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Encountering God: A Liberative and Societal Experience

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Abstract: Everything in our life, today just as in Jesus' time, begins with an encounter. An encounter with this Man, the carpenter of Nazareth, a man like all men and yet different. There is an encounter between people, an encounter between people who were in the street". And this, he commented, is "something unusual". In fact, "when we go into the street, every man thinks of himself: he sees, but does not look; he hears, but does not listen"; in short, everyone goes their own way. And consequently "people pass each other, but they do not encounter each other". Because, Pope Francis clarified, "an encounter is something else" entirely, and this is "what the Gospel proclaims to us in our context: an encounter between a man and a woman, between an only son who is alive and an only son who is dead; between a happy group of people — happy because they have encountered Jesus and followed him — and a group of people who weep as they accompany the woman", who is a widow and is on her way to bury her only son. The Church should create spaces for critical reflection, spaces where poor people can meet and reflect about God's presence in their concrete situations. Also these spaces should be places of communion among equals, where real participation is lived out. These spaces should

be witness of God's presence among the people, a presence of communion, equality and "new creation".

Keywords: Liberative, Passover lamb, Incarnation, Liberation Theology, Clericalization, Trinitarian model, Culture of encounter.

"Everything in our life, today just as in Jesus' time, begins with an encounter. An encounter with this Man, the carpenter of Nazareth, a man like all men and yet different. The first ones, John, Andrew, and Simon, felt themselves to be looked at into their very depths, read in their innermost being, and in them sprang forth a surprise, a wonder that instantly made them feel bound to Him, made them feel different." -Pope Francis

Introduction

What is encountering God, what is liberative and societal experience? Without some clarity on these terms we cannot have a meaningful understanding of the subject. Encounter in this context is meeting God face to face. In my younger days, it was confined to having daily family prayer, going for mass and receiving communion once in a while. Sometimes we helped the poor, basically giving alms to the poor. If we did all these, I thought we had fulfilled the obligation and encountered God. In other words, it was encountering the Living God. Liberative and societal experience leads us to a wider realm, which is related to the wider society. Pope Francis explains this term very explicitly. It is an invitation to work for "the culture of encounter", in a simple way, "as Jesus did": not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying "what a shame, poor people!", but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; "and then

to draw near, to touch and to say: ‘Do not weep’ and to give at least a drop of life”. Pope Francis used these words in one of his homilies. Pope Francis on a regular basis has spoken of a Culture of Encounter as a goal for human society. A society that espouses a Culture of Encounter facilitates the right relationship among humans and involves a spirituality that emphasizes a personal friendship with God who first encounters us in love. I believe that the term, *culture of encounter*, Pope Francis uses, is a loaded term. To make an encounter, part of our culture means that every one of us is expected to practice it in our day to day life. The Culture of Encounter may be explained as, the structuring of a society in which persons encounter each other, and thus they are able to encounter the Living God.

Encountering God

In the First Book of Samuel, the young boy ministered to the Lord under the direction of Eli. We read that in those days, the Word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions. We know that Samuel’s sleep is interrupted because he hears someone calling his name. He gets up and goes naturally into Eli’s bedroom to see what he wants, only to find out that the preacher has not called him. Only after three disruptions of sleep that Eli-the-priest, realized what was going on. “Samuel,” he said, “Go and lie down, and if you hear that voice calling you again you say, “Speak, Lord; for your servant hears you”” (1 Samuel 3:9). So Samuel went and did just as the prophet asked, and God spoke to Samuel that night in a special way.

The above-mentioned experience of Samuel is a classic example of encountering God personally. If this experience remains within the personal self, it has no substantial effect. On the other hand, if we understand the meaning of, *speaking*

Lord, your servant hears, we will understand that the Lord will tell us to reach out to others. Lord tells his ministers to carry on with their services to society. Psalm 24: 3-4 clarifies the perspective. Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.

Obstacles to Encountering God

“If a man cannot get through to God, it is because there is a secret thing he does not intend to give up.” We are so preoccupied with the secret thing that we refuse to give up such things, and we enjoy ourselves being in such situations. But unless we give up such a stubborn nature, there is no way of coming close to God through prayer. To experience Him and His power personally, we have to be real with God and search for Him in our selves daily. When we sin against others, our relationship with them is affected, so naturally, our relationship with God is breached. We have the example of Adam and Eve hiding from God behind the fig leaves; we too are ashamed and likewise hide. We have many ways of hiding from God; we hide behind our daily routines, work, family responsibilities, recreation, or even spiritual ministry. We have to understand, therefore, how sin affects our relationship with God and so constant prayer is very important.

Another obstacle that prevents us encountering God is brooding over painful past events: “Stop dwelling on past events and brooding over times gone by; I am doing something new; it’s springing up - can’t you see it? I am making a road in the desert, rivers in the wasteland” (Is 43: 18-19). Many of us go through traumatic experiences in our life, and quite naturally, we find it difficult to experience

God. We want to experience happiness and fulfilment in life. Unfortunately, we feel we are caught up in our past. How can we find a way out of this situation? At least on some occasions, we can find some helpful method by meeting a close friend, a loving Christian or a right counsellor. We have to open our heart to receive the grace of God through their kind words of encouragement and hope. God does intervene in our life through many people and events. Through such ways, we can deal with the painful past and overcome it. In other words, God's love and healing are available to us always provided we rely on His love to heal our wounded heart.

Holding grudges against others: "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness, no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12: 14). An easy way of keeping God away is to keep grudges against others and keep the bitter feelings against them. Since it is our own choice to keep grudges, the power of the spirit will not enter into us, and we will not encounter God. We will not be prompted to think of God or to pray. There will be no personal desire in us to be reconciled or to forgive others whom we have wronged or others who have wronged us. We should realize that our faith is mainly about forgiveness, as Jesus has mentioned. Jesus has given us as a free gift, and we, in turn, are expected to share this gift with others. As believers in Christ, we are obliged to follow the way of Christ. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4: 31-32).

Stubbornness in unbelief: "Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did more evil than their fathers" (Jer 7: 26). One of the main barriers

which block us from coming close to God is unbelief. Unless and until we keep unbelief apart and believe in Jesus, we cannot find God. If we persist in unbelief, we cannot understand what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. We need to understand what is said in the NT. He cried out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

With a little effort, we can become believers. Though it is a simple thing, many people don't care about it and thus do not believe. They harden their heart and choose unbelief over belief. They choose to reject God and ignore Him. Unless we break this barrier of unbelief, we cannot have contact with God. By accepting Jesus as saviour, we are forgiven, and we can encounter God.

Community Encounter of God

We read in the Old Testament when the Hebrews were held in slavery by the Egyptians; God chose Moses to be His instrument to rescue them, because He had seen their trouble, had heard their cry for help and had decided to come down and set them free. The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land" (Exo 3). Such a God is someone who is very close to the people, and people can easily encounter Him as their redeemer, father and saviour.

Further, we understand that God acted to save His chosen people as a community special to him. After many difficult and troubling situations, God designed to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go free. Finally, God sent the angel of death to take the first-born of every family so that the chosen

people are set free. God wanted to assure His people that He cared for them as a community. Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssops, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door frame. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door frame and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down” (Exo. 12).

What we can conclude here is, death was not going to affect God’s people if they obeyed His word and trusted in the blood of the lamb. They had to paint their doorposts. As a community, they obeyed the instructions and found themselves safe although death had visited every Egyptian house. Thus the Hebrews encountered the saving power of God in their life because they listened to their God.

As committed Christians, we know that the same power of God can work in our life. All that we need to do is to trust in the power of God and be washed in the blood of the lamb. We have to remind ourselves often of the awesome power of God that redeems us and leads us through great trials and tribulations. Since we are part of the church we don’t have to face these struggles by ourselves; the encouraging support of the church is always available. Thus we can also help one another to encounter God!

Ways to Encounter God

There are many and different ways to encounter God, for instance, through the beauty of nature, through prayer and

meditation; there are also sudden and tremendous encounter such as St. Paul’s experience on the way to Damascus. Each encounter depends on the situation in which we live and when God who wants to reveal himself to us. The Peruvian liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez had another way of encountering God. His option for the poor enabled him to see the Lord in the faces of the poor in Latin America. He acknowledges that “Christ hides himself behind the faces of those whom we tend to avoid because they have little importance in the eyes of the society.” According to him, to be followers of Jesus requires us to walk with and commit ourselves to the poor. In doing so, we encounter the Lord who is simultaneously revealed and hidden in the face of the Poor.

Encountering God: Old Testament

Based on the understanding that the Biblical God is close to human beings, first of all, Gutierrez reflects on the first covenant that speaks about God dwelling in the midst of his people. God said, “I shall dwell in the midst of the Israelites, I shall become their God, and by my dwelling among them, they will know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt. I am Lord their God” (Exod.29: 45; 26: 11-12). The presence and the dwelling of God among his people emphasized the relationship between God and human beings. To despise one’s neighbour (Prov.14: 21), to exploit the humble and poor worker, and to delay the payment of wages, is to offend God: “You shall not keep back the wages of a man who is poor and needy” (Deut.24: 14-15; Exod.22: 21-23). Therefore, to love God and to love our neighbour means to do justice to the poor and the oppressed.

Encountering God: New Testament

In the New Testament God becomes present in the Incarnation of the Word. Through the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh, every person is the presence of God. Gutierrez notes: “Since the incarnation, humanity, every human being in history, is the living temple of God.”

This is the key element for speaking about an encounter with God. Gutierrez puts it this way: “If humanity, each person, is the living temple of God, we meet God in our encounter with others; we encounter God in the commitment to the historical process of humankind.” The Trinitarian understanding of God has been taken very seriously by Liberation Theology. Such seriousness was also recognised by the Pope’s (John Paul II) visit to Puebla on the occasion of the Latin American Bishops assembled there, when he stated that, “Our God, in his most intimate mystery, is not a solitude, but a family. For he intrinsically contains paternity, filiation, and the essence of the family that is love: this love in the divine family is the Holy Spirit”. However, the belief in the Triune God for the faithful throughout the world is a real struggle.

According to Liberation Theology, it is possible to emphasise a political and a religious reason for such a struggle. In the political arena we are used to political authoritarianism which is expressed in a heavy concentration of power. It is sad that the family is fashioned around an old patriarchal figure that does not allow equality for male and female. Unfortunately, the political and social situation has suggested that, just as there is one God, so there must be one ruler and one rule. In the religious sphere, according to liberation theologians, we find a similar phenomenon, that is, the centralization of power in the hands of a single

person, though in theory, it is said to be different. Similarly, the clericalization of the Church has led to the accumulation of power in the hands of priests who often exploit this power.

Trinitarian Dimension: Praxis Oriented Approach

The model of Trinity as communion can be seen as the ground where the struggle of impoverished people is rooted. Moreover, the communion model can uphold and sustain the utopia of a new form of society. Today there is an emphasis on the communion model as it can challenge the Church and her praxis in the world. We need to ask why the Church should be involved in the struggle of marginalised people. The preferential option for the poor helps people in the church and the world. Pope Francis says very explicitly, “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

We know that Jesus revealed God. He is the central person, in order to understand the Trinity. Jesus revealed a God full of compassion for poor, marginalized and oppressed. Jesus revealed a God who made a clear option for the outcasts and marginalized of society. If we understand liberation theology, we know that the Trinity is not impartial and universal. Through the incarnation, the Trinity opted for the poor. Therefore, the Church, in order to remain faithful to the God revealed by the Son, is called to renew her option for the poor. A society inspired by Trinity is a society that cannot tolerate class differentiation, domination and marginalisation. On the contrary, a society rooted in the Trinitarian model is an inclusive society where equal opportunities are granted to all people.

Conclusion

Without contemplation, prayer, thanksgiving to God, there is no Christian life, and the fulfilment of the Christian life is in commitment, solidarity and love of neighbour. These two ways are not separated, and they need each other. The integration of these two approaches is the best way to link justice and spirituality. Since we cannot approach God without carrying the longing of our brothers and sisters with us.

Pope Francis expressed, “the Word of God speaks of an encounter. There is an encounter between people, an encounter between people who were in the street”. And this, he commented, is “something unusual”. In fact, “when we go into the street, every man thinks of himself: he sees, but does not look; he hears, but does not listen”; in short, everyone goes their own way. And consequently “people pass each other, but they do not encounter each other”. Because, Pope Francis clarified, “an encounter is something else” entirely, and this is “what the Gospel proclaims to us in our context: an encounter between a man and a woman, between an only son who is alive and an only son who is dead; between a happy group of people — happy because they have encountered Jesus and followed him — and a group of people who weep as they accompany the woman”, who is a widow and is on her way to bury her only son. The Church should create spaces for critical reflection, spaces where poor people can meet and reflect on God’s presence in their concrete situations. Also, these spaces should be places of communion among equals, where real participation is lived out. These spaces should be witnesses of God’s presence among the people, a presence of communion, equality and “new creation”.

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