

# THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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**W**HEN THE world Synod of bishops meets in Rome in October of this year, they will discuss and presumably come to some agreement about the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world twenty years after the Second Vatican Council. Meanwhile, lay men and women themselves have been thinking, talking, praying and in some cases writing about their experience of being Roman Catholic Christians in the late-twentieth century. Much of this intentional reflection has been motivated by the Synod itself. Pope John Paul II, the Synod Council and various episcopal conferences have all expressed the hope that widespread consultation with the laity would precede the Synod. For their part, the laity have made it clear that they cannot imagine the bishops talking about them until the laity have first talked to the bishops.

In the United States a many-faceted consultation process has been underway for over eighteen months. Approximately 200,000 people have participated. The secretariat for the United States Bishops' Committee on the Laity developed a list of topics to assist dioceses and parishes to begin some focused conversation. A nine-part television series about the laity's life in the Church and in the world allowed viewers to telephone questions and opinions to panelists.<sup>1</sup> Five regional meetings were sponsored by the Bishops' Committee on the Laity, four of them for diocesan representatives and one for leaders of national lay organizations and movements. The laity have candidly discussed questions of Church structure, shared responsibility, clergy-laity relations, unity-dissent, the role of women and witness of life in its various forms. But notably present in the many different reports is a strong sense of the laity's spiritual yearning. It is not that people are ignorant of God's presence and action in their lives. Not at all. Having glimpsed or tasted or consciously lived with the Holy One, they desire more, and they hope their religious leaders will prove to be spiritual

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leaders and guides for them.<sup>2</sup> A further illustration of the pre-eminence of spiritual awareness in the lives of American Catholic laity is the response I received to a column I wrote in the spring of 1986.<sup>3</sup> In it I asked readers to share with me their stories of faith and hope. Nearly five hundred letters were received from all over the United States. Responses came from urban centres and rural communities, from nursing homes and kitchen tables. One man wrote from federal prison; a woman from a national park where she is a park ranger. The mail came from children as young as ten and from adults aged almost ninety. Some created poems to express the inexpressible. A few wrote something akin to spiritual autobiographies. Many offered the information (usually by way of apology for a lengthy letter) that this was the first time they had been asked to talk about the God they know.

#### *Consulting the faithful*

Commentators on John Henry Newman point out that he was advocating trying to discover what the faith is really like among the people at a given time, when he argued the importance of consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine. Gerald O'Collins, for example, interprets Newman as meaning that a decision to consult the faithful presupposes that the Holy Spirit remains with the whole body in a dynamic and influential way. And since the faithful have an instinctive sense of the symbolic, probing that symbolic life can reveal, in some measure at least, the activity of the Holy Spirit in our time.<sup>4</sup> Bernard Cooke puts it a little differently. 'Today we are using the life experience of believing Christians, as individuals and as communities, as the starting point of theological reflection.'<sup>5</sup> This article is both a report of and a reflection on the life experience of a cross-section of believing Christians in the United States. Reference points for reflection on these stories of contemporary faith and spiritual awareness are insights of two of this century's most respected writers in the area of spirituality: Thomas Merton and Evelyn Underhill.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I offer some observations about how the institutional Church, particularly the parish, might assist lay women and men to deepen their experience of God in everyday life.

#### *What we have learned*

Both Merton and Underhill are insistent that the spiritual life is of vital importance to ordinary people, and is in fact available to

many. The men, women and children who responded to my article could easily have been in Evelyn Underhill's mind when she wrote *Practical mysticism* whose original subtitle was *A little book for normal people*. She addressed her little book to the men and women who are neither learned in ascetical theology nor particularly devout. (They have a body of literature, she insisted.) *Practical mysticism* was written for the much larger group, men and women who are a little shy, or somewhat repelled by 'churchiness', but who wonder about God and about the spiritual life, and especially wonder if it has anything at all to say to one's loves and disappointments in the family, the town or the work place. If Underhill were alive today she would be assuring people that the resources of the inner life have some relationship to micro-chips and Japan.

Underhill's goal was to free the word 'mysticism' from the clutches of the esoteric.<sup>7</sup> Mysticism—the knowledge of the ultimate reality we call God—is the result of discipline, concentration and education of human consciousness, she writes. We can learn to redirect our attention so that we can see that to which we have been blind. Her thesis is that new sight, and its concomitant behaviour, are possible for all. The world of reality exists for all just as the beautiful exists for all, not just for the artist or the poet.

The word that first- and second-world persons often use to describe their lives in a high-tech culture is 'fragmented'. We are frequently overwhelmed by speed and choices and possessions. And then comes a moment when all the *pieces* stop rattling, and *peace* replaces the pieces. For a brief moment the conveyor belt stops and we are lost: lost in music, in another person, in a scene of nature. These may be brief, fleeting moments, but they are unforgettable, and they signal another way of being in life.

Underhill recognized a similar scattered existence in the pre-nuclear age in which she lived and wrote; she recognized, too, the occasional breakthroughs to another, more gathered existence. She asked her readers and retreatants, 'Are you willing that your participation in Reality shall depend wholly on these incalculable visitations, on the sudden wind and rain that wash your windows and let in the vision of the landscape at your gates?' She insisted that one could keep those windows clear by turning one's attention that way, by learning to look out of them. A life crisis or conversion often redirects one's gaze, she noted; but more often, one plods on, gradually clearing the windows.

My respondents testify to windows cleared both by sudden visitations and by patient, disciplined cleansing. Although the circumstances of their lives varied greatly, certain common themes emerged. One theme is that *nature* continually reveals the glory and mystery of the Creator. A ten year old boy wrote, 'Yesterday I saw a robin let a worm go. That's like God'. A hospital orderly from Mississippi, after writing about touching God in the patients she cleans and feeds, and receiving second-hand clothes for her children 'as if from the hand of God', describes the pure joy of Mississippi rainbows which serve as objects of meditation for her at the end of a hard day's work. An Ohio reader notes, 'Where I live in the city I observe ten crab-apple trees in their different stages and seasons . . . they remind me of Christ'.

Another almost universal theme is that of *family*, a place of comfort and acceptance, but also of challenge and deep sorrow. No matter. In both the brokenness and the solace people feel and know that God is present in their family life. Parents of special Down's Syndrome children feel blessed by their gentleness. Others write of burying their children and how that form of crucifixion rooted them more firmly in the mystery of God. Teenagers and older persons view babies as special signs of hope. Husbands and wives cherish their small, everyday sharings that are so much like rituals in the flow of a day. Widows and widowers are universally grateful for what has been, and move through their grief to a new kind of waiting. Some experience God when they tap into surprising courage to leave a destructive marriage. Adult children of alcoholics describe the new energy that comes from forgiving their parents. Grandparents tell about kissing immortality when they embrace their grandchildren. The broader consultation confirms the family as the primary place for encountering God, day after day.

After family, the *parish* is most often cited as the place where people experience the divine presence. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are thresholds whereby men and women often cross over into a deeper and fuller experience of God. Some respondents identified their return to Mass and communion as the beginning of a total life-conversion that includes care for the poor and discernment regarding the use of money. Some credit the sacraments with increasing their sensitivity to the social and structural sins in society. A significant number of readers deplore what one man calls 'unthought-through homilies or the tacit message that the pastor is not to be disturbed'. But for every spiritually/

emotionally remote priest, readers named dozens whose homilies have spoken to their hearts at critical moments, especially when they were near despair. Many people credit pastors with guiding them to Alcoholics Anonymous or in some other way giving them courage and enough self-esteem to change the course of their lives. Post-Vatican II lay participation in the ministry of the parish is deeply cherished. In the words of a Milwaukee correspondent, 'The Church today is a real force in the world, not so much because of politics, but because people really seem to be more caring . . . to be doers of the word, not just hearers. I love the Church today. I'm proud to be part of it'.

Lay persons wrote in a most unself-conscious way about their *ministry and service*. As people visit nursing homes, care for invalid spouses, serve as eucharistic ministers or as prayer group leaders or as catechists, their experience is that of receiving from the bounty of God. They are living evidence that Jesus was right when he said that in giving we receive.

Following family and parish, the *work place or work itself* is most often mentioned as a means of knowing God. One young man in his late twenties described his work environment as stressful but through prayer and meditation he is beginning to enjoy it. Another part-time college student and worker views his daily labour with the contemplative eye. 'Sometimes while cleaning furnaces in dark and lonely cellars, God presents himself to me in the intricate designs of the spider webs, the fire from the furnace or the friendly cat.' Teachers, nurses and child-care workers wrote most often about their work, its challenges and opportunities for growth. These workers are very conscious that their material is human and that their daily encounters are steeped in the spiritual.

These are but a few of the stories of death and resurrection that I have been privileged to read. Many of the stories are breakthrough kinds; the boy and the worm for example. But others are clearly shaped by discipline like that described by Evelyn Underhill. The theology of these stories is markedly incarnational, concrete and decidedly this-worldly. Thomas Merton would understand and appreciate them.

Very often the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so called 'spiritual life' of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of everyday life: for

nature, for the body, for one's work, one's friends, one's surroundings etc. A false supernaturalism, which imagines that the supernatural is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life.<sup>8</sup>

Both Merton and Underhill weave together the practice of meditation, contemplation and prayer in general with the continuing appreciation of the whole of life which is our gift from God. Life and prayer are of a piece. And so the practice of meditation enables one to see more clearly and to live more consciously. For Merton, 'to find the real world is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our inner ground'.<sup>9</sup> Underhill insists that worship is the path to that discovery. 'Worship purifies, enlightens and at least transforms every life submitted to its influence . . . not merely in the ethical or devotional sense.'<sup>10</sup> She believed that one of the functions of worship and prayer is to win our wills to God's will. It is what she called 'adherence'. And from this adherence there develops the habit of the centrality of God in our lives, and from this paramount fact follows the love of our fellow humans. How do we come to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to reach out to those who in themselves seem unlovable? By maintaining the priority of God in our lives. Merton is in agreement.

The power to love another for his/her own sake is one of the things that makes us like God, because this power is the one thing in us that is free from all determination. It is a power which transcends and escapes the inevitability of self-love.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholic laity who wrote to me about their experience of God in everyday life revealed a remarkable capacity to move beyond self-love, and a remarkable determination to 'clear the windows' so as to look upon humanity and divinity with an increasingly steady gaze.

### *Spirituality and the institutional Church*

At a time when our planetary home faces unprecedented challenges to its continued existence, it seems imperative that the human family should more intentionally cultivate the inner ground

of being described by Merton, and patiently work at 'cleaning the windows', Underhill's metaphor. The point is, of course, to see more clearly God's will for the earth, and to join our will with God's: adherence. Herein lie both human responsibility and human fulfillment, and the testimony of thousands of men and women in the United States' pre-Synod consultation underscores this assertion. We cannot leave the cultivation and the cleaning to chance. Remembering that the parish is for many people an important threshold for meeting God, and that as institution it has resources often not available to individuals, we might wonder about the role of the parish in supporting the spiritual quest, and in the transformation of consciousness. What is possible?

I see at least five ways that parishes are now, or might be, engaged in the people's spiritual quest.

1) *Worship*. Evelyn Underhill's own spiritual quest led her to a step beyond personal, private worship; it led her to join an Anglican parish, something she had resisted for years. Her Catholic spiritual director, Friedrich von Hügel, convinced her that a necessary complement to her solitude and contemplation was participation in a worshipping community. About the Church she wrote:

What does a Church really do for the God-desiring individual; the soul that wants to live a full, complete and real life, which has 'felt in its solitude' the presence and compulsion of Eternal Reality under one or other of the forms of religious experience? I think we can say that the Church or institution gives to its loyal members:

- \* Group-consciousness.
- \* Religious union, not only with contemporaries but with the race, that is with history . . . an enrichment of the group-consciousness.
- \* Discipline; and with discipline a sort of spiritual grit, which carries our fluctuating souls past and over the inevitably recurring periods of slackness, and corrects subjectiveness.
- \* Culture, handing on the discoveries of the saints.
- \* Promoting the repetition of acts which are primarily our instinct for God.<sup>12</sup>

Participants in the pre-Synod consultation say that they want and need good liturgy in order to grow spiritually. They view clergy and religious as spiritual leaders not in the sense of merely

celebrating sacraments ritually, but in the sense of facilitating their prayer life, energizing them with rich liturgy and stimulating preaching.

All of this suggests that the spiritual development of parish leadership should be a priority. This will probably require a reordering of the leadership's time and perhaps a reordering of the parish's space. Those who make visible the symbols of the Christian faith enjoy a unique opportunity to be companions to those who seek God.

2) *Spiritual direction*. The relationships of mentoring, guiding, befriending are all part of the Christian tradition. These kinds of relationships were central for both Merton and Underhill, and they experienced them in a reciprocal way. They were both guided and guides. The laity today sense that they need spiritual directors and/or spiritual friends if they are to grow strong in the life of the spirit. The parish is one place where those gifted as spiritual friends can be called forth, trained perhaps, and encouraged to utilize their gifts on behalf of the larger community. Support for this emerging lay ministry is in addition to the availability of the priests themselves for this ministry.

3) *Dialogue*. For many people today, a primary need is a place for dialogue, for what John Coleman calls a 'new kind of talking'.<sup>13</sup> By this Coleman means small groups of Christians gathered to explore the points of hope in their lives (clearly a theological issue), the moments of meaning, the experience of faith. It is such conversation, contends Coleman, that yields a true lay spirituality, rooted as it is in the everydayness of work and family, of civic culture and Church culture. In the United States the RENEW programme has, in some places, inaugurated this new kind of talking, as has the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Again, participants in the United States' pre-Synod consultation make an explicit connection between their new and deepening spiritual insights (and the concomitant willingness to co-operate with God's will) and with their experience in small communities of faith. It seems that the basic Christian community is a universal sign of new life in the Church. While it is prudent to weigh the pull of enthusiasm, it is also true that:

the creative Spirit . . . presses forward, and perpetually brings novelty to birth; and insofar as we are dedicated to this spirit we



may not make an unconditional surrender to psychic indolence, or the pull-back of the religious past.<sup>14</sup>

A pastoring style that enables small communities to gather and pray and dialogue about the connections between the inner life and the outer life of work and family and society is one that fosters a whole spirituality.

4) *Education for ministry.* A recent research project in the United States surfaced over two hundred lay ministry programmes that have some official sanction or enjoy the confidence of the American bishops.<sup>15</sup> Who are the people studying in these programmes? For the most part they are mature adults who, after an awakening, look for some systematic way to continue what God has begun in them. It is a familiar method. Ministry is one of the classic ways of Christian growth, and training for lay ministry is usually not only theoretical but practical as well. Most of these programmes in the United States connect people to parish or diocesan ministry: intra-Church. What about education for 'worldly ministry'? Programmes for the doctors and teachers, the business community and scientists, the homemakers? I am thinking of programmes that would afford scripture and systematic theology, Church history and spirituality for those men and women whose energies are quite taken up by worldly responsibilities. The parish or a coalition of parishes could offer its theological expertise to 'equip the saints' (Eph 4, 12).

5) *Celebration and play.* One of the great gifts of the black Churches to their own people and by extension to others has been their ability to turn their people's mourning into dancing. When one goes to a black church on Sunday, it is very evident that something special is occurring. People dress in their best; trouble is left at the kerb-side; music fills the sanctuary and the human heart; men and women enjoy their God, and enjoy God enjoying them. Historically within the black culture, Church was and remains a place to be in touch with liberation. Today, there is so much within all of us and within our culture that binds us and blocks our being merry folk; Church may be one of the last institutions within society that potentially, at least, can provide sabbath-time, that quality of being that appreciates what it is to be human and to be graced. If the parish were to help the laity to rest, to be and to play as well as to minister, then we might stay with the

oftentimes arduous task of clearing the windows that face two worlds.

### Conclusion

The 1987 Synod of bishops has become an occasion for lay women and men to pause, to reflect, and to dialogue with each other and with the Church's pastoral leadership about the lay experience of christian spirituality. What we are discovering is that the laity themselves are a kind of revelation of grace, a sign of God's abiding and energetic presence within the Church. Furthermore, what one senses is a fresh willingness; one senses, too, intimations of imagination regarding the Church and roles within the Church on the part of both the laity and the ordained. Is it possible that we are consciously moving toward a new horizon of ecclesiology, one characterized by the laity's vocation to adult responsibility within the Church, by the existential realization of the universal call to holiness, by a burgeoning of ministry within the Church and by the formation of new forms of collaborative community? The consultation within the United States points to that possibility.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The television series, *Changing Church/changing people*, contains nine segments. Eight deal with a variety of topics: *the laity's mission to the world; women; marriage and family; spirituality; ethics in the workplace; the power of community, lay leadership; inculturation*. The ninth features the U.S. Synod delegates and their *periti* in dialogue. Produced by Golden Dome Productions, video cassettes are available from Golden Dome Productions, WNDU, University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

<sup>2</sup> Kinast, Robert: 'Interim report' in *Origins*, April 2, 1987. The entire text is available from NC NEWS, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 20005.

<sup>3</sup> The column was written for *Faith today*, a religious education supplement for diocesan newspapers, produced by NC NEWS.

<sup>4</sup> O'Collins, Gerald: 'On consulting the faithful' in *The furrow*, in a 1986 series on the 'Synod on the laity'.

<sup>5</sup> Cooke, Bernard: 'What God has joined together', *Commonweal*, March 27, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> I presume readers of *The Way* are familiar with the biographies of Thomas Merton and Evelyn Underhill. I would only underscore that Merton, a convert to Catholicism, spent most of his adult life as a Trappist monk, and is one of this century's most prolific writers on the nexus point of religion, culture and spirituality. Evelyn Underhill, an Anglican laywoman, was a well-known writer and retreat-leader in Britain during the nineteen-twenties and thirties. The Catholic layman, Friedrich von Hügel, was her spiritual director. She is considered by many as one of the outstanding scholars of western mysticism.

<sup>7</sup> Greene, Dana: 'Adhering to God: the message of Evelyn Underhill for our times' in *Spirituality today*, Spring 1987, vol 39, no 1.

<sup>8</sup> Merton, Thomas: *Contemplative prayer*, (Cistercian Publications, 1969; later published by Herder & Herder, New York).

<sup>9</sup> Merton: *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Underhill, Evelyn: *Worship* (London, Nisbet, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> Merton: *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Underhill, Evelyn: 'The life of the Spirit and the life of to-day' in *The Evelyn Underhill reader*, ed. Thomas S. Kempler (New York, Abingdon Press, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Coleman, John: 'The world today and tomorrow' in *Work and faith in society: a handbook for dioceses and parishes*, (Washington, D.C.: USSC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Underhill, Evelyn: 'The life of the Spirit and the life of to-day', in *The Evelyn Underhill reader*.

<sup>15</sup> Elsesser, Suzanne (ed.): *Preparing laity for ministry*, (Washington, D.C., USSC Office of Publishing Services, 1986).