

EXPERIENCING
GOD

Thomas Green, S.J., was one of the most beloved and most accessible of all modern Catholic spiritual writers. *Experiencing God* is classic Green: clear, concise, based on years of experience as a believer and a spiritual director, and enormously helpful for anyone seeking to move closer to God in prayer and daily life. Highly recommended.

James Martin, S.J.

Author of *My Life with the Saints*

Experiencing God offers a very readable synthesis of Thomas Green's own thinking on prayer. I found the book to be very helpful, because it's not just about stages of a person's prayer life but about spiritual growth itself: from knowing to loving God, from loving to truly loving God. I would recommend the book to anyone committed to a life-long encounter with God, as well as to spiritual directors, prayer companions, and pastors, who must from time to time find words to articulate how to move forward in that mysterious reality we call prayer.

Michael McCarthy, S.J.

Assistant Professor
Santa Clara University

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The Three Stages of Prayer

THOMAS H. GREEN, S.J.

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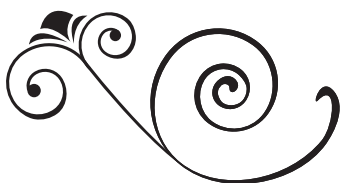
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P A R T O N E :

GETTING TO KNOW

GOD



I would like, in the first part of this book, to say something about the fundamental idea of prayer. The background comes from something I wrote about in *Opening to God*. I began *Opening to God* by asking, “What is prayer?” I responded by saying that we can define prayer as the opening of the mind and the heart to God; I added that we can also define prayer as a personal encounter with God in love. Both of these definitions have a certain value, and I will still stick by them as basic ideas.



PRAYER: AN OPENING AND AN ENCOUNTER

Prayer as the opening of the mind and heart to God involves not only the head, but the heart, not only the understanding, but the affective side of a person, the emotions, and the will; that prayer is not primarily a lifting, as the old catechism definition said, but an opening. This first definition of prayer, an opening of the mind and heart to God, is helpful in terms of clarifying what one might call the “faculties” involved in the basic approach to prayer. It is the more abstract and descriptive of the two definitions.

The second definition, a personal encounter with God in love, is really the one I prefer, as it is the more experiential of the two—it is the one I would

ultimately want to base things on as a spiritual director. But one of the things I have learned is that the second definition, while more experiential and (I think) more personal, can be rather discouraging to people when God seems absent. If we describe prayer as a personal encounter with God in love, then when people get into dryness, they are tempted to feel that they're not praying because there's no encounter.

This is a problem that will need to be addressed later in the book, but I mention it now mainly to indicate that both definitions of prayer have their value. If my prayer has run into dryness, I might well be more encouraged by the first definition. In this case, even though I cannot see that I am encountering God, I am open, mind and heart. I don't see what's happening. I cannot pinpoint that this is an encounter; in fact, it seems to me that God is absent. I can check whether I am truly open, in both mind and heart, to God. If so, I'm praying. In that case, I think, the first definition would be more reassuring. The disadvantage of the first definition is that it focuses more on what we do, whereas the second one focuses on the fact that prayer is an encounter—an *encuentro*—between persons. Prayer experience is not something that I do alone. Rather, it is the interaction between God and me.



THE REAL BEGINNING: VOCAL PRAYER

At the same time, reflecting on prayer as the years have passed, I think one good observation is that the above definitions elucidate what prayer *should be*, rather than what prayer in fact often *is*—at least at the very beginning. That is, I think it might be a little more experiential and honest to start from the reality that for most people, prayer is not like these two definitions. For most people, even to get into a mentality resonant with these definitions can involve some real effort, some real frustration, and even some discouragement. The process can take much of their lives. So it might be good to start by recognizing that for most people

prayer is neither an opening nor an encounter. Prayer for most means vocal prayer. I really think that's what most people, in their real life experience, would understand prayer to be.

I've had some very interesting experiences as a result of writing books on prayer. One thing that has been quite striking for me is the privilege I've had of directing two Protestant ministers. Both of them come from traditions very different from my own—they come from the Methodist and Presbyterian traditions. One works here in the Philippines, and is an American who is here as a sort of missionary, running a church for expatriates in Makati; the other is from Australia, a female minister, who has worked her whole ordained life in Australia. It has been quite striking that both of them have said to me that, in their traditions, prayer does not normally mean listening. It was quite a revelation to me that, in Protestant traditions, at least the ones from which they came, there was a good deal of focus on prayer as asking, prayer as petition, and prayer as adoration, but not so much on prayer as personal encounter. I think that's why, when they read my books, they were somehow drawn to seek me out, because they seemed to feel they had found something which perhaps was lacking in their own traditions.

I balance that story about my Protestant directees by mentioning that I have been working with two

prayer groups in different Catholic parishes here in Manila. We've been meeting about once a month for the past year or so, and in both groups people have been saying that our monthly sharing about prayer and the little assignments I have given them in the intervening weeks have completely revolutionized their experience of prayer. I was happy to hear that but a bit surprised that it was that revolutionary for them. What was "revolutionary" really ended up being the same point as the one my Protestant directees had made.

As one woman said, she had been raised in the convent schools to identify prayer with asking and with novenas and with reading from the prayer books. She put it very beautifully—this is a woman who has grown children, so she's not so young—saying that all of her life she's been prayerful, but she was lost without the book. Unless she had a prayer book there to read, she didn't know what to do. She said for the first time in her life, when we began to share in these groups, she has found herself putting the prayer book aside, beginning to suspect that maybe it was better to just listen to the Lord and to be more spontaneous with him. She was surprised that she could survive without the crutch of the prayer book, and even more surprised that she finds now she's reluctant to pick up the prayer book. She thinks that she's now found something better.

In short, my experience has led me to the realization that my Protestant friends' experiences are quite valid for most Catholics, too. Many other people have confirmed this experience. It seems to boil down to two important points about most people's prayer: that there is something better, yes, but also that most of us, Catholic or Protestant, did not know that there was something better. For most people, prayer means vocal prayer, and that in turn means talking to God. And talking to God very frequently means using somebody else's words. Reading the old Vatican II missal put out by the Daughters of St. Paul, you find a daily meditation in which Father Alberione's words or the words of Pope Paul VI or somebody else are given to us, precooked, for our reflection. That has been very much our tradition—I pray by reading somebody else's words.

Now, in trying to wrestle with the issue of praying vocally, I would say that it is in fact a good way to pray. I'll say a word about the possibilities of growth in vocal prayer in a moment. But I will also ask, why might this not be the best way? To use an analogy: suppose a boy named Herman is courting a girl named Suzy-Bell. Herman is rather shy and somewhat tongue-tied. He doesn't know what to say to Suzy-Bell, so he gets a copy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Then, as courtship goes here in the Philippines, he gets a guitar and plays under her

balcony, and when she comes out on the balcony with stars in her eyes his heart begins to beat fast, and he takes out his copy of *Romeo and Juliet* and reads Romeo's words to Juliet. What would the girl think? Sure, Romeo's words are beautiful (especially if you know and love Shakespeare), but they are not the boy's. Suzy-Bell might then say to him, "Well, for heaven's sakes, Herman, speak for yourself! I'd like to hear from you!" Herman then replies, "Yes, but Shakespeare speaks much better than I do." She responds, "Well, fine, but I'm not marrying Shakespeare!"

Now that's the problem, I think, with vocal prayer. Vocal prayer is somebody else's words, which can be a help to start, but sooner or later the Lord, like the girl, is going to say to us, "For heaven's sakes, speak for yourself! Stop reading me somebody else's words and let's begin communicating ourselves." Now, we may be shy with God, we may be insecure, that's true, and someone else's words may help us as a start. But Herman's own words to Suzy-Bell are far better, even if they're not very good English. They are far better than Shakespeare's words to express what's going on between him and her. Does that make sense? I think that it's very important that Herman and Suzy-Bell find the words to express their own love and their own experience. In addition, Herman has to learn to listen and

not just talk. The danger with vocal prayer is that we end up doing all the talking. So there are two dangers, really: first, we end up using precooked words that are not our own; second, we end up doing all the talking.

Having critiqued vocal prayer, let me say something positive about it. St. Teresa of Avila is the great authority here. She wrote her *Way of Perfection* when her sisters asked her to teach them how to pray. The main reason *Way of Perfection* exists is because in Teresa's day women were not educated; they did not have much schooling. Even Teresa herself was educated in something more like a finishing school than a formal university. Most of Teresa's sisters could not read, and printing was just beginning in those days. For most of them, vocal prayer was what they knew, and the shorter and the more simple the prayers were, the more likely the sisters were to know them.

The point of St. Teresa's *Way of Perfection* is that one can reach the heights of contemplation even through vocal prayer. I think it's a great book for people who feel that some of the things I have discussed in other books are a bit too sophisticated for them. The *Way of Perfection* speaks to that problem. Vocal prayer can lead to the heights of contemplation, provided, as Teresa says, that we think about what we're saying. Teresa says that reciting vocal prayers without thinking is useless (or worse than

useless) because it is, in a way, insulting to God. It is talking to God without thinking about what I am saying as if there were some magic in the words. Teresa says that if we think about what we're saying vocal prayer can lead us all the way to the heights of contemplation. I think that's very true.