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A God 'embarrassed at the prospect of possession' - Exploring Divine Revelation

I give thanks
To the giver of images,
The reticent god who goes about his work
Determined to hold on to nothing.
Embarrassed at the prospect of possession
He distributes leaves to the wind
And lets them pitch and leap like boys
Capering out of their skin.
Pictures are thrown behind hedges,
Poems skitter backwards over cliffs,
There is a loaf of bread on Derek's threshold
And we will never know who put it there.¹

Introduction

Divine revelation is the term Christians use to express the process whereby God discloses God's self in history, a process that begins with creation and climaxes in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians understand God not only to have created the world, but, from the very beginning, to have freely chosen to relate to that world. According to Christians, God freely enters into a self-giving relationship with the whole of creation, and more profoundly and personally, with humankind.

The purpose of this chapter is to try to understand something of the nature and dynamics of divine revelation, and of the process whereby humans experience it and seek to respond to it. I will begin by discussing the nature of the God who reveals, and then proceed to sketch how some theologians have attempted to speak of divine revelation.

Searching for language

The closer we get to what lies at the heart of Christian faith, the more inarticulate we seem to become. Even when we are trying to speak of relationships between human beings, of deep feelings we have for each other, for example, of love, joy, and so on, words tend to let us down.

The challenge to express meaning is multiplied when it comes to speaking of our relationship with God. It is all the more vital, then, that when we seek to discuss divine revelation, we acknowledge the poverty of our language. Words will, at best, be ever only 'short-hand'. Over the centuries, theologians have acknowledged the limited nature of the language at their disposal by reminding us that all language about God is essentially analogical. This means that whatever we assert of God we must at the same time hold in our minds the radical inadequacy of what we have just said.²

Poetry is a less inadequate form of language with which to speak of the divine and so I begin with the Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, who, in his poem *A Giving*, provides us with a good starting-point for reflecting upon the nature of God.

The 'reticent' God

¹ Brendan Kennelly, 'A Giving', *A time for voices*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990, 106

² See Karl Rahner, 'Experiences of a Catholic Theologian'. In: Declan Marmion and Mary E Hines (Eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, Cambridge: University Press, 2005, 299.

In Kennelly's poem, the word 'reticent' stands out. At first glance it seems to ruin the image otherwise being put forward of a generous and self-giving God. Why then should we think of God as 'reticent' in relating with humankind?

The strict meaning of 'reticence' is a certain reserve in self-expression, an avoidance of saying all one knows or feels. However, God's hesitancy does not originate in a desire to hold back or to hold out on us. It is not because of a selfish desire to cling to divine dignity. Rather, God's 'reticence' springs from deep respect for the dignity of creation and especially for the gift of freedom already bestowed on human creatures. Conscious of how easy it would be to overpower, to impinge on fragile human freedom, God's approach is by way of invitation, not ultimatum. This is echoed in the Old Testament where we find a God who is encountered more in the gentle breeze than in the raging storm; who, eventually, is recognised as to be less like a king commanding than a shepherd gently beckoning to his weary and somewhat wary flock.

Thus, the first important point we need to understand about the Christian notion of divine revelation is that it is a *freely chosen act* of God, a movement by God towards creation and especially towards humans, motivated entirely by love, to which the only adequate response is one of *free loving acceptance*. As with all instances of love, freedom, on both sides, is required.

The Christian tradition has always been anxious to emphasise God's freedom in revealing God's self. This has led to an important debate which we can only touch on here. It is the issue of whether or not humans, left to their own devices, so to speak, could have any knowledge or understanding of God.

The Church has always been anxious to teach that, in principle, in a purely 'natural' state, God "can be known with certainty from the created world, by the natural light of human reason".³ Affirming this point brings home the fact that God could, in principle, have created us without having had any *special* plan or intention to reveal God's self to us in the *fullest* sense, that is, to communicate God's self to us. And so it emphasises that this divine self-communication is in no way owed to us by virtue of the fact that God created us. It is pure gift.

At the same time, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has never believed that it is dealing only with a *deus absconditus*, a god who creates and then abandons God's creatures. Theologians argue that a purely 'natural' state never arises in reality as we encounter it because, as the Second Vatican Council's decree on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* states, God "manifested himself to our first parents from the very beginning... and he has never ceased to take care of the human race".⁴ Theologians speak of a kind of 'general' or 'universal' revelation of God that begins with creation and is "the ongoing outpouring of God's creative, formative love into the entire world", as well as of a 'special', 'exceptional', 'historical' divine revelation "in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth."⁵ We will deal with the former type, 'general' or 'universal' revelation towards the end of the essay. We will explore the event of revelation in history first.

In no way 'needy' of relationship or friendship with creation, God freely chooses to enter into intimate relationship with us from the very beginning. In fact, it is for such a relationship that we are created. We humans, in turn, are free to accept or reject God's loving invitation to relationship. At the same time our freedom is a creaturely freedom, and so, limited, in the sense that it is not a capacity to do whatever we like with our lives as though our free acts lacked consequences. Freedom is a particular capacity we humans have to enable us to reach our full potential as human beings; a capacity to enable us to 'become' the people we are called to be. It is, as Karl Rahner says, a capacity we have 'for the eternal'. By exercising our freedom we determine who we wish to be for ever.

So a free movement in love towards creation and human creatures characterises divine revelation. Similarly, free love must also characterise the human response to God's self-revelation. We must

³ 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' *Dei Verbum*, n. 6, 99 - 100. In: Austin Flannery (Ed) *Vatican Council II, the Basic Sixteen Documents*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 97 - 116. [hereafter DV],

⁴ DV 3

⁵ See Gerald O'Collins, 'Revelation', *The New Dictionary of Theology*, (Eds) Joseph Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane: Minnesota: Glazier, 1995, 884.

reckon with the possibility that we can, and sometimes do, say no to God and thus play our own part in obscuring God's revelation.

Two points follow from what has been said above. The first is that a negative response to God's divine revelation on our part does not leave us in a kind of "neutral" situation. As Augustine put it, we are made for relationship with God. A deliberate refusal of such a relationship not only puts us in contradiction with God but with our deepest selves as well, since it is precisely for such a relationship that we are made.

The second point is that there is no contradiction between our own deepest desires for ourselves, and God's deepest desire for us. Sometimes one hears in popular spirituality the view that people must set aside their 'selfish' desires for themselves to follow or do God's will. But if we are made for communion with God then God's will, our own deepest will and our most mature desires for ourselves coincide.

There is another aspect to God's 'reticence' to which we can draw attention. This is an aspect that Enda Lyons, in his aptly titled *Jesus: Self-portrait by God*, helps us to understand.⁶ When any of us seek to be creative we are limited by the means at our disposal. An author is limited, for example, by language and vocabulary; a painter, by canvas and oils, and so on. God, too, is limited when God seeks to 'express' God's self, that is, 'press out' the divine self into the realm of that which is not God. It is not so much that God avoids saying all God knows or feels but rather that God's speech, God's Word, is limited not by God's self but by the means at God's disposal. Creation, so to speak, provides the infinite God with a finite 'canvas' upon which to express God's self.

Among creatures, human beings provide God with the least limited 'canvas'. Among human beings, Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth, being the most fully human of human beings, whose humanity is in no way diminished or distorted by sin, is the most perfect self-expression of God's nature possible in created reality. The *Preface of Christmas I* used in the Catholic Liturgy at captures this well:

In the wonder of the incarnation your eternal Word has brought to the eyes of faith a new and radiant vision of your glory. In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.

Jesus of Nazareth is the Word of God in flesh, the 'sum total of revelation' as the Second Vatican Council put it⁷. Yet even though Jesus provides us with the most radiant vision of God possible in this order of reality, nonetheless it is true to say that God still remains hidden.

This brings us to one final aspect of God's reticence upon which we should remark before moving on: the *persisting* hiddenness of God.

When we speak of a certain reserve on God's part in terms of God's self-revelation, it brings to mind, for instance, that our experience of God can at times seem to be far from revelatory. In fact sometimes it can seem ambiguous, confusing and even disappointing. Faced, for example, with the reality of evil and suffering, God's presence may seem very reticent indeed. Curiously, even the most devout believers and those who invest most in coming to know and love God seem to have this experience of God's hiddenness. It is not something that recedes with love and knowledge of God but rather seems to be characteristic of the human-divine relationship at its most intimate and intense, as the lives of many of those we recognise as saints testify.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition has always emphasised that God's self-revelation is characterised by incomprehensibility. St. Augustine noted this dimension to our experience of God when he said, *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*⁸, meaning 'if you understand, then it is not God'. Karl Rahner, especially towards the end of his theological life's work, also emphasised the mysterious nature of God's self-revelation. He stressed that while approaching us as 'self-giving nearness' God nonetheless remains God and thus shrouded in mystery.

⁶ Enda Lyons, *Jesus: Self-portrait by God*, Dublin: Columba Press, 1994.

⁷ DV 3

⁸ *Sermo 52*, 16: PL 38, 360. See also Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 38.

It is important to clarify what we mean when we use the term ‘mystery’ as it is fundamental to the Christian understanding of God. Theologically speaking, mystery does not designate as yet unanswered or even apparently unanswerable questions. It is not about questions and answers as such. Nor is mystery, theologically speaking, susceptible to resolution. Rather, it refers to the hidden depth that is characteristic of life. The more we come to know and understand, this hidden depth does not seem to ‘bottom out’ as we might expect, but rather seems to get deeper and more mysterious. Interestingly, even Albert Einstein recognised and accepted this:

The most beautiful experience we can have is of the mysterious. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It is this knowledge and this emotion that constitutes true religiosity.⁹

Mystery defies resolution. But it invites surrender. By surrender I do not mean ‘giving up’ but rather ‘giving in’ trustfully; perhaps even delightfully letting-go into the wonder of life, and even of one’s own life. What has been said here about the mysterious hiddenness of God we also experience about ourselves. Active acceptance of the mysterious nature of our own lives and of life itself is, according to Karl Rahner, already an implicit acceptance of God as the origin and giver of life.

Faced with the mysterious and incomprehensible nature of something as painful and life-defying as suffering and evil, Rahner urges us to turn such experiences into moments when we school ourselves in acceptance of God’s incomprehensibility. Thus, he says

If there is not ... acceptance of the incomprehensibility of suffering that all that can really happen is the affirmation of our own idea of God and not the affirmation of God himself.¹⁰

For Rahner, the fundamental challenge facing humans is to allow God to be God. It is to respect God’s freedom just as God respects ours. This means not imposing upon God our notions of how God should be and resisting the temptation to evacuate the mysterious nature of God with facile if consoling answers.

When we reflect upon it, we realise that mystery characterises the most intimate of human relationships. As Hans Urs Von Balthasar notes

The moment I think I have *understood* the love of another person for me... then this love is radically misused and inadequate, and there is no possibility of a response. True love is always incomprehensible and only so is it gratuitous.¹¹

Ultimately it is useless to try to ask or answer the question as to why someone loves us or why we love someone else. Similarly, divine-human love is shrouded by an incomprehensibility to which there is only one ‘answer’: gracious letting-self-go.

To summarise then: we have noted that our perception of a certain ‘reticence’ or reserve on God’s part, God’s hiddenness, can be understood in a number of ways. It can be understood in terms of the unavoidable limits finite reality places upon God’s self-expression. It can also be understood in terms of the respect which the Creator has for creatureliness and especially for fragile human freedom. We have also noted the distorting effects of human sinfulness which dim and obscure our ability to perceive divine revelation.

Fundamentally, however, God’s reticence must be understood in terms of mystery. Though God communicates God’s self in absolute self-communication, nonetheless this same God remains eternally a mystery, infinite, incomprehensible and inexpressible.

We will now probe this mystery a little further.

⁹ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1954, 11

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, ‘Why does God allow us to suffer?’, *Theological Investigations* 19, London; DLT, 1983, 207 – 208.

¹¹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Love alone: the Way of Revelation*, London & Dublin: Sheed & Ward and Veritas, 1968, 44.

Embarrassed at the Prospect of Possession

One of the songs often sung at the Jewish celebration of the Passover, the *Dayenu*, goes as follows:

Had he brought us out of Egypt and not fed us in the desert, we'd be satisfied...
Had he fed us the manna, and not then ordained the Sabbath, we'd be satisfied...
Had he then ordained the Sabbath, and not brought us to Mount Sinai, we'd be satisfied,
Had he brought us to Mount Sinai, and not given us the Torah, we'd be satisfied...
Had he given us the Torah and not led us into Israel, we'd be satisfied...

The Old Testament tells the story of a people first chosen and then prepared over time to receive the Good News about God's stance towards Creation and especially towards the human race. Quoting the Letter to the Hebrews, *Dei Verbum* notes, through the centuries from the call of Abraham to the coming of Jesus Christ, God spoke 'many times and in various ways'.¹² In terms of naming God and defining God they never really got beyond the encounter of Moses in the burning bush: 'I am who am.'¹³

At another level, however, perhaps the most important one, the Jewish people became aware that this unnameable God is revealed in deeds more than in concepts. They became aware of God's journeying with them in and through their history as a people. They became aware of God's fidelity towards them and forgiveness of them. They had a sense of being rescued and shepherded by God again and again and it is this experienced that formed them and gave them their identity as a people.

The Jews found that one of the reasons God seemed to defy definition was that with God there was always 'more'. Too often they thought that the same limitations that marked their response, the infidelity that curbed or foiled their generosity towards God, was also characteristic of God's stance towards them. It took some time for them to recognise that the 'eye for eye' reciprocity characteristic of human relations did not apply to relationship with God.

Christians add another verse to the *Dayenu* cited above, and in addition hold that the coming of Christ completes and perfects all that has gone before.¹⁴ In Jesus, in the words of the *Preface* mentioned earlier, we have "a new and radiant vision of God's glory".

Sometimes we forget just how dependent we are on Jesus of Nazareth for an insight into God's nature. The familiarity with which we speak *of* God, for example, calling God *Abba*, meaning 'Father', and the familiarity with which we speak *with* God in prayer, both of these we owe to Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, Christians believe that they can only speak of and with God 'through him (Christ), with him and in him'. Christians believe that everything known about and experienced of God is radically transformed in the Christ event.

In the suffering and death of Christ on the cross, God is rendered present to, transforms and heals humankind and human history. At the same time, human history becomes part of God's 'history', so to speak; it becomes part of the inner life of God and thus is given eternal value. In the first centuries of the Church the maxim emerged: 'that which is not assumed, is not redeemed'. Christians believe that in Christ all things are assumed; taken up, into the mysterious love of God. The suffering of Jesus and his death determine the course of human history

The effect of the Christ event, according to Julian of Norwich is that even our sins will be placed on the heavenly display shelf as trophies of the triumph of God's grace. Similarly, Balthasar brings out the radical depths of the incarnation when he speaks of Jesus even descending into hell, where he suffers an agony of incredible loneliness with those who may have definitively chosen "to put their I in place of God's selfless love."¹⁵ Balthasar speculates that the sinner who chooses to be separated from God finds God in the weakness of crucified love, and that even hell can be understood as a Christological place. Thus, human sinfulness, instead of frustrating divine revelation, brings out its radical depths.

¹² DV, 3. See also Chapter 4.

¹³ Exodus 3:14

¹⁴ DV, 4

¹⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, (Eds), Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982, 153.

Christians believe that in an important sense Jesus Christ ‘closes’ revelation.¹⁶ But this is, as Rahner insists, a positive statement, not a negative one. It is, as he says, “a pure Amen”.¹⁷ What has come to an end is the ‘holding back’ of God’s self. In Jesus, God and God’s creation have become irrevocably one, “for ever without confusion, but forever undivided”.¹⁸ The ‘more’ of God is eternally in our midst, an ever-replenishing plenitude of love.

We conclude this section by returning to consideration of the nature of God’s love. As Balthasar observes, we have nothing with which to compare the love of God:

The love of God is great beyond comparison. It has no ground except itself and always comes from farther away and leads still farther on than I could have thought and imagined. In my limitation, therefore, I must unceasingly add an “and”; but what I thus bring about has already long ago been brought about by the love of God.¹⁹

This is an important reminder: when we think of God’s love we tend to do so in human terms. But God, as theologians in more recent times have been very keen to point out, is not simply one being among other beings, and certainly not a kind of ‘super’ human being. For the Anglican theologian, John Macquarrie, God is better understood as Being rather than ‘a being’, if even the most supreme and powerful one. For Macquarrie, Being includes ‘becoming’ and has as its essence the dynamic act of ‘letting-be’.²⁰ Just one word of caution here. By ‘letting-be’ is not meant, in any sense, a ‘laid-back’ approach to life, a kind of ‘letting it all hang out’! Letting-be, in Macquarrie’s sense, means dynamic engagement and passionate commitment but with a detachment founded on love which respects freedom.

There is, of course, no ‘proof’ that this aptly describes the nature of God, if by proof we mean scientific evidence. But science does not answer all our questions, or even perhaps the most important ones. However, there is evidence I find persuasive. We humans experience ourselves as most alive, most truly ourselves, when we are being generous. We are happiest when we are ‘letting-go’, perhaps painfully surrendering to the mystery of life and our own lives. In contrast, we are least happy when we find ourselves calculating, possessive, fearfully clinging, anxious, controlling and slow to trust.

If, as the Christian tradition has consistently claimed, humans are in the image of God, the *imago Dei*, and if we humans are most truly ourselves, most fully alive when we are graciously letting-be, does this not reveal to us something of the nature of God, accepting, of course, that our ‘letting-be’ is infinitesimal compared to that of God?

In addition, when we look at the life of Jesus Christ, the one whom Christians believe to have lived a fully human life, that is, one undiminished by sin, do we not find a gracious letting-be in the sense described above? The Gospels recall that his very touch seemed to enable people bent double to stand up straight and they tell countless others stories of people being restored by him to the fullness of life.²¹ But apart from deeds as recorded, his entire life story seems to have been one of active self-giving surrender, overcoming darkness, sin and evil by trusting in the power of goodness and truth. The Gospels emphasise how he let himself go into the mystery of God, not always understanding but clearly trusting and graciously surrendering to the will of the one he called ‘Abba’. Among human beings Jesus is most perfectly the *imago Dei*. Thus, in him is revealed not only God’s nature, but ours as well.

We can conclude this section by making a final point that emphasises just how much God dispossesses God’s self. Although at times in the history of the Church God has been portrayed as harsh and demanding, the Christian tradition has consistently taught that God seeks friendship with us. This is recalled again in *Dei Verbum*:

¹⁶ DV, 4

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, ‘The development of dogma’, *Theological investigations 1*, London: DLT, 1974, 49.

¹⁸ See the Symbol of Chalcedon (451) in Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, (Eds) *The Christian Faith*, London: Collins, 1983, 153- 154.

¹⁹ See Hans Urs Von Balthasar *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 111.

²⁰ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1966, 110

²¹ Luke 13:10-17

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.²²

Genuine friendship is difficult: it is an invitation to share one's life through a love that is on the one hand passionately caring and involved, on the other, detached and selfless. It means self-emptying, vulnerability, openness, letting-go; it means actively intending the good for another for his/her own sake. Friendship requires freedom; it implies equality and mutuality. How can such a relationship exist between creatures and their Creator?

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) is our best guide here.²³ He stresses that it is the incarnation that makes possible the equality and mutuality necessary for friendship between God and the human race. In the incarnation a divine 'condescension' takes place: the Word of God "collapses naked and bare into our narrow creaturality"²⁴ and assumes all the weakness and vulnerability of the human condition. This is captured by the Letter to the Philippians when it speaks of Jesus not regarding equality with God something to be 'exploited' or 'grasped' but instead taking the form of a human being subject to death.²⁵

The Word of God stoops down to us but not just to join us in the messiness and at times the misery of the human condition. The incarnation marks not just divine condescension but also human elevation. Through Jesus Christ the human race is made worthy of God's friendship. We are restored to the dignity God had intended for us from the beginning. Thus, it is not just Christ who is exalted by God but the whole human race. Gerard Manley Hopkins puts this beautifully:

I am all at once what Christ is, ' since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, ' patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.²⁶

The Christian tradition has understood the incarnation as an invitation to *koinonia*. This Greek term gives us 'community' and 'communion'. Thus, we can see how it is God's invitation to friendship which provides the basis for the Christian community and why the Eucharist, in which we celebrate our friendship with God in the most intimate act of table-fellowship, is central to the life of the Church.

Now that we have explored something of the nature of the God that is revealed through Jesus Christ we need to consider how and in what way God is encountered.

A loaf of bread on Derek's threshold

At the outset we spoke of two kinds of revelation: 'general' or 'universal' revelation that begins with creation, and the 'special', 'exceptional', 'historical' divine revelation "in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth."²⁷ We now need to explore what is meant by 'general' or 'universal' revelation.

As we saw, the Second Vatican Council taught that from the very beginning, that is, long before the call of Abraham, and so before God's 'special' revelation commenced, God manifested God's self. God did not just create the world but also communicated God's self to that world.

The dilemma facing theologians is to try to understand and explain this without on the one hand implying that God, in creating us, *had* to reveal God's self and give God's self to us. Such an implication would compromise the free, gratuitous, gifted nature of revelation, and so undermine it as a loving act entirely initiated by God out of the fullness of God's love.

²² DV, 2

²³ See Summa IIa IIae, qq. 23- 46); See also Eberhard Schockenhoff, 'The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, q. 23- 46)'. In: Stephen J Pope, (Ed), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, Washington: Georgetown Univ Press, 2002, 244-258.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, 'Erfahrung eines katholischen Theologen'. In: Albert Raffelt (Ed), *Karl Rahner in Erinnerung*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1994, 148.

²⁵ Philippians 2: 5-11 (NRSV)

²⁶ That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection

²⁷ See note 5

On the other hand, if insufficient emphasis is laid on some kind of ‘general’ revelation, then there are also difficulties. One difficulty is that it is then hard to explain how people who have never had the opportunity to hear of ‘special’ revelation can respond to God and thereby freely accept God’s offer of friendship. Remember that we are speaking here of the vast majority of humanity; all those born before the call of Abraham; all those since who, for whatever reason, have not come to recognise and accept Christ as God’s ultimate self-communication in history. Does God ignore them? Are they ‘damned’, through no fault of their own? Or does God save them despite themselves, but in so doing vitiate and compromise their freedom?²⁸

A second difficulty is that unless we acknowledge some kind of ‘general’ revelation, then ‘special’ revelation seems to come to us entirely as something incongruent, extrinsic to our everyday experience. Would we even be able to recognise God’s ‘special’ revelation in Jesus Christ if God had not already sown in us the seeds of such a revelation, so to speak; if we had not already been formed in such a way that we ‘knew’ however vaguely, to anticipate, and to yearn for such a revelation? According to Avery Dulles:

From Augustine to Karl Rahner theologians of stature have repeatedly affirmed that if we did not somehow know God in our experience we could not even raise the question of God. Before we begin to search for God, we already apprehend him obscurely and implicitly in the restlessness of our own hearts, in which grace is operative... When we do find in Christ – or elsewhere – the appearance of God our Saviour, we spontaneously feel that we are recognising what we already know in an obscure anticipatory way.²⁹

If we did not already experience God in our everyday lives then we would not be able to raise a question about God in the first place, or recognise as true the claims made explicitly about God by Christianity.

The verse we cited from Kennelly at the beginning of this chapter suggests the ordinary nature of encounter with God. For Kennelly, God is met in the ordinariness of everyday experiences such as leaves stirred up by the wind or the gift of a loaf of bread.

Key to understanding this is to stop thinking of God as one being ‘out there’ to be met and encountered just like we meet and encounter people and things. As we noted with Macquarrie, God is more like the gracious letting be of being, rather than a particular being, however great, however magnanimous, standing alone among other beings.³⁰ God is not encountered in isolation from God’s creatures.

St Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556) stressed that God is to be found in all things. Influenced by him, but also by Thomas Aquinas, Rahner is the theologian who, in recent times, has most emphasised what he called “the mysticism of everyday life”. Rahner prefers to speak of God being ‘co-experienced’ rather than ‘experienced’ as such. By this Rahner does *not* mean that we do *not* experience God directly, but rather that our immediate experience of God occurs in our experience of ordinary everyday moments and events. Human experience, according to Rahner, is the platform for God’s self-revelation. In our experience of ourselves, others and creation, we experience God. In accepting, responding to and loving our deepest selves, others and creation, we accept, love and respond to God.

Rahner’s way of speaking of experiencing God overcomes a number of difficulties. In particular, it enables people to integrate experiences of God in “the bits and pieces of Everyday”³¹ with the God as proclaimed in the Christian community and encountered in the Church’s worship and sacraments. It intrinsically connects our experience both of ‘general’ and ‘special’ revelation.

²⁸ See Eamonn Conway, *The anonymous Christian – a relativised Christianity?*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993; Eamonn Conway, ‘So as not to despise God’s grace’. In: *The Courage to Risk Everything... Essays Marking the Centenary of Karl Rahner’s Birth*, Ed Eamonn Conway, *Louvain Studies* Vol 29, Spring-Summer 2004, 107 – 131.

²⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, 49. Cited in G Donald Maloney SJ, ‘Revelation and Experience’, *Doctrine & Life*, March 1975, 196.

³⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, London: DLT, 1978, 54ff

³¹ Patrick Kavanagh, ‘The Great Hunger’ *The Complete Poems*, Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1972, 88

At the same time an emphasis on experience creates difficulties of its own. In trying to avoid extrinsicism, we run the risk of subjectivism. We can forget that our subjective experience is a limited enough prism from which to view and to judge reality. According subjective experience primacy, making it the measure of everything that is important to and valued by us, can diminish our capacity to encounter God as God is; to let God be God.

In addition, it is very difficult today, especially in a postmodern context marked by fracture and fragmentation of shared categories for understanding and interpreting human experience, to speak of human experience in any monolithic or undifferentiated sense.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty has been alluded to by Balthasar. Balthasar is concerned that an emphasis on human experience as the 'locus' of the most fundamental revelation of God effectively relativises the 'special' revelation that takes place in the history of Israel, and in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Thus such an emphasis also undermines the sacramental life of the Church as the representation of Christ's saving work. An over-privileging of subjective human experience 'reduces' the saving event of Christ to mere fulfilment of a well-anticipated human need by a God who, in the very act of creation, had already committed God's self to loving and rescuing humankind. For this reason, Balthasar argues that:

It might be true that from the very beginning man was created to be disposed towards God's revelation, so that with God's grace even the sinner can accept all revelation.... But when God sends his own living Word to his creatures, he does so, not to instruct them about the mysteries of the world, nor primarily to fulfil their deepest needs and yearnings. Rather he communicates and actively demonstrates such unheard-of things that man feels not satisfied but awestruck by a love which he never could have hoped to experience. For who would dare to have described God as love, without having first received the revelation of the Trinity in the acceptance of the cross by the Son.³²

The difference of emphasis between Rahner and Balthasar on this point has led Rowan Williams to refer to Rahner's Christ as the answer to the human question and Balthasar's as a question to all human answers.³³

Kennelly's description of pictures being thrown behind hedges and an unexpected loaf of bread appearing on Declan's threshold captures both the ordinariness and extraordinariness of divine revelation.

It seems to me that the surprising, wonder-inducing, category-defying love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ does not need to be protected and is, in fact, ill-served, by playing down the reality that God "wishing to open the way to heavenly salvation... manifested himself to our first parents from the very beginning... and he has never ceased to take care of the human race, in order to give eternal life to all those who seek salvation by perseverance in doing good."³⁴

Perhaps an image that can help us here, one that is not as trivial as it might seem in that we find it in the Gospels,³⁵ is that of salt that transforms the flavour of food. Jesus told his disciples that they are to be to the "salt of the earth". This can only be the case, however, if he, the one they are to follow, is understood as such himself. The 'special' revelation of God's love that takes place in the history of Israel and climaxes in Jesus Christ can thus be understood as drawing forth, intensifying and

³² 'Current trends in Catholic theology and the responsibility of the Christian', *Communio* 5, Spring 1978, 80.

³³ Rowan Williams, Balthasar and Rahner. In: John Riches, *The Analogy of Beauty*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986, 34.

³⁴ DV, 3. See also Eamonn Conway, 'A Constant Word in a Changing World: Recognising and Resolving Tensions and Tendencies in a Post-Modern Context', *New Blackfriars*, Vol 87, No 1008, March 2006, 110 – 121.

³⁵ Matt 5:13; Mk 9:80; Lk 14:34

transforming the 'general' revelation of God that, through a free act of God, has accompanied God's creation from the very beginning.

Conclusion

Further systematic study of the concept of divine revelation is necessary to which this chapter should only be taken as an introduction. Such a systematic approach one finds, for example, with Alister McGrath, who details revelation in terms of doctrine, presence, history and experience.³⁶ Along similar lines, Avery Dulles speaks of revelation in terms of five 'models': Doctrine, Revelation as History, Revelation as Inner Experience, Revelation as Dialectical Presence, and Revelation as New Awareness.³⁷

A close reading of *Dei Verbum* is also essential. In particular one should look out for the Council's emphasis on revelation as a personal self-disclosure by God, inviting a personal response; the Church as the 'servant' of revelation, not its master; revelation taking place in history and therefore in human experience; the re-emphasising of the biblical and Trinitarian dimensions to revelation; and, finally, the main point: that a person, Jesus Christ, rather than an institution, is at the centre of divine revelation and human history.

Understanding divine revelation is one thing, graciously accepting God's gracious acceptance of us is another. This chapter began with the phrase "I give thanks". Eucharist means thanksgiving, and giving thanks is the most fundamental Christian prayer, and therefore the most appropriate response to a God 'embarrassed at the prospect of possession' in whose image we are made.

³⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 151 – 158.

³⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983