

Quest is the condition of the wayfarer, of the lover. The mind points out the search, and the heart goes seeking; it reaches out toward the lovable known, even though dimly known. This is the fundamental attitude of the Christian. There is, first of all, the general seeking of God, the orientation of the soul toward Him as a last end; this much is necessary for salvation. Then there is the particular and individual seeking of God—the earnest endeavor of the just man, of the saint. This implies a tending toward God in all that one does, ad- vertence to Him in every action, and a solicitude of heart at all times to do His holy Will. The just man
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seeks God in his exterior life, in his keeping of the law, as David affirms in Psalm 118, that beautiful psalm of the Will of God: “Show me the way of Thy laws, O Lord, and I will keep it perfectly. ... I seek Thy favor with my whole heart.” And he seeks Him most of all in his own soul and makes every effort to remain there with Him. “Establish me in Thy presence” is his constant prayer.

This condition of search, however—of which St. John writes with such beauty—presupposes another condition that the words of the Mystical Doctor always imply. It is the condition of being sought. God is there in the shadows; He has been seeking the soul, inviting it, calling it to Himself with the cry of infinite and incomprehensible love. He says to every soul: “I have called thee by name; thou art Mine.” And this is no sudden movement on the part of God! It is a search that had no beginning. “I have loved thee,” He says, “with an everlasting love.”

In the stories of the canonized saints we are made fully aware of this God-seeking, this unmerited predilection, this wonderful unbeginning choice of the Divine Lover. Yet it is the condition of all the elect. We are predestined from all eternity; our glory began “infinites of time” before we were called into being and before we had the grace to lift our gaze toward God.

Hound of Heaven

St. John the Evangelist wrote: “Let us therefore love God because God hath first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). This
is, indeed, the foundation of all our holiness. This is the great mystery that turns our face toward heaven. God is asking for souls, for my soul, for me. God is seeking me, a creature, and a sinful creature at that. And yet, curiously enough, when God makes His appeal to the soul, when He sets out to draw the soul to Himself, that creature soul, wounded as it is with original sin, in all likelihood sets out to escape Him. It is the mystery of our fallen nature that even in His appeal of love, God can fail to convince the soul of His worthiness, of His preeminence over every other good. This is the moving theme of The Hound of Heaven: the puny creature soul seeking to escape its most loving Creator, with the tremendous climax of capture and surrender.

It is only then in some mysterious way that the soul begins to seek the God Who has captured it, Who holds it fast in his unyielding grasp. It is only then that it turns its face upward and dares to aspire to the ascent of Mount Carmel. It is in this light that one of our Carmelite writers has said that The Hound of Heaven could fittingly be placed as a prelude to the works of The Mystical Doctor, St. John of the Cross. In the story of the soul God’s mercy and love went before, as indeed it must follow after.

To the saint who kept his innocence and to the saint who was lifted up from his degradation, the mercy of God “Who hath first loved us” is always a marvel and a mystery. Perhaps to the saint who had been a sinner it is the greater marvel. This is what Francis Thompson has so admirably told us in The Hound of Heaven.
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God’s love is more than a call, more than a seeking; it becomes, as the poet said, a pursuit, and each soul is its prey. In the case of the sinner, God does not weight the hapless soul with consolations; He lets it run after love where love can never be found. But He races after it, ready to receive it when in its failure it turns to Him.

Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save Me, save only Me?

And at the capture:

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!

Yet it is not the great sinner alone who flees from God; any man can confess himself to be in some way a daily fugitive from the Divine Goodness. The least sin, the least imperfection is a flight from God. And after each sin, God renews His pursuit of the soul. When the contrite soul turns back to God, He condescends to its pitiful searching, and yet He is and was always preeminently the One Who sought.

In his commentaries and maxims St. John of the Cross presupposes this theme of The Hound of Heaven; he implies this first appeal of God to the soul. And he trails that theme of God’s appeal through all his writings. He tells the soul that if it is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking it much more. He tells us, as Francis Thompson does, that naught will shelter or content the soul save God, that there is a long process of purgation which strips the soul of the love and possession of all
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earthly things; indeed, the soul having God “must have naught beside.” God brings the soul to an utter poverty, a complete emptiness so that at last it cries out:

Naked I wait Thy love’s uplifted stroke!
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me to my knee;
I am defenceless utterly.

Here the Carmelite mystic goes on to describe in lines of special brilliance the complete spoliation of the soul. It comes to see that God cannot work with it until it is despoiled of self, a condition to which it cannot be brought without much suffering. In *The Dark Night of the Soul* the image of wood being dried by burning and blackened in the process, foreshadows Thompson’s image.

Ah! must—
Designer infinite!—
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere
Thou canst limn with it?

But St. John goes further; the wood become penetrated with fire, it becomes flame itself. Also in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, we find an image that could have inspired Francis Thompson: that the “gloom” is the “shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly.” Francis Thompson in his poem brings us only to the capture of the soul and the divine assurance of its later enrichment—all will be returned to it, and unspeakably more if it surrenders to God.

All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for they harms,
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But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!

St. John continues from this point; he shows how every sacrifice, every loss is repaid and returned in some more wonderful way. He tells us in *The Spiritual Canticle* and in *The Living Flame* what riches come to the soul that has been united to God. It is rewarded most of all by the fact that God looks upon it and loves it.

It has been said that the difference between a saint and a sinner is that the saint believes that God loves him. Though he sees his own abjection and unworthiness, He does not doubt God’s oaths of love that fill both Testaments, His constant reiterated avowals of love. Yet though the just man believes that God loves him, he is filled with wonder; he sees that the manifestations of that love are in some way mysterious and unbelievable to the creature mind. St. John of the Cross speaks of that wonder:

His ways, judgments and works are strange, new and marvellous to men.... He is strange also to the holy angels and the souls who see Him.... Even to the day of the last Judgment they will see in Him so much that is new in His deep judgments, in His acts of mercy and justice, as to excite their wonder more and more.

The love of God for us is invariably filled with surprise. Even those who have had experience of God within their souls—surely these most of all—have voiced their amazement at the unexpected glory of His coming. One favored soul who confessed her sudden
awareness of the Divine Presence said that it was not God in His majesty Who came to her, or God in His splendor of light, but God in His tenderness. One day, without expectation, without warning, she felt God embracing her in her soul, embracing her as a loving father embraces his dearest child. So the saints have experienced God—in some sudden almost unbearable knowledge of His devoted love. How often they have spoken of this “embrace of God.” It was not so much their love of God that they acknowledged, as His love for them.

Everything that happened to the saints became in some way a message from this “Tremendous Lover.” In the most unlikely places they would find God in some touching manifestation of His love. St. Thérèse was deeply moved at the little evidences of God’s love that seemed to meet her at every turn; even so simple a thing as the coloring of a peach would fill her eyes with tears. The sight of a hen tucking her chickens under her wing so overpowered her that she had to turn from the picture. Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified must also have been charmed by this image; for on one occasion she said, “I am the little chicken under the wing of its mother.” To this holy Carmelite of Bethlehem, all the little creatures of God were reminders and messengers of Him; she would break into praises of Him at the sight of them.

Once when she was ill as a novice, two little fishes were placed in a bowl beside her bed, and when she
was sleeping they leaped out of the bowl and settled on the pillow beside her. On awakening and finding them there, quite alive, she said, without surprise, “These little fishes come to me because I love them and take care of them. I ought to go like that to God Who has created me and loves me more than I love them. I hope He will have mercy on me.” One might truthfully say that all the saints of God were moved to deeper love for Him by the sight of His creatures, because they are, in one way or another, expressions of His love.

There is no doubt but that God speaks to all souls through His beautiful creation. It is because the soul is intent upon self that it does not hear God speaking, because there is nothing so full of noise and distraction as is self-love. St. John of the Cross says that it is only in complete detachment from self that we find God. Denudez—that is the great secret of holiness.

The saints of God see Him and hear Him everywhere. “My soul melted when He spoke,” sang the bride in the Canticles, and for the chosen ones of God, the “silent sound” of His voice can melt the heart. Perhaps that is why the Curé of Ars once affirmed that “the hearts of the saints were liquid.” They could well understand the old hermit who walked through the woods crying out to the beautiful things of creation to hush their voices, because what he heard was the voice of God’s love, an infinite love, calling to his soul, oppressing his finite soul. “Thy love presses me as a weight,” he could have said, altering the words of St. Augustine. The holy ones of God could well adapt to themselves the words of the
Irish poet, Seamus O’Sheel, when he sang of a human love:

Splendid and terrible Your love.
I hold it to me like a flame;
I hold it like a flame above
The empty anguish of my breast—

Not a searing flame for the saints, but a flame that warmed comforted them, even though it overwhelmed them.

Loved by God

_The Spiritual Canticle_ and _The Living Flame of Love_ reveal the end of the story that The Hound of Heaven only prefaces: the happy fate of the soul that has surrendered to God. If God so pursues with His love the soul that seeks to escape Him, what torrents of love and of glory will He not pour upon the soul that has become wholly His? He clothes it with His own beauty and He says to it again and again, “Since thou becam-est honorable in My eyes, and glorious, I have loved thee” (Is 43:4).

As St. John says, “To say that God loves, is to say that He multiplies His grace.” The last pages of _The Spiritual Canticle_ attest in glowing words to the splendor of that soul which God has chosen and united to Himself. He assures it: “I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I have given Egypt for thy atonement and Saba for thee. I will give men for thee and people for thy life” (Is 43:3). He burdens it with favors;
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He listens to its least cry and hastens to do its will with love. One perfect soul is more precious in God’s sight than a thousand mediocre souls; it becomes dear to Him beyond all imagination.

Nor is this all. God cries out to it His great promises of eternal life, with which St. John the Evangelist has jeweled his Apocalypses, words of unutterable majesty and grandeur:

I will give him to eat of the tree of life.... He shall be vest-ed in white garments.... I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.... I will give unto him to sit with Me in My throne.... I will make Him a pillar in the temple of My God and he shall go out no more.... I will give him the morning star.

It begins to understand, even in this life, that “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor hath it entered into the heart of man what God hath prepared for those who love Him.”

The soul itself becomes conscious of its beauty which is the beauty of the Son of God. It loves Him with His own pureness and perfection because it loves Him with the Holy Spirit Who is His own love. Purified in that love, the soul asks God to give her “the essential glory for which He had predestined her from the day of His eternity.” “From the day of His eternity....” These are the words that stand as preface to the story of each soul’s salvation, of each soul’s beatitude. God has been pursuing us from the day of His eternity. If we seek Him and find Him and are transformed into Him, it is only that He in His mercy and love has found us and
can claim what was always His. By the grace of our long-delayed surrender, God in the rush of His love can go at last, as the words of Coventry Patmore expressed it, “straight to His homestead in the human heart.”

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“What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God with our appetite and with our tongue, for the language he best hears is silent love.”

St John of the Cross
Prayer As Awareness of God’s Presence

GOD’S PRESENCE IS A CONSTANT. From our point of view, we might say his presence is a given. And yet that is only a partial statement of what is real. God has such priority over us in every way that it is really we who are a given, we who exist as recipients of a life in his presence. We discover the reality of ourselves in him only when we become aware of how totally we exist in his presence.

Awareness of God’s presence is not only the starting point of prayer, it is also the basic criterion of what prayer is, no matter what variety and expression it might take on. In its most advanced forms, unitive prayer becomes a constant awareness of God, an awareness brought about at this stage more by God’s grace and activity than by efforts to focus on him. This awareness need not always be on the intellectual level. For example, a husband and wife might be in the same room—one reading and the other writing a letter—but they share an awareness of each other that would be missing if they were not together. Words and ritual are
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empty without the interpersonal relationship of such awareness.

A reflective approach to the ways in which the people of the Bible discovered, experienced, and expressed God’s presence can be most helpful to our discovery of all that is given and to our deepening response to this grace that is most basic to prayer.

The Beginnings of Awareness in Symbols

A) The Holy Place

As we look into the Old Testament, especially in its earlier stages, we find many symbols and images used to convey something of the experience of God’s presence. One such representation is the holy place, an example of which is found in the story of Abraham’s call and his subsequent journey to the holy place of Shechem:

Abram passed through the land as far as Shechem’s holy place, the Oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, “It is to your descendants that I will give this land.” So Abram built there an altar for Yahweh who had appeared to him. (Gen 12:6–7)

For ancient men to leave home and break ancestral bonds was nearly unthinkable, yet Abraham had done it. Something of a personal intervention and presence is already represented in his migration, and, as he goes on, one Canaanite holy place after another seems to reaffirm the reality of the presence of the One who called.
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As worship was eventually localized in a central sanctuary, the religious experience could be well expressed in a prayer attributed to Solomon: “Day and night let your eyes watch over this house, over this place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there’” (1 Kgs 8:29). The sanctuary was a symbol of God’s faithful love, of the gift of his presence.

But even Solomon is portrayed as being conscious that the holy place is inadequate to express all of what God’s gift of himself comprises when his prayer is qualified with the words, “Why, the heavens and their own heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kgs 8:27). This qualifier eventually grows to be the principal statement in John’s Gospel: “The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ...true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4: 21, 23). That historical progress from temple to all-present Spirit finds it counterpart, in a microcosmic way, in the growth of an individual person from times, symbols, and places of awareness of God’s presence to a more all-pervading awareness. St. Teresa of Avila, for example, speaks of a constant immersion in God.

B) The Lord’s Face

The “face” of the Lord is a more personalized way of speaking of his presence. Let us try to understand what religious experience this human yet reverent imagery conveys. We read that “Yahweh would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend”
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(Ex 33:11). But when Moses voices his fear about moving on from the place where they had been camping, the Lord assures him: “I myself [my face] will go with you and I will give you rest” (Ex 33:14). Later, while instructing the people, Moses states, “Because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt, openly showing his presence [his face] and his great power” (Dt 4:37).

And the priestly blessing Moses passes on contains the words, “May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh uncover his face to you and bring you peace” (Num 6:25f). On the other hand, if God were to “hide his face,” it would mean a withdrawal of his favor (Ps 27:9) and of his sustaining power (Ps 104:29).

What, then, is the experience behind the image of the Lord’s face, which of course literally no human could see (Ex 33:23)? God’s presence is for Moses a “face-to-face” intimacy of friendship, and it also promises to be a reassuring accompaniment. For the people at the Exodus, his presence was known as a saving intervention, while in the liturgy it was a source of blessing, peace, and graciousness. And for all creation, his presence is a sustaining providence.

The various facets of the Israelites’ experience offer us much to identify with, especially in the process of being more perceptive of a “face,” a personal presence of God, with the graciousness, peace, and blessing he allows us to know.
C) The Cloud

The story of Moses also informs us that when Moses went to the Meeting Tent, “the pillar of cloud would come down and station itself at the entrance to the Tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses” (Ex 33:9). Or, as the Jews began their wilderness march, “Yahweh went before them, by day in the form of a pillar of cloud to show them the way” (Ex 13:21). There seems to be certain tension in the experience here—the tension of an “already” and “not yet” about the presence of the God who speaks and guides, for the cloud gives a visible sign of his presence at the same time that it veils him.

We are reminded of the same tension found in contrasting passages in The Spiritual Canticle by St. John of the Cross:

It is noteworthy that, however elevated God’s communications and the experiences of his presence are, and however sublime a person’s knowledge of him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to him because, indeed, he is still hidden to the soul. (1:3)

Yet the same John later adds:

O, then, soul, most beautiful among all creatures, so anxious to know the dwelling place of your Beloved that you may go in quest of him and be united with him, now we are telling you that you yourself are his dwelling and his secret chamber and hiding place. This is something of immense gladness for you, to see that all your good and hope is so close to you as to be within you. (1:7)

The symbols we have looked at, as well as the other Old Testament symbols of God’s presence, are all subject to the same tension. For God does not hesitate to
make use of symbols and human experiences that in themselves are inadequate, as is everything short of the Beatific Vision. So, at various stages of our prayer life, we should not rule out what might seem all too human. This caution comes in when we face letting go of the experiences at one level so that we may believe there is more to come—a presence of God in seeming absence.

The Presence of Christ

The Incarnation adds such a different dimension to God’s presence. While in Old Testament times God did not hesitate to use very inadequate human symbols and experiences to reveal his presence, in the Incarnation—the mystery of a personal union that is not transitory—brings God’s self-communication into the realm of the human as the unique relation of this mystery to the eternal procession of the Word (Heb. 1:1–3).

Matthew’s Gospel begins with the news of the Emmanuel (with us is God) to remind us that even in the limitations of Jesus’ earthly life, his disciples experience in him, as never before, the presence of God. Later they could reflect:

Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands. (1 Jn. 1:1)

But Matthew’s Gospel goes on to refer us to the Paschal exaltation of Jesus in which the limitations of time and space are surpassed in his very humanity, and a Lordship is given in which the risen Christ
Prayer As Awareness of God’s Presence

can be present at every point in the universe. And so the Emmanuel theme of the first chapter is more than matched by the Gospel’s final promise: “And know that I am with you always; yes, even to the end of time” (28:20). Consequently, in each Gospel narrative of the resurrection events, there is the underlying theme of a discovery of Christ’s living presence. Faith in his resurrection is also for us a belief and an assurance of his presence.

In 1 Jn. 5:6–9, we read how the Spirit’s testimony does not go without confirmation of the Lord’s presence: “There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the [baptismal] water, and the [eucharistic] blood, and all three of them agree.” Here again we find the foundation of the unitive grace already given to all Christian.

Presence in Our Prayer

Essentially, prayer is that moment in which, through God’s help, we are able to focus on him instead of on ourselves. It is that moment—hopefully a growing and expanding moment—when we let God into our lives more fully and become aware of him as “Person” who is always present to us. We are not talking about some stoic effort to “make God present,” but rather about belief in the gift of his presence. More positively, let us start with a simple faith in God’s presence, his presence in love and mercy. Let us express our simple faith by taking God’s presence for granted, given, because God has promised it. Our attitude could be summed up as,
Prayer As Awareness of God’s Presence

“Of course, he is with me and in me; of course, he is here with the warm and refreshing sunshine of his love and mercy.” In just this way our simple faith can break through our own constructions and encumbrances to the reality of the true God, discovering ourselves in him and he in us.

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“Let your way of life among people be such that whoever sees or hears you will glorify and praise our Heavenly Father.”
—St Francis of Assisi—
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