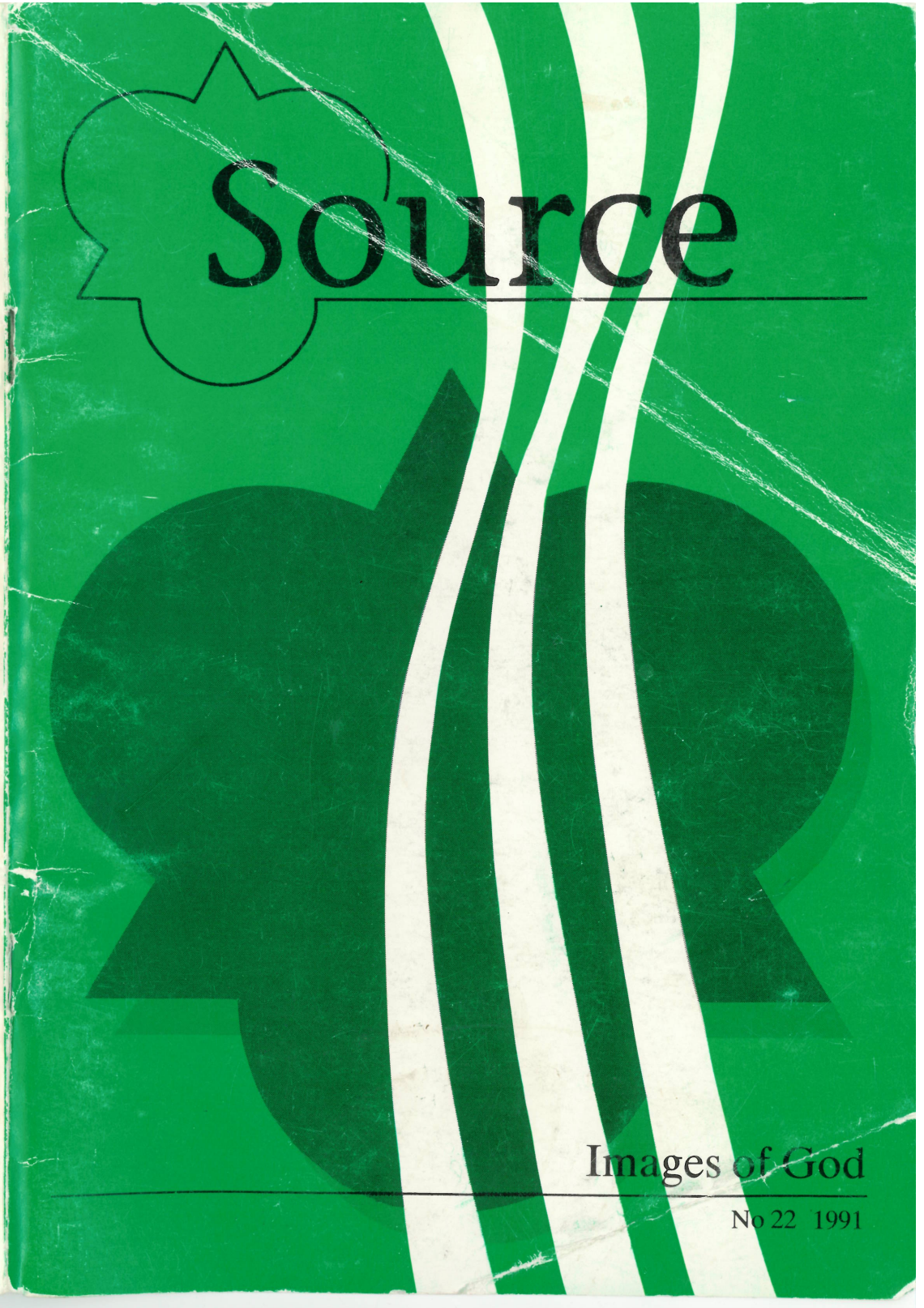
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Source



Images of God

No 22 1991

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IMAGES OF GOD

SHCJ

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EDITORIAL

I RECENTLY attended a meeting of women from congregations within the Ignatian tradition. We were discussing our womanly images of God, encouraged by one another in the context of Maria Riley's words: Let us not limit God by the poverty of our own imaginations.

This issue of SOURCE is also devoted to *Images of God.* I suspect it is harder to commit one's images of God to paper than to share them in an encouraging atmosphere as we did at the Ignatian meeting. So I want to express my gratitude to those who contributed to this issue, who took the risk of sharing what is truly intimate and personal — a glimpse into their relationship with God. I must also apologise for the delay in publishing this issue, a result of factors outside the editor's control.

The editorial board met together in July 1990 to plan this and future issues. We explored suggestions for *a new title* for SOURCE but reached no conclusions. However, as you see, we have changed *the cover* and are grateful to Wayne Gradon SHCJ for the new and more dynamic design.

We feel SOURCE deserves a wider circulation, and have fixed the cost of a *subscription as £6 or $12* per annum (in Africa please consult Henrietta). If you know of anyone who would like to take out a subscription please contact a member of the editorial board.

Once again we invite contributions, suggestions and responses to published articles. Copy for the first issue of the year should reach the editor by the beginning of the previous September; for the second issue by the beginning of February.

JUDITH LANCASTER SHCJ

POEM

Eileen Sweeney SHCJ

I throw
the discus
of my spirit
into the heart
of my
black God

who deftly
catches it
and lays
it down
in the
red earth
of his
dark heart.

And now
my spirit
moves forever
to the rhythm
of his
heartbeat.

WOMAN IMAGING GOD

Pauline Darby SHCJ

I ALWAYS enjoy the story of the little girl who set to work to draw a picture of God. Her mother pointed out that no-one knows what God looks like. The child was undaunted: 'They will when I've finished!'

A few days before the deadline, and after the fourth attempt to finish this article, I was still far from satisfied. Much earlier the title had changed from 'Images of God' to 'Imaging God', and the only constant in each draft was the opening story. I read that again and suddenly knew what was wrong with all I had set down so far. What I really wanted to reflect upon was 'Woman Imaging God'. I had been daunted by the challenge but now proceeded with new heart.

The development from 'Images' to 'Imaging' is very important. By using a rather unfamiliar verb instead of noun, attention is directed to the profound relationship between the one imaging and the one being imaged. To image means to visualize, to represent and to contemplate. Hence I am setting out from a basic premise that our imaging of God reflects and transforms our understanding of our relationships and of ourselves. Another way of expressing that is that it is in the interplay of shaping and being shaped by our experience that we image God.

We are engaged in this dynamic as women and at a time when our last chapter enactments call us to consider 'Justice for women based on the dignity of every human being created by God in the divine image'. I hope that what you read — something necessarily incomplete as we attempt to enter into Mystery — you will take further and refine, until what emerges truly mirrors aspects of our experience of the feminine in relation to God.

So let us begin with experience. Tad Guzie in *The Book of Sacramental Basics* distinguishes between raw and lived experience. He suggests that raw experience is that which happens to us most of the time, which may be either simply routine or the basis for deeply lived experience. The transformation from one to the other occurs when significance comes into play, when there is an awareness that enhances the quality of life. At this point we realise that our own experience is framed by a bigger event or reality.

I should like to illustrate this by sharing with you something that happened to me, in the hope that it will trigger your own story-telling. Making a retreat in England can be a chilly undertaking at any time of the year. It was novel for me to pray mostly out of doors during a retreat in Rome. Each morning I sought the slightest cooling breeze among the Christian Brothers' cloister of trees up behind Casa Cornelia, usually carrying some lunch along with my bible. One day it took me — for the first and only time in my life — an hour and a half to eat a small piece of bread and cheese with a tomato. It was a veritable banquet, shared with some ants, and I truly 'recognised him in the breaking of bread'. 'Surprised by joy' on this occasion I also grieved at my usual tendency to gobble up life and God. T. S. Eliot's words resounded within, that frequently I have 'had the experience but missed the meaning'.

That day, in rediscovering the miracle of food, I tasted the God who delights in our appetite. Since then I have been much more attentive, in my own life and in privileged listening to others, to our own ordinary experience as the source of the sacred. Human beings can experience God only through their human consciousness. Whether that is in ecstasy or 'through a glass darkly' there is a mediation through the body, feelings and mind. Intimacy with God is always a deeper immersion into some aspect of human experience. This would appear to be obvious and yet is constantly forgotten. Why?

This question, together with others such as how is God experienced, where is the sacred place, or what do we describe as holy, leads us into the dialectic of God's transcendence and immanence. In the attempt to be true to the 'Otherness' of God the realm of the divine has been often, albeit reverently, set apart from the ordinary, maybe confined to liturgical worship or the observance of law or the involvement in the 'religious' as opposed to a 'secular' sphere. Jesus' proclamation that the Reign of God is both within and around us was heard as blasphemous by some; they were shocked that he made God 'as available as a village water pump', to use John Shea's graphic phrase. Similarly the statement in *Lumen Gentium* of the 'universal call to holiness' was amazingly radical, produced as it was against an ecclesiastical background in which altar rails and exclusive ministries suggested a rather different theological perspective.

Liturgical language is one very sensitive indicator of our comfort or otherwise with differing perceptions of God. It is a somewhat disturbing exercise to examine the titles attributed to God in the Roman liturgy. They are almost all variations of the following: Almighty God — all powerful and ever-living — Lord — Father — Most High — of heaven and earth — of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and heavenly King. They tend to place God safely outside our immediate experience. Acknowledging that all images are anthropomorphic and that God is beyond metaphor, yet known only by analogy, we must examine the consequences of the

choice and restriction to a few. What does it mean for both women and men if immanent incarnational images, including the feminine, are largely ignored in our public worship? By contrast, what is the effect when God is addressed as laughing —passionate — tender — God with whom we wrestle — the God of Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca, not to mention Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba, or Mechtild of Magdeburg's chosen image 'I, God, am your playmate'?

I do not know what happens for God when addressed in these terms but I do know that something happens for us. Our experience is sifted. By this I mean that a judgment is made on very important areas in our lives. To put it simply, if I can celebrate God as vulnerable and playful and feminine and whatever, I can celebrate these aspects of myself and others. If I am ashamed or uncomfortable with these images, then either they are not true aspects of God or myself or I have yet to come to a fuller acceptance of my humanness in all its ambiguity.

This really first came home to me at *a gut rather than head* level just a couple of years ago. During a workshop for retreat directors we were asked to go and pray 'as a child open to receive from a loving Father'. Something in me rebelled and I wrote furiously in my notebook: 'I need to be in touch with my feminine God who understands what it is to be a woman of 37 not a child of 7!' Any psychologist could have a bonanza with that statement; I describe it because that day my anger fuelled a commitment to explore our imaging of God.

Many writers are currently probing the feminine in God, a dimension overlooked for so long. Women are specially placed to do this, having ourselves been largely disregarded. As we were considered outsiders, unworthy to enter the official sacred space, the power in our God-revealing stories has yet to be fully released. However, it is encouraging to note that books like *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker and *An Interrupted Life: the Diaries of Etty Hillesum* are often quoted as deeply religious writing. In them the naming of female experience hitherto considered disreputable actually reveals a mysticism as real as it is unconventional. The accounts of situations in which women endeavour to name the truth of themselves and their experience vis-à-vis God, are often deeply moving. It is in such stories that many, particularly of a younger age-group, find an image of the feminine in relation to God which is not alienating. They reveal that when we are grounded in love of life, 'The living, the living are the ones who praise you' (Is. 38: 19); when we enter into the sometimes troubling ambiguity in that being alive, then we are in the realm of the truly sacred and our God is very near.

Etty, a Dutch Jew who died in Auschwitz in 1943, bore witness to this in and through her honest confrontation of all that happened to her. In the turmoil of trying to make sense of herself and her complex relationships, together with the events in war-torn Europe, she could write: 'I only want to try to be true to that in me which seeks to fulfil its promise'. Her struggle is that of choosing to meet and relate to the powers surfacing in her, or succumbing to possession by them. Etty somehow embraces her divided, many-mooded, complicated self and in doing so releases a compassionate commitment to justice: 'It is sometimes hard to take in and comprehend, oh God, what those created in your likeness do to each other in these disjointed days. But I no longer shut myself away in my room, God. I try to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked human being amidst the monstrous wreckage caused by (people's) senseless deeds'.

This extract from her diary brings Cornelia to mind, someone else whose spirit refuses to be cloistered even now. Throughout her life, as we know, she sought the God against whom alone she could frame her rich yet painfully conflicting experience. Many, before and after her death, wanted to cover up or deny the scandalous aspects of that experience. Others recognise the story of her life as an undaunted testimony to truth.

At a time when many women feel estranged from ecclesial tradition, we need to hear these narratives, a continuation of the Gospel according to women. They are resurrection accounts, part of an unbroken but often hidden line through the centuries. Etty does not respond with bitterness to her dire situation, symbolised in the destruction by storm of a tree outside her house;

> 'Somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did. And it spreads its scent round the House in which you dwell, O God. You can see, I look after you. I bring you not only my tears and my forebodings on this stormy, grey Sunday morning. I even bring you scented jasmine.'

Her experience is akin to Cornelia's 'jubilee of heart not bargained for in this life of accepted suffering.' The witness of such women helps us to believe and understand the God who lives and acts — and is imaged — in us today; 'All of us with unveiled face, looking at the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image, from glory to glory by the spirit of the Lord.' (2 Cor. 3.18).

IMAGES OF GOD WITHIN AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Rose Usoro SHCJ

AFRICAN thought forms are more concrete than abstract: Africans experience reality in process, which makes meaning of life. This makes the relationship between Africans and God very real because Africans relate to life and this life is no other but God.

Life is the highest African value because it is seen not only as a quality but as an identity and so it is important to Africans to respect life in all forms. We Africans see ourselves as participating in the life of the Supreme Being, in the process of creativity and sharing of life. These aspects of creativity and sharing are concretized in birth and community life.

In the African context when a child is born a new life has come to the society, a concrete life given to the community by the Supreme Being. This is seen as expanding or broadening the existing community. That is why people rejoice, feast and make merry because God is in continuous relationship with us through this new life.

Each stage in Life is marked by special ceremonies and feasts. A Boki male child is initiated into Atam cult, at the birth of a new child. While clay (symbolic of joy) is used by the Efik/Ibibio people. Many outsiders do not understand when Africans frown at someone's inability to give birth; but for us Life is stunted, Life is diminished, Life is extinguished, the relationship with God is no more.

Even in death Africans believe that life continues. This understanding is shown in the funeral rites; chiefs who die are burned with their wives and regalia, farmers buried with their farm tools and hunters with their weapons. All those who participate in this same Life continue to live even in death because God who is the originator of Life is a God who lives eternally. The pouring of libation affirms the relationship not to the dead but to the living.

We Africans are noted for our deep sense of community. We believe that God works in solidarity, so we work together in community, sharing our lives and responsibility and even suffering together in our times of need. Individualistic tendencies exemplified in excessive acquisition of

wealth, eccentric behaviour, and marginalising individuals in society are not part of African customs or traditions. Africans go further in sharing our rites and cutoms with the young ones initiating them into different social cults and traditional institutions. For example young boys are initiated into the Ekpe cult of the Efik community. At puberty the Ejagam community initiates young women into the Monikim institution. And Ibibio women are trained in the premarital institutions of Mbokpo — fattening room. Among other things the women are taught to respect life; abortion is to be frowned at because it destroys life.

There is also a strong relationship among Africans, a relationship that makes it possible to identify with other Africans at home and abroad. This explains why the Igbos refer to any Ibo speaking person as 'Nwannem — my mother's child'. The Yorubas refer to an elderly woman as 'Mummy'. The Efiks call any adult 'Uncle' or 'Aunty', while the Ibibios and Efiks refers to grown up men as 'Ete' meaning father. Authority is also an important concept in the African world view. We see God as the Supreme Authority and understand the ancestors as those who guard and exhibit this authority. Authority is experienced initially and formally in the family where parents are respected by children. Then in society at large, elders are respected by all other members. In the African context though young people dine with elders they are not above them.

Authority in the African concept is hierarchical: God is the Supreme Authority, then the divinities, the tribal spirit and the ancestors. This concept is identified as it relates to the spirit world. In the human sphere we have the chiefs and the rulers, the rainmakers, priests, diviners, medicine, many household elders, parents, elder brothers and sisters, and finally the youngest person in the family.

From the valuing of authority too comes great respect for old age and for the older members of society, who are seen as the source of wisdom by the young. The main reason for this respect is that the old people are furthest on the way to join the Supreme Authority. The African concept of authority does not include dictatorship. The God we believe in as an authority is also the God we see as a Father. Therefore, the Authority is one who listens, understands and appreciates human beings. This Authority also punishes and forgives. Hence when Africans experience famine and drought and epidemic diseases we believe that God must be punishing us because of our sins and disobedience. We believe that in sacrificing to appease God we are also forgiven.

The images of God I have focused on include Life, Community and Authority. God who is Life shares life with people — the African people. God exists in solidarity and functions in community; This is reflected in the actions and relationships of African people. Lastly Africans see God as Authority. This makes it possible for us to organize society with respect, integrity and growth.

THE ROCK OUR TRYSTING PLACE

Helen Forshaw SHCJ

THIS Sonnet is the best way I can explain my image of God — the image that for over 10 years has been *the* one for me. The poem springs from my love of rocks in themselves — locked up in them such energy, so many millions of years of living things dying and being transformed into this hardness which in turn can nurture life in its nooks and crannies. And the Scriptures are full of this image too — especially the psalms. And there are significant rocks — Moses' rock in the desert, the rock cave at Bethlehem, the rock of Calvary, the rock-tomb, and the rock of Ascension. All is compressed in the poem.

The image-door where I most meet
The mystery of God is Rock.
On rock-strewn paths my searching feet
Find stepping-stone in stumbling-block.
And God, whose Presence I would greet,
Is foothold safe and sudden shock;
In pain's deep crannies, honey sweet;
Pure water welling from the rock.

Rock-fortress sure where I may stand,
Cleft rock where I may safely hide,
Rock stricken by despairing hand
Which yields sweet water from its side.
This image-door is that dear place
Where God and I come face to face.

CORNELIA CONNELLY'S IMAGES OF GOD IN CHRIST

'learn, then, how He looked, *how He acted,* and *how He prayed.*' *(CC 30: 10)*

Caritas McCarthy SHCJ

A STORY is told of a six-year-old Katie who, being afraid when she woke up alone at night, frequently awoke her parents. 'But you are not alone,' her mother would reassure her, 'Jesus is with you.' One night Katie replied, 'But, Mommie, I want someone with skin on.'

In her own way Katie was expressing the human need to which God responded in the Incarnation when Jesus, 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15) lived a visible human life among us. The first Christians wrote of what they 'had heard ... had seen with our own eyes ... had watched and touched with our hands' (1 Jn 1:1), bequeathing to us in the gospels the powerful human images of God in Jesus. With this began the enduring Christian tradition of affective contemplation in which each person forms, from the gospel portrayal, his/her own images of Jesus and is led, in the context of unique personal experiences, to union with and transformation into Christ.

Through the centuries the great Christian leaders have constantly called us to approach our God through the gospel images: Augustine, Bernard and Gertrude, Francis and Clare, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila. In our own time, David Stanley has asked if the Ignatian tradition of affective contemplation is relevant for the twentieth-century Christian and has answered with a strong affirmative, saying that 'The contemplation of the Gospel scenes is no mere exercise in imagination,' that the events of Jesus' life retain in him as risen Christ 'a perennial, dynamic reality which remains ever contemporary with the ongoing process of history ... Through the various mysteries of his earthly existence he can 'touch' me in the innermost recesses of my being, imparting to me a grace-filled capacity of relating to him in these very mysteries.'[1]

All who know Cornelia Connelly's spiritual teachings will readily associate her with the affective contemplative Christian tradition especially as it was mediated to her through Ignatian teachings. We shall also associate her with Stanley's affirmation that through the grace of the risen Christ we are led from image to the reality of Christ's enduring presence. But it would seem that until recently we have not looked as

closely as we might at Cornelia's image of Jesus, nor have we explored comprehensively through all her writings the full range of her images. Elizabeth Mary Strub, as a part of a larger purpose, has given us, in her account of Cornelia's experience of the suffering and death of her infant son, a deeply moving exposition of how she was led through her images of the suffering Jesus and the Mother of Sorrows to profound contemplative union with her God. (*Informatio:* 109-13). This essay will not look so closely at any one expression of Cornelia's images, but rather give a tentative survey of the range of Cornelia's images indicating which predominate and how they are related to her life experiences and that of her family and Society. But first we must ask what Cornelia has said about the use of images of Christ in prayer, what significance they had in her own spiritual life and spiritual teachings.

To answer this latter question we must turn to Cornelia's 'most precious written legacy to her Society' the first chapter she composed for its Constitutions in 1853, which 'came to constitute the essential Rule which perennially embodies the charism of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.' (*Informatio:* 29). She composed this 'essential Rule' at the request of her sisters, even while she was suffering from persecution from the hierarchy and her husband, and was sorrowing over the sudden death of her eldest son.

She begins the Rule with the fundamental call to her sisters 'to *seek* in the mysteries of the life of this divine Lord all that can serve' to unite them to him and to serve others. She fixes as the starting point, the rich fountainhead from which all else will flow, 'the contemplation of the Eternal Wisdom in the lowliness of His Humanity,' that is, the approach to God, the seeking of God through the images of God in the gospels. 'What more sublime teaching can we find,' she asks, 'than that of the Incarnation?' — of the God who can be imagined in human form? Drawing upon her own God-given faith-vision for her Society, she pours out a succession of contemplative images of the 'humble and hidden' Jesus, from his 'enclosure in the womb of his creature' to his 'labouring in a carpenter's workshop,' as a source of special inspiration for her sisters. She envisions that her sisters will be led from graced images to profound spiritual experience — 'to drink' from the 'living wells' of the 'Incarnate God,' 'to taste' beside his crib the 'sweetness of suffering and contempt,' 'to rejoice to labour and to die with him,' and 'to employ every effort to bring others to taste and embrace the sweet yoke which he offers them.' (*Source 4:* 77-80). It can be readily seen from these quotations that Cornelia placed great emphasis on the use of images as a springboard, not only for contemplative union in prayer but also in apostolic action. These few comments on Cornelia's essential Rule for her Society do not do justice to her theology of the Incarnation and of apostolic service enunciated in its eleven paragraphs, but only serve to show how significant for Cornelia were the human images of God which the Incarnation makes possible.

The comments above on the Rule also indicate what further research

has shown — that although images of Jesus as infant and child do not occur with greatest frequency throughout all of Cornelia's writings, they do predominate in her more formal and especially her constitutional writings for her Society. Already by 1850 Cornelia had written into her Constitutions a passage which shows the Society's inspiration from the Babe of Bethlehem '— a humbled God —' and adds an image which will recur frequently in her writings, that of the Holy Child *growing*, and sisters and students *growing* with him 'step by step.' In this passage also the Child grows to become the Man of suffering, 'our crucified Lord,' who leads to 'a glorious eternity.' The Crib and the Cross are images closely linked in Cornelia's response to the tragic death of her two-year-old son. Elizabeth Mary Strub wrote that 'John Henry became for her a sign that Jesus' passion would always lead her back to the Child. In fact, Cornelia came to the Holy Child as the center of her Society's devotional life by way of suffering and separation — by way of her own Calvary ... Her personal tragedy was illuminated and transposed by the Passion of Jesus explicating the Infancy of Jesus.' (*Informatio:* 111) Cornelia used prints of her time which showed the Boy Jesus with his arms extended in the form of a cross, often with a cross in his background.

When one searches the earliest of Cornelia's extant writings at the time of her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1835 one finds that her first reference to Jesus is to 'Christ crucified' (CC 1:40); from then until her death her writings are regularly punctuated with images of Christ suffering for her, for his people, with her, with his people. Christ is in the garden drinking his bitter chalice (CC 7:17), he is thirsting on the cross and is offered only gall (CC 6:52). Christ is being scourged and nailed to the cross and his blood is being shed for her, for all (CC 8:77, 6:45). His wounds remain as a symbol of his love (CC:21:60), 22:24). Often Cornelia's images of Jesus in his Passion are linked to the Eucharist or his Sacred Heart; her images for each of these could well be the subject for future studies. Taken together these images occur with greater frequency throughout her writings than all others.

Even if Cornelia's own life experiences and devotional attractions had not led her to the Crib and the Cross, the devotional literature of her time would have directed her there as the places for contemplation thought most appropriate for women. She pointed to the appropriateness of the life of the Child at Nazareth for the prayers of children and encouraged their imagery:

> You must take for your pattern the Holy Child Jesus, not only to love Him and His Blessed Mother, but to *imitate* Him as He lived with her in the house of Nazareth. You must follow Him as He worked with St Joseph, as he went upon His many and troublesome errands, and as He helped His Blessed Mother in her household labours. You must learn, then, how He looked, *how He acted,* and *how He prayed.*

May you really so learn of the Holy Child Jesus, my dear children, growing as He grew, in stature and grace; ... (CC 30:10)

Cornelia did not stop with contemplation of the Child; she continued with 'and when you grow up may you so love and follow the Man Jesus ...' Her images of the Man Jesus apart from his Passion have received little attention till now; only first gleanings can be given here as a base for further study. For her the Man Jesus was one who laboured for thirty years in a carpenter's workshop (*Source* 4:78), fasted and was tempted in the desert (CC 21:31), gave good wine to the wedding guests as Cana (CC 22:11), and offered living water to the woman at the well in Samaria and to the crowds at the Temple in Jerusalem (CC 21:7, 22:4). The Man Jesus ministered to his disciples and commanded them to follow his example (CC 22:25); he summoned Zaccheus: 'Make haste and come down, this day I must abide in thy house' (CC 29:3). Jesus is discovered in the images he uses for himself — the Good Samaritan, the seed dying to bear fruit (CC 29: 2, 21:56-57). Jesus is the Saviour walking steadfastly on to Jerusalem (CC 22:17). Above all, Cornelia's image of the Man Jesus is that of the Spouse, the Bridegroom, the King and Master. These images occur so frequently, implicitly as well as explicitly, that they cannot be cited in so brief a study as this. They are obviously rooted in her own life experiences as these were illuminated by the biblical revelation of God as spouse of the soul.

Although Cornelia uses only a few images drawn from the post-Resurrection gospel scenes, one would say that she has a vivid sense of the risen Christ present and constantly with her. As least as often as she refers to Christ through her images drawn from the gospel, she simply refers to him as 'our Lord,' 'our dear Lord,' as one refers to a constant companion, to a spouse. Cornelia knew well the prayer of simple presence, as well as the prayer that is ineffable and beyond images. She knew the uniqueness of God's dealing with each person and that each must advance in her way. And she also knew the power of images to draw the whole person, rooted in his/her life experiences, into the prayer encounter with the living God. Thus she opened her essential Rule of 1853 with a call to that affective contemplative prayer which our God-become-human makes possible; and that call remains relevant in our age which seeks an incarnational, wholistic spirituality.

NOTES

[1] D. Stanley, 'Contemplation of the Gospels, Ignatius of Loyola, and the Contemporary Christian,' *Theological Studies* (Sept. 1968) 423-25.

SOME IMAGES OF GOD: THEN AND NOW

Placida Brewer SHCJ

SEVERAL years ago at a catechetical workshop in Los Angeles, we participants were asked to share our earliest impression of God. We were to do this, not in words, but by drawing a picture that would illustrate how we imaged God 'when we were little'. I remember being somewhat reluctant to do this; however, my sketch of a rather stern figure in flowing robes, shaking a finger at me while saying: 'No, no, no!' was not altogether unlike several other sketches shared in our group.

That negative image of God gradually faded over the years, thanks in great part, I believe, to the daily religious instructions received from third grade upward at St Edward's School. There was Baltimore Catechism every morning, rugged sometimes — but, ah! the afternoon instructions: peaceful, enlightening, encouraging. So gradually there emerged an image of God as 'our Father' — just as Jesus told us He is.

This new image of God prompted a great change in my life. No longer so fearful of doing the wrong thing, no longer afraid of God, I became a happy child, able to 'be good' and 'see good' in others. I could not have named it as such at that time, but God's Goodness was being reflected all around me, particularly in the devoted caring of some very special teachers.

So much for images of God in a former time, although the image of God as 'my Father' whom Jesus said to call 'Abba' (which I have somewhere read, translates as 'Papa') happily remains.

The mirroring of God occurs for me now in a special way here in the New Sharon Infirmary, where reflections of Him abound. In advanced years curtailed activity, gradual diminishments, pain, illness, failing powers are facts of life — visibly so here — creating a counterpart of Christ's Passion and Death. Alongside these factors are the visible traits of cheerfulness, kindness, caring, courtesy, compassion, hope, hospitality — like bits of a mosaic assembled in this particular setting to reflect God's loving concern for us all.

Thus do we who are made in His Image mirror Him for one another in faith — faith in His promises, acknowledging His presence in our lives.

THE GOD OF WONDER

Mary Hubbard SHCJ

IN approaching the subject of 'Images' of God, I asked myself whether or not I believe in God. The next questions were what 'God' I believe in and how I have reached belief in this God.

I was born into a devout Christian family so I met God mediated through my parents, first of all, then through teachers and priests and, as I grew older, through the liturgies of the church. From these different sources I gradually formed the concept of a Being who influenced and guided rather than dominated or repressed my life. This concept has persisted into adult life influencing my spiritual growth and maturity.

I suppose that I was a very fortunate child. The security of a loving family prepared me to meet God with confidence and trust. My mother was incredibly pious. There were statues, crucifixes and holy pictures in every room (which led one of my less devout relations to remark that our house was like a repository!) God was not presented to me as a strict adjudicator exacting reparation for misdeeds. The people who gave the orders and permissions were my parents and teachers and transgressions were met and punished by them. The conviction that God — whoever he was — was not concerned with my peccadilloes made my first confession something of a puzzle. Being an obliging child I prepared a suitable 'laundry list' but was rather hazy as to who it was for. I was six and a half years old.

As I grew up I learned prayers and hymns about God. The hymn 'Full of Glory, full of Wonders' appealed to my childish imagination. I felt that there was something magical and fairy-tale about this wonderful person. God became for me light and glory and wonder and I was very happy with this image. I never saw God as a white-haired old gentleman with a long beard (no one had introduced me to Daniel's vision). God was too mysterious to fit that image.

During my school days constant exposure to stories of the heroism of the English martyrs revealed to me another aspect of God. He was a God to be loved. I reasoned that if so many people had sacrificed so much for Him, had led such dangerous lives for His sake, then He must be

immensely lovable. This realisation was supported by the liturgies of the great feasts, particularly those of Holy Week when the suffering face of a loving God was revealed.

Perhaps the most significant event for me during these years was a performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* by a local amateur group. Newman's majestic prose and the atmosphere of mystery culminating in the 'soul's' great act of love seemed to encapsulate all my dreams of God. I was deeply impressed. It was an experience which I have never forgotten.

The next stage in my understanding of my image of God came during the great breakthrough in biblical studies which happened in the 50's. (My only acquaintance with the Old Testament until then had been *The Bible Beautiful,* an expurgated version and terribly boring). This was the opening of a new era in biblical thinking and while new translations of the text and commentaries poured from the press courses on biblical studies proliferated.

It was here in the pages of the bible, that I found my final and perfect 'image' of God. He was there in the visions of the patriarchs and prophets, continually intervening in human affairs and covenanting with his chosen people. Finally he was there among us in the person of Jesus Christ —

'He is the image of the unseen God' (Col 1 v 15)
The radiance of his Father's splendour and the full expression of his being.' (Heb. 1)

Christ Jesus is the only 'visible' image I have of God. God is still to me a presence, an atmosphere that surrounds me, a Being beyond conceptualisation but close and all-pervading. I search for clues about him in the old and new testaments, in the different translations, to find new meanings. I am rarely disappointed.

From my own experience I have come to believe that God is all that is, that he is life and in him I grow day by day as he possesses me more day by day. Growing old has ceased to be a fearful thing but is an enrichment and a promise. I have started on the return journey home!

'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.
(W. Wordsworth)

GOD THE ARTIST

Gertrude Denkabe SHCJ

AN artist treasures and protects his art-piece because it reflects himself or herself in some way.

In my own history I have envisaged God as an Artist whose work of art progresses each day of my life and draws the whole of creation into harmony. God treasures this work of art and protects it. Therefore, everything that is part of my life — objects, places, events and experiences have their own language of inspiration, reflecting the image of God in their different natures. These images of God are nourished by God's connectedness with nature and other experiences. Looking back through my history with God, I become aware that at each stage of my life I discover a new image.

As a child, my image of God was that of an old, bearded man, living but invisible to me. I thought of Him as a loving Father who knew everything about me. Because of this I was shy, especially when I did something that I knew was not right.

This image of God began to change as I grew up and experienced many joys, challenges and pains. During this time of my life, I found God a Mother as I experienced compassion and consolation, and a Friend when I became aware of His loving presence. Energised by this, I went in search of God and found Him more and more through my becoming a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

God led me through many journeys. With my limited understanding and natural tendency to fear, worry and ask 'Why?', it was not always simple for me to assume that God really did know what to do with me. Despite my doubts, God picked me up and showed me His mercy and His love.

During my formation as a religious, I became aware that there is a Presence in me that is greater and deeper than my own, and it enables me to receive, respond to and reveal God's love. I also realised that God truly lives in me and that I no longer live for myself alone. Because of His presence, I am compelled to share my life with others and also receive from them.

As I live out my religious life, different images of God become more meaningful. One picture is of a Shepherd who moves on with His flock. For a shepherd, there is no greater reward or satisfaction than seeing his sheep well fed, safe, flourishing and contented. This is indeed his very 'life'. God has the same sensation of anxiety, concern, compassion, tenderness, love and patience. My Shepherd comes quietly, gently, reassuringly to me, no matter when, where or why I may be cast down. This becomes the foundation of my faith and confidence as I realise that God bought me with 'hard cash' which is Jesus; He owns me and delights in loving me.

Being aware of my limitations and struggles, I strive each day to become a little more like the Artist who loves me, learning to be creative with my life. In my daily ministry, he works through me as he does through the whole of creation — bringing to birth and giving glory to his name. I pray that through my efforts others, too, will find their image of God.

MY CHANGING IMAGES OF GOD

Claire Sullivan, SHCJ

IT was March 9, 1990. The television screen showed Billy Graham speaking to the people of East Berlin. 'The world is changing all the time,' he said, 'but God has not changed and the promises of God have not changed.'

Perhaps not, I thought. But certainly our human perceptions of God and our understanding of God's promises have changed over the centuries. Because God is invisible to us as he is in himself (herself?), human beings have always needed to speak of him in the language of symbol. The 'cosmic mystery', as Bede Griffiths terms it, is beyond thought, beyond word, infinitely transcendent, not to be uttered. Yet 'it is based on the belief that God reveals himself in creation and in the human soul.' (Bede Griffiths, OSB: *The Cosmic Revolution.* Illinois, Templegate, 1983. p.109) The revelation comes as experience, to be subsequently embodied in symbol or concept.

Images have been used from earliest times to express experience of God as life-giver (sun), nurturer (goddness), purifier (water), protector (warrior/god). As human consciousness evolved, the language of myth gave way to the language of reason. In the first millenium B.C. there seems to have taken place a universal awakening to the transcendent mystery. Under the peaceful reigns of David and Solomon, the Hebrew scribes began recording the Yahwist and Eloist traditions concerning God's revelation of himself to a People. By the sixth century B.C., the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were speaking for a transcendent Yahweh, the Holy One, yet a God with human feelings who asked for a personal fidelity from his people.

In India, writes Bede Griffiths, this religious awakening flowered in the tradition of the Vedas with the Upanishads in the sixth century B.C.

When we enter into the depths of our own soul, or rather the depths of our own spirit, we discover this depth of God, the Lord dwelling within us ... this Brahman, this Atman, is the Lord ... not only a Lord to be worshipped and adored but ... also a Lord who has love for man. (Griffiths, p.110).

At about the same time, as Griffiths points out, this awakening to the transcendent was renewed by the Buddha with the experience of Nirvana and it was discovered in China by Lao-Tsu, whose *Tao* is

> one of the most profound expressions of this cosmic mystery ... In the first millenium B.C., this great movement seems to have come to a head; a breakthrough took place in all these different spheres and practically all the deepest principles of religion in the world today derive from the great revelations which took place during that time.'
> (Griffiths, p.111).

With the Christian revelation, human nature reached a new level of awareness of the divine. St John's gospel speaks of the mutual indwelling of the Father and Son in Jesus' prayer for his followers 'that they also may be one in us.' (John 17:21) St Paul speaks of Christ as 'the image of the invisible Godhead, the first-born of all creation ... for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ...' (Col. 1:15) Until the end of the middle ages, belief in a transcendent God who desired to relate intimately with his creation was universal. This understanding continued even as attention shifted to man and his potential during the renaissance. The flowering of art and literature in that period witnesses to a continuing regard for the creative and the intuitive even as the powers of human reason were being explored.

Descartes in the seventeenth century with his famous 'I think, therefore I exist' encouraged western individuals to equate their identity with their rational mind rather than with their whole being. The result was the development of extreme spirit/matter dualism in philosophical thought.

In scientific thought, the mechanistic Newtonian model of the universe, which saw the material world as a multitude of different objects assembled into a huge machine, dominated all scientific thought. 'This,' writes Fritjof Capra, 'was paralleled by the image of a monarchical God who ruled from above by imposing his divine law on it.' (Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point.* NY: Simon and Shuster, 1987, p.41) Capra and others see this view of reality resulting in man's attempt to dominate both nature and women.

Thus, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the God of the Rationalists and the Deists was a remote, uninvolved deity. Such thinking led many to the conclusion that 'God is dead'.

With the advent of the new physics in the 1930's came a need for new understandings, new images that express the inter-relatedness within the universe. Science today is making contact with mysticism and exploring the intuitive approach to knowledge. Human persons are seen as stewards of our planet, thus bringing theology and ecology into dialogue. People are searching for new images of God that are inclusive of the feminine and reflect the sacramentality of all of creation.

> The universe is no longer seen as a machine, made up of a multitude of separate objects, but appears as a harmonious indivisible whole; a network of dynamic relationships that include the human observer and his or her consciousness in an essential way. (*Ibid,* p.47)

In his book *The Tao of Physics,* Fritjof Capra proposes that the world view of the Eastern mystic, which sees the cosmos as one inseparable reality, spiritual and material at the same time, provides a philosophical background for the theories of contemporary science.

> The Eastern image of the Divine is not that of a ruler who directs the world from above, but of a principle that controls everything from within.
>
> He who dwelling in all things
> Yet is other than all things,
> Whom all things do not know
> Whose body all things are,
> Who controls all things from within —
> He is your Soul, the Inner Controller,
> The immortal.
>
> (*Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad,* 3.7.15, quoted in Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics.* NY: Image Books, 1982, p.11)

How does this overview of the changing images of God in the world over the past three thousand years relate to your own personal experience of the Holy One? I am not sure, but I suspect that what we experience of the physical universe and what we experience in prayer have profound influence on our images of God.

As I consider these changing perspectives of God and the universe over the centuries, I realize that my own images of God have reflected my ever changing experiences. One of my early memories is of a summer evening when my parents allowed my brother and me to attend a town carnival a few blocks away. I recall standing somewhat precariously on a narrow ledge, looking through a store window, my back to the street. It was getting dusk, my money had long been spent, and I felt bored and tired. Suddenly I felt my father's arms encircling me from behind, lifting me to the ground and taking my hand in his. My heart sang! His coming brought security and love and possibly the money for a few more rides!

It is not surprising that my earliest and most lasting image of God was my father who modelled for me a divinity to be loved, to be counted upon, to be trusted and to be delighted in. There was nothing patriarchal about my father. He had the sensitivity, strength and nurturing gentleness of a woman. He resembled the Father Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.' (Mt 6:8)

Looking back, I think I have always been uncomfortable with pictorial representations of God. As a child I was not attracted to holy pictures and statues of Jesus. I preferred kneeling before the tabernacle, believing Our Lord was there looking at me and accepting my confidences with love.

It was not until I was eighteen and a novice at New Sharon that I was introduced to the doctrine of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This new understanding appealed to me very much, although I tended to objectify that presence as I did my image of God as Father/Mother and as Jesus/Lover. I had much to learn.

I remember a conversation with a psychology professor and some classmates of mine at college in Los Angeles when I was in my mid-twenties. We were talking about suffering and I announced that I intended to by-pass suffering as a path to spiritual growth. I preferred to go to God through joy!

A very few years later I found myself in a state of spiritual darkness. I remember kneeling before the altar in the chapel at Mayfield Pasadena and feeling totally cut off from God. Overwhelmed by a vague sense of sinfulness, I wondered if I had unwittingly committed a serious sin. At that same period, I was struggling painfully with trust. I recall walking up and down outside the convent, thinking that even though God had all the power and willingness to save me, he had given me the freedom to turn from him forever. I recall thinking that though I might trust God, I could not trust myself.

I'm not sure how long this first period of darkness lasted — probably not quite a year. Then, as was to happen more than once in my life, God sent someone to guide me into a new phase of my spiritual journey. I was thirty at the time, living at Mayfield and working on a Master's thesis on the influence of Cornelia Connelly on modern American education. In August, 1958 James Walsh, SJ, came to spend several months in California contacting relatives of Cornelia in the West and Southwest and getting to know the Society in America. I got permission to speak with him, hoping he would have some material on Cornelia which would help me with my research. I don't remember the details of that first conversation, except that I asked him if it were true, as Mother Maria Joseph Buckle had recorded, that Cornelia was never without a kind of consciousness of God's presence. Tears filled my eyes as I asked this, a sign of my own emptiness and longing. James replied that he thought yes, she did seem to have had that grace. We talked for a long time after that and I suppose I laid before him my fears and my neediness. I left him with new hope and new heart, and carrying a sheaf of documents containing Cornelia's educational ideas. I xeroxed hundreds of pages of her letters and other writings in the weeks to come and Cornelia's images of God came to influence my own. In reading some prayers she

had had printed for the novices in 1869, I came across these words: 'May my devotion be less a habit than a continual *élan* of the heart.'

I wrote to Father Walsh, then in Portland, of how this image appealed to me. He replied: 'That *élan* phrase ... is certainly a light. [The élan] is the 'going out of myself' to meet him constantly as he 'comes out of himself' — descends from — condescends — in the Epiphany of the Godhead in the Manhood. The *élan* is the movement (we are drawn and pushed at the same time) from his manhood — as we see and know it externally — His coming to meet us — *through* to the Godhead in which we live and move and have our being.'

I was being led to a new understanding of the inner, dynamic life of the Trinity and my own insertion into that movement through the humanity of Christ. From Father Walsh's doctoral dissertation I copied the following excerpts:

> For love is the first movement of the man who is restored in Christ; a human love which dilates the heart even as it purifies the mind, which never ceases to be human even when it is divinized ...

I looked back on the darkness of the preceding months as an aspect of the longing for God that is, perhaps, after himself, his most precious gift. Walsh wrote about

> that longing for God which reaches across the eternity of the ages. If the full possession of the Infinite Transcendent Being is necessarily an illusion, this everlasting desire is itself a possession — the only one which truly corresponds both to the Divine Nature and the nature of the soul.

This image of God as a kind of lodestone, drawing me by the desire he had implanted in my being, was enriched by the writings of Julian of Norwich to which Father Walsh introduced me at that time. I copied these words into my notebook:

> I am he who makes you to love;
> I am he who makes you to long;
> I am he, the endless fulfilling of all true desires.
> (Julian of Norwich: *Showings,* Edmund College, OSB and James Walsh, SJ, Editors. New York: Paulist 1978. p.296)

Julian's insights into the motherhood of Jesus added a new dimension to my image of Christ.

> The mother can give her child to suck of her milk. But our precious Mother Jesus, He can feed us with Himself; and doth, full courteously and tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament ... (*Ibid,* p.298)

Her reflections on the Trinity 'out of whom we have all come, in whom we are all enclosed, into whom we shall all go', and on God's unwavering love and mercy towards us even in our sinfulness were grounds for a growing trust. (*Ibid.,* pp.283, 267-278.) Not since that time have I been tempted by the thought of losing God by my sinfulness.

> I protect you very safely. This word was said with more love and assurance of protection for my soul than I can or may tell. For just as it was first revealed to me that I should sin, so was consolation revealed — assurance of protection for all my fellow Christians ... For in every soul that will be saved there is a godly will which never assents to sin and never will. (*Ibid.,* pp.241-242).

So deeply was this conviction implanted in me that I think I sometimes took advantage of the Lord's goodness as I moved through my thirties. I found in myself a moral freedom that led me to experiment in ways that I would have found previously unthinkable. I had a chance to apply Cornelia's educational ideas in a new foundation in Potomac, Maryland. Vatican II was causing explosive changes in my understanding of the Church and of religious life. I formed some dear and close relationships. James Walsh continued to guide me with his letters, encouraging me to love others even as I prayed and worked for balance.

> Only one effort is any good — the effort of love. The reformation is his work — our work is love and only love. Remember, too, that being free for the Lord's love is a matter of balance ... *Obviously*, it is better (normally speaking) to love too much rather than too little. Detachment is to correct this situation according to the centre of balance — our Lord. One *must* love, in order to help people, so one must run the risk of loving too much. (Private letter)

During the 1960's I found myself loving sometimes too much and sometimes too little. I found myself administering a secondary school, dealing with rebellious teenagers and occasionally rebellious faculty, driving 160 miles to Rosemont most weekends for committee meetings in preparation for renewal chapters. I developed rheumatoid arthritis. I also read Teilhard de Chardin's *The Divine Milieu* and adopted his image of the two hands of God: 'Oh God, that at all times You may find me as You desire me and where You would have me be, that You may hold me fully, both by the Within and the Without of myself ...' (Teilhard de Chardin: *The Divine Milieu.* N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1960. p.51)

God did. In 1968 I returned to Mayfield as prefect. The arthritis was severe, but with the help of medications I worked through that year. In the summer of 1969 I finished my studies and took comprehensives for a master's degree in English at the University of Notre Dame. My legs were badly swollen and my hands so stiff I could barely endure the twelve hours

of writing required by the examinations. Then in August I went to Rosemont to make the Spiritual Exercises for thirty days under the direction of James Walsh. In spite of pain and exhaustion, it was a graced time.

When I returned to Mayfield in early September, I was very ill. For three months I ran a fever and suffered from manifestations of the rheumatoid arthritis. I was relieved of my office as prefect and encouraged to rest and recover.

This was the beginning of a long period of constant physical pain and increasing psychological depression. I used to wonder if this was the divine response to the 'Sume et suscipe' that I had made during the long retreat. It was in every sense a dark night of sense and spirit. Sent east to work with the Institute of SHCJ Studies in the spring of 1970, I remember feeling greatly diminished as a person, unaccepted and unacceptable in community. Prayer was a kind of dark contemplation. A few close friends were my sources of strength as I endured major surgery and five successive hospitalizations for the arthritis within a twelve-month period. This was followed by six months of daily physical therapy and eighteen months of psychotherapy while living at Potomac. By February of 1972 I was considered well enough to work part-time in the school and to begin theology studies. I knew I did not want to remain in high school work, but I did not know what else I was fitted for. It was a miserable period in my life which culminated in my falling on the ice and breaking my hip in February, 1973.

I later found the sufferings of those years described by Simone Weil in her essay entitled 'The Love of God and Affliction.' (Simone Weil: *Waiting for God.* N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1951. pp.117-136)

> Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain ... There is not real affliction unless the event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another. (*Ibid,* p.119)
>
> Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time ... The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be with only an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world to it ... (*Ibid,* p.120-121)

One morning, later that year, I was sitting by the swimming pool behind the house at Congressional Court, thinking, praying. Quite suddenly I felt as though I had fallen through an inner trap door. I found myself resting at a new interior depth. Though I had not been there before, there was a feeling of 'at-homeness'. This breakthrough changed everything for me. As

the weeks passed, I came to think of this new level of myself as my 'Claire/self' — someone worthwhile, loved, and even beautiful. I recall driving on the beltway one snowy morning a few months later and thinking, 'We are all — all of us — incarnations of God!' The joy of this realization filled me. I later told a friend that my soul felt like a sparkling winter wonderland.

The next few years saw the development of the Anchorhold Center in Rockville, Maryland, where lay men and women worked with me to teach contemplative prayer and practice in a parish setting. Still pursuing a Master's in theology. I spent the summer of 1976 at the University of San Francisco with a special objective in mind. For some time I had been uncomfortable with traditional statements about the Trinity. 'In God there are three divine Persons.' I could not identify three 'Persons' in my experience of God. I wanted to find new language to replace that of Chalcedon, a contemporary model for expressing the experience of Trinity in Unity. Secondly, and intimately related, was my need to explain 'how' the human Christ is present in my deepest expressions of God in prayer.

I came then to San Francisco on this search and established myself in as much quiet and solitude as was feasible. I enrolled in Kenan Osbourne's course in Christology. I read the Christological works of Piet Schoonenberg, Oscar Cullman, Wolfhart Pannenberg and others. Particularly significant was Raimundo Pannikar's *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of God,* which pointed to an understanding of Trinity congenial to my own experience. Finally, in reading an unpublished paper of Yves Raguin, SJ, entitled 'The Seven Steps into Awareness of the Mystery', I found my last difficulties resolved regarding the 'how' of Christ's presence in deep prayer.

It seemed to me that God has poured himself out, communicated himself to us in his Son, through whom alone we have access to the Otherness of God. The Word, the self-expression of God in all of creation and especially in all human beings who are in process of forming with the risen Lord the Whole Christ, may be termed the *Exteriority* of God. The Word is at the same time the *Consciousness* of God in this world. Jesus Christ is all of God there is to know. Deep within the interiority of Jesus Christ lie the unsearchable mysteries of Transcendence and Immanence. The self-awareness of Jesus moves out endlessly into the Source and Goal of all beings to whom Jesus gave the name Abba, but who is known only to the Son and 'those to whom the Son shall reveal him.' This Absolute and Unknowable is the *Interiority* of God, 'dwelling in inaccessible light.'

The Spirit of God is the *Activity* of God, forming us to his own likeness and attracting us relentlessly to himself. I thought of Spirit as the current of love which moves back and forth between the *Interiority* and *Exteriority* of God — between God as Absolute Other, Source, Goal and God as Word, Son, Humanity, Us.

There is but one Person, both divine and human, inviting us through his humanity into his divinity by the power of his Spirit. Mystically this takes

place at the deeper levels of human consciousness when the divine Spirit has prepared the human spirit for intimate union with God within the inner awareness of Christ. Julian of Norwich had said it well: 'In him we are enclosed and he in us.' (Julian of Norwich: *Showings*. p.285)

Such were my images of God in 1976. They satisfied me at the time, but the Lord had to teach me how incomplete they were.

As in the past, the door was opened by illness and suffering. On Memorial Day weekend, 1980, I woke up early Saturday morning with a very severe flare-up of the rheumatoid arthritis. The pain was close to unbearable in all parts of my body and a friend had to help me change my position every fifteen minutes or so. It was agony to move, but worse agony to remain too long in one position. In the late afternoon, sitting propped up in a chair, I looked over at my friend. It had been a strenuous day for her, yet she was looking at me with a love in her eyes that startled me. The look seemed more than the ordinary look of friendship. I felt Christ's own love was pouring out of her eyes into me. Moments passed, and then I suppose pain required me to shift my attention. Nothing was said.

Two nights later I had a frightening nightmare in which I was escaping from the pull of earth's gravity and ascending into the sky, helpless to direct my floating. I was terrified. Would the winds carry me out over the ocean, where the damp cold would aggravate my arthritis pain? Would the birds come and peck out my eyes? What really terrified me was the conviction that God would not intervene to save me. I was alone. Whatever the future held for me of suffering and death, God would not interfere with the secondary causes already set in motion.

That 'theological' conviction remained with me throughout June. I arrived at USF at the end of the month to make an eight day retreat under the direction of Father Yves Raguin, SJ. At our first meeting I told him I was suffering physically (the flare-up had settled in my hands) and was afraid to be alone with God. 'You will not be alone,' he promised. 'I will be with you.' And he suggested some passages from the *Song of Songs* for my meditation.

Back at the convent where I was staying, later that day, the priest in his homily commented on the words of the responsorial psalm, 'Tend the vine thou hast planted.' He suggested substituting the old English verb 'husband' — 'husband the vine you have planted.' As the liturgy continued, I felt something turning around inside me; the fear was beginning to slip away.

During the following days I was blessed with new insights. A vague concept of a cosmic Christ was replaced by the felt presence of the living Christ. 'Christ lives!' Father Raguin said to me the second day when I explained to him my 'theology' of a non-intervening God. Christ loves, I came to realize in a new way. I had recently seen his love coming from a friend's eyes. I was seeing it now in Father Raguin's eyes and words.

As I pondered this joyful mystery, it seemed to me that when the Father asked Jesus to relinquish his ministry so early in life, he promised that he

could continue to spread the Good News on earth after his resurrection. In exchange for his earthly body, Jesus received our bodies, our eyes and arms and lips, through which to express his love for all time to come.

This understanding was reinforced during the weeks that I spent in Southern California that summer. I experienced Christ's own tenderness in the love I received from family and friends. Love is healing, and when I returned to Potomac in August, my health was restored. The grace of the summer remained alive and gave new meaning to my ministry and my relationships from that time on.

This article began with my image of God as Father, and although this image had been shaken by various events and understandings, it had not disappeared. My own father continued to exemplify for me God's fidelity and unconditional love. When he died of lung cancer in August 1986, I received the grace to let him go with a peaceful heart, knowing that he was ready and grateful that he did not suffer greatly.

A few hours after the funeral, I fell and shattered my left femur. Two long years and five surgeries were needed before my leg was fully healed. During that difficult period, the Lord remained close with his basic peace. But somewhere in my heart was a hurt. How could a fatherly God have let this happen so close on the death of my dad? My earthly father would certainly not have done so. Did God, then, not love us as a father? What does it really mean to trust in God? Thoughts became a trap. I wrote in my journal: 'I wonder ... I know less and less ... I cling — quietly — with as little thought as possible.'

That 'clinging' got me through the surgeries, the long hospitalizations, the ten months in a brace. During my summer retreat at Shillington, Pennsylvania, I stayed with a Zen-like meditation until the realization dawned that God is not someone outside of me directing events. God and I cannot be separated. I felt myself once more part of the cosmic flow, inseparable from all that is. Some of the fear relaxed with this realization, but part of me remained apprehensive of what future physical disasters were in store.

On my return to Anaheim in August, I learned that Father Raguin planned to visit me on his way home to Taiwan from Montreal. The visit was quite unexpected, quite undeserved, in my opinion, since our correspondence had dwindled to nearly a stop in the four years since I'd seen him. I hoped he might be able to straighten out my thinking about God and suffering and the meaning of trust.

His visit was sheer sacrament — a coming of Christ to me in a way that revived, restored, reconnected me with my deep Self and the divine Life-stream from which and into which it flows. The heart-numbness disappeared: new energy surged.

I think I was finally able to relinquish my image of God as a protective parent. I now see suffering as inevitable in this life, a natural result of human freedom and the laws of nature. 'Blame the weather or your genes,' said Father Raguin, 'but don't blame God.' God does not intervene to

protect us from the effect of our humanness. But Christ suffers in us when we suffer and draws us to spiritual growth, enabling us to unite our suffering with his and to keep on loving. Furthermore, he comes to comfort us in his friends and ours and comes in us to do the same for others. So it seems I have found the 'father' in the Son. I look forward to the rest of the journey, in Christ, back to the Source, where 'the bliss of our motherhood in Christ will begin anew in the joys of God our Father.' (Julian of Norwich: *Showings,* p.305)

GOD AND THE SEASONS OF MY LIFE

Grace Ellis SHCJ

AS I reflect on the topic, an Akan saying comes to my mind: 'Obi nkyere aborfra Nyame.' Translated literally it means, 'Nobody teaches or shows a child what God looks like.' Somehow, this presupposes that the individual through experiences and other factors like the family, community and the environment will gradually come to know God. This knowing God as related to experience is what God is for that particular individual as whatever images one may have become crucial to the very way one lives, acts and relates to others and the world.

As I delve more into my own life I am aware that, in my own life experience, depending on the seasons of my life, events, the people I live with and even world events, certain images of God loom more sharply than others. Of course there are certain images that are in the subconscious and like a mirror continuously reflect in my thinking, relationships and prayer. At the same time, I do realise that God is always beyond my capacity to define and there is no way I can grasp or capture this God of mine in a single image. For the reality and the truth of God is far greater than my personal history, experience and whatever goes to make me me.

Very early in life I was aware of a loving God who loves me and created me. As a child, and even now, I feel very strongly this image of a loving God and experience his personal love for me. I can still remember the first morning prayer my mother taught me as a child, 'I thank you God for everything: the flowers that bloom, the birds that sing, for all your gifts bestowed on me: home and family and friends. Bless my dear ones everywhere and keep them in your loving care.' This linking of God with beauty and nature gives me the image of a God who is creator but a creator who creates for us to enjoy what he has created. Somehow if he creates then he cares. I recollect the image of a caring God that came when I was a novice when making the Spiritual Exercises. In one of the meditations on sin, one is to imagine the Trinity looking down on our world and deciding to send the Son. To me this is not a God who manipulates but one who first loves and is free in his love and therefore gives me that same freedom to love his world.

At times when I am aware of my own limitations and sinfulness, I become aware of the God who forgives and heals. The gentle touch of God that assures me, accepts me and encourages me to trust. As I grow in this healing and forgiving power of God, I become more aware of the holiness of God. Many a time I am like Moses and I feel I have touched the holy ground of God and therefore I need to remove my sandals. But the most fascinating thing is that He allows me to step on his holy ground and this calls forth in me reverence, adoration and at times a sort of fear but the kind of fear that leads to awe and more reverence.

The image of a challenging God is very much a part of my experience. God challenges me to growth through people, events and prayer. This challenge comes most often when I try to make God do what I want or even love me the way I think I should be loved by him. Through prayer, reflection and daily events this image of the God that I think will pamper me changes to a God who loves so much that He challenges me to see him for what he is and no other.

True friendship, different people I live with or encounter through my ordinary day to day activities and experiences like a shared word, tears and joy capture certain images of God. They sharpen the image of the glory of God that is full of life and vitality and is able to share itself with others. The anguish and sufferings of others due to injustices, poverty, illness and hunger mirror for me a God who suffers but is able as the psalmist says to 'hear the cry of the poor' and to be the 'protector of the widow and the orphan.'

Wherever people are gathered in communion there is for me a sense of a God who is communion. There is the image of the wholeness of God. This sense of wholeness makes me aware that God cannot be compartmentalized. God is an embodiment of faithfulness, patience, compassion, truth. These images are always in the background but depending on my mood, one of them may dominate more than the others.

Lastly, I draw from my own cultural background certain images of God that are feminine in character. For the Akan there is no distinction between a male God and a female God. God is simply one. Thus in this totality, many attributes are given and used. He can be father, she can be mother. It is this mother God who cares for her children with a mother's love, who protects those who are weak and shows compassion to those in need. The list can go on and on but the feminine in God and what this implies has a lot of influence on my way of seeing and relating to God as a woman.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am very much aware that my image of God is onesided. At the same time as I grow in faith and other factors affect me certain false images change, other images that are not so clear become sharpened and the Mystery of God as God continues to challenge me and enables me to live in his freedom as his child who is greatly loved.

GOD AT THE CENTRE OF MY BEING

Louise Frey SHCJ

ALTHOUGH it is a biblical expression, I do not find the image of the 'Face of God' helpful. Every time I'm asked to reflect on it, I sense panic, suppress a quick mind-flash of the bearded old gentleman and then try to get in touch with my experience. Isn't that what we're talking about: our experience of God?

It has taken me quite some time to get to this conclusion. At an extended general council meeting in Wernersville (U.S.A.) in 1983, George Schemel SJ asked us to reflect on what the Face of God meant for us and, worse, to SHARE our findings! I remember so well feeling like 'woodshaving turning around its own emptiness' and my memory, thank God, doesn't relate what I shared...

Our experience of God ... Perhaps I have to thank two people more than any others for giving me the knowledge that God works in my history now and has done so since the beginning. They have set me on the path of tracing God's actions in my life, making sense of what has happened and allowing me to return to that still point where God made himself known first.

With many of our sisters in the European province I shared the privilege of being taught scripture by Sr M. Callista. I was extremely ignorant of sacred scripture, and my English, although fairly good, was by no means perfect during my novitiate and student days. But even if I did not catch the meanings of all the details, I nevertheless gathered very clearly that what mattered most of all was the fact that God was in the midst of his people, that he affected their history. I can still see Sister's lovely blue eyes sparkle with enthusiasm as she explained what revelation really meant.

Later, as a postgraduate student at Cavendish Square, I came across Sebastian Moore's *'God is a new Language'* where he made the point that it was absolutely no good teaching our pupils any scripture at all unless they could put themselves in the place of the people of God whose history mattered to God. Sister Mary Callista's teaching was thus re-enforced and developed: not only was God active in the history of the

Israelites but he is also active in our, in my history because we continue to be his people. Even now I recall that moment of recognising that my consciousness was 'taking a leap'. What exciting times those sixties were!

The seventies, on the other hand, were not so 'hot'. I was trying to pass on some of the insights just gathered to some very recalcitrant secondary school students. Those were the days of transition, when teachers were at pains not to 'stuff religion down children's throats' and even thirteen-year-olds suddenly became experts at discussing weighty matters of life and death, instead of sitting there listening spellbound to 'Sister'. I am full of admiration for the gifted teacher who can enable her students to find their own path in their search for God. Looking back at my efforts during the seventies, I say this from the bottom of my heart!

One of the questions I have asked myself since those Wernersville days is whether our perception of the 'Face of God' changes. It is only recently that I have come to realise that when I am centred and in touch with my own feelings (having reflected on my experience and on my relationships with others) when at that moment I 'meet God', there is no change. It is the same now as it was when as a three year old I became aware for the first time of what for want of a better expression I call the presence of God.

It is true that there have been times, during alienated teenage years or after those meditation preparations in the novitiate (of which I barely understood the words, let alone the meanings) when my perception shifted, when I thought that my experience was not valid. But those were also growth points, leading to greater understanding of others, even though or perhaps because the experiences were so painful.

It is from that stance of the 'God within' that I'd like to quote Rilke's poem (with apologies to my friends who have been treated to this before!):

Tell us, poet, what it is you
do.
I praise.

But the deadly and
monstrous things,
how can you bear them,
how can you accept
them?
I praise.

But even what is
nameless, what is
anonymous,
how can you call upon it?
I praise.

What right have you to be
true in every disguise,
beneath every mask?
I praise.

And how is it that both
calm and violent
things,
like star and storm, know
you for their own?
Because I praise

'PAPA DIOS' and KENNY (DAD GOD)

Carmen S Torres SHCJ

When asked to write a reflection of my experience of images of God I thought right away of people. For some time I wondered about this and discovered that in my day-to-day experience I could not separate the two, God and people. I have realized that it is through people that I have had some of my deepest experiences of facing, touching, talking to, listening to God, as well as having been faced, talked to, listened to, and touched by God. This may be where the mystery of the Incarnation becomes real for me.

As a child in Philadelphia, living in what seemed at the time two different worlds, a Puerto Rican home and American society, I had two prominent images of God. At school and in the English-speaking world, God was referred to as 'Our Father'. This name for God spoke to me of distance, respect, and a certain reverence required in order to approach Him. At home God was spoken of as 'Papa Dios (Dad God)'. 'Papa Dios' was a part of our family, always present in our home. 'Papa Dios' was present in the reality of our daily lives. This God, for me as a child, seemed closer and more intimate. Yet I cannot speak of 'Papa Dios' without speaking also of 'la gente' (the people). Our family is large, we are nine, and there were seldom times when we were just nine. There was usually a person if not a whole family staying with us for a while. The values that I learned as a child about the importance of helping people feel welcome and at home in our home helped expand my idea of God. 'Papa Dios' did not only dwell in our house, but in each one of his/her people.

This image of 'Papa Dios' has expanded even further since my entrance into the Society. In order to articulate this expansion more clearly, let me share a story.

During this past year I had the privilege of working at the Dominican Sisters' Family Health Center one morning a week. I helped in the playroom which is part of the Family Life Program. Most of the children in the playroom are under four. On the first morning in the playroom I was sitting on the floor building blocks with a little boy named Matthew.

After a while I felt a small hand ruffle my hair. I turned around quickly only to see the little person running to the other side of the room grinning at me. I smiled and went back to building blocks. A few minutes later I felt a little hand again ruffle my hair and again I turned around only to find him at the other side of the room. The third time I was ready. As soon as I felt the little hand I did not turn around but swung my hand around and grabbed hold of him. I sat him in my lap (he was all giggles) and asked him why he kept 'messing up my hair'. His response to me was 'because I like you.'

Again and again I have thought about this brief interaction with Kenny, who is four years old, and I smile to myself as I think of God's love for us. Kenny provided me with another image of God that is very similar to the image I had as a child. I go from a God who is always present to me to a God whose love goes beyond just presence. This God does not only want to be present to my reality but wants to touch my reality. Why? Because, like Kenny, God likes me and loves me.

So I go back to the beginning, the reality of who God is for me and how I image the God I find in myself and in others. It is through what is deepest in ourselves and in othes that 'Papa/Mama Dios' chooses to reveal him/herself most.

YAHWEH, I KNOW YOU ARE NEAR

Geraldine MacCarthy SHCJ

MY God is the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love, so I am constant in my affection for you' (Jer.31). He is Jesus, the Christ, my friend and companion on the road of life:

Walk with me, O my Lord,
Through the darkest night and brightest day;
Be at my side, O Lord,
Hold my hand and guide me on the way
(Estelle White).

She is the Spirit of all that is creative, beautiful, positive in our world: 'Breathe on me, Breath of God, till I am wholly thine ...'

I am increasingly aware that my images of God are concrete, even anthropomorphic. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that I find God through concrete, tangible experiences — very often associated with persons. My experience of human love leaves me in no doubt at all that God *is* Love. A profound experience of comfort and peace in a particularly difficult and painful situation revealed God the Comforter, the Consoler to me in a way that the abstract concepts, nouns and adjectives of scriptures and theology never do.

Persons are mediators of God for me. The qualities in others that I associate with being 'in the image and likeness of God' raise my mind and heart to God. So do all forms of beauty and colour, in persons and nature. I had my most felt certainty of the existence of God on the common near Grayshott, Surrey, one beautiful summer's morning in 1969 during our pre-Final Vows 30 days' retreat. I have been very lucky indeed to have had in my life so far many and varied experiences of people and places which have made my God a living God, very near to me.

I know that my basic approach to God is shaped by my own personality and by my Irish Catholic culture and education. I am aware also of the enrichment of my images, the nuances of light and shade, from contacts

with the spirituality of other cultures and religions. I am realising more and more how our images of God shape our spirituality, our relationships with God and with others, our approach to daily life and the world, our morals and ethics.

I know that my images of God are only a tiny part of the reality of God. I realise the danger of identification of religion with God: I see with sadness and horror what we have done to God, and continue to do, in God's name. The grim, judgmental face of God in some Christian traditions; the oppressive, self-righteous, unforgiving face in fundamentalism in all religions. I am told by friends with a different spirituality that such expressions of religion are sociological and cultural and have very little, or nothing, to do with God. Rationally, I accept this and yet ... how we are as persons, how we act, the choices we make, must say something about our vision of God. And my God is the Incarnate God who 'has chosen to need men and women in every age to extend the reality of the Incarnation' (SHCJ Constitutions).

Our self-image should be very positive: 'Does a woman forget her baby at the breast or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you. See, I have carved you on the palms of my hands' says Yahweh, our God (Is.49). I am reminded of a conversation I had recently in the WUCWO Secretariat in Paris with a young development worker from Burkina Faso. We were sharing on the meaning of development, his understanding of woman's development in the African context. He said he thought that the African, man and woman, starts with a poor self-image for historical reasons summed up in their saying 'Dieu est grand mais le blanc n'est pas petit'. This has stayed with me in a way very relevant to my images of God. God is great but no human person can truly be small. How could we be when we are so loved?

How do we mirror this God who is love? How do I? How can I, poor, limited and yet so rich and gifted, know and reveal God without damaging distortion? I pray for an increased understanding of the heart, a gift of the Spirit of God.

THE GOD WHO ISN'T

Terri MacKenzie SHCJ

[I WROTE this article shortly after receiving the General Council's April, 1989, issue of *FOCUS*. Learning from that report that other SHCJs' 'sense of God is changing' and that their experience, too, was 'hard and confusing', motivated me to write. This fall (1990) I will begin studies focused on images of God.]

Every now and then it really hits me: the quantity — and quality — of changes I've made in what I believed from childhood. Mortal and venial sins, seven days of creation, apples in paradise, salvation for Catholic only ... But I never expected anything concerning GOD to turn up on that list!

Like everyone else, I had no final answers on the best images to use for GOD. I thought I knew that all images and all words concerning GOD are inadequate. I didn't know how 'hard and confusing' it would be to really experience that knowledge.

I will attempt to write about my experience in the hope that it might help someone who, like me, has had, or will have, her 'sense of God changed ... radically' (to use the words a general councillor wrote to me). To help clarify my own radical change, I will begin by considering some of my early beliefs about GOD.

When Bishop John Robinson popularized and crystallized humankind's centuries'-old debate about GOD (*Honest to God and the Debate,* 1963, SCM Press DLT, London), he described a 'traditional' image of GOD this way:

> ... a God 'out there', a God who 'exists' above and beyond the world he made, a God 'to' whom we pray and to whom we 'go' when we die ... [who] entered into contact with those whom he has made ... establishing a covenant with them ... 'sends' to them his Son who must one day 'come again' to gather the faithful to himself.

That pretty accurately describes the GOD of my youth. Even while I was praying to and teaching about a GOD present everywhere, I often

used images that were not only inadequate, but which actually tended to filter out the undivided presence of GOD.

'Limits on language are really limits on thought, and on the capacity to act,' warns Sara Maitland ('Ways of Relating,' *The Way,* 4/86). 'The language we use describes and recreates the social relationships we experience.'

Let me apply Sara's insight to a non-theological example: the words 'sunrise' and 'sunset'. Who among us doesn't know that the sun neither rises nor sets? But when we use the words thoughtlessly, we unconsciously or subconsciously reinforce a worldview that keeps our earth at the center of creation. The words and images bind our horizons and limit our growth in understanding truths not accessible to past generations. In limiting our worldview, they limit our relationships also.

So, too, do some words and images we use in referring to GOD. Although this is obvious as it relates to masculine images and language about GOD, it has other applications. Take, for example, the words 'in heaven'. How often are those words accompanied by a look or gesture to the sky? They reinforce a belief that GOD is separate from us in space and/or in time. But, where is GOD not? And if GOD is present there, where is heaven not?

For me, the word 'GOD' was as misleading as the words 'sunrise' and 'sunset' because I unconsciously let it define and limit what I knew could never be adequately defined or limited.

Ann E. Carr, BVM, quoted in the 5/89 *U.S. Catholic,* says: 'I may be so comfortable with my image ... that I take God for granted. I start to imagine that I know who God is. I start to worship the God I've created in my own narrow imagination instead of GOD ...' In this sense, all images of God are sure to be 'the God who isn't.'

Many things contributed to the eventual shattering of my idol. Among them, surely, was focusing on Justice with Compassion since in doing so we focused not merely on the right ordering of people and the planet/universe, but on an image of GOD. Karl Rahner said: 'The truth of the mystery of God and the liberation of human beings [and, I would add, all creation] grow in direct proportion.' As my journey into this truth grew, my old wineskins (images) could no longer contain them. My images exploded.

Leaving behind old images of GOD was not easy for me. I did not know when undergoing the death what the resurrection would be — or, indeed, *if* it would be. Perhaps things I had read or heard prepared me to *have* the experience, but none prepared me to deal with it. Directors I consulted were supportive, but each seemed slightly suspicious.

In the circumstances I had problems trusting my feelings, and often recalled the pity and/or accusations frequently given to those who 'lost their faith'. Was that what was happening to me? Yet despite the darkness I felt peaceful, the recipient of something which was right and true for me. Rejecting it seemed neither possible nor desirable.

In *No Other Name* (1985, Orbis Books), Paul Knitter says: 'To view truth as a growth in understanding and to open oneself to that growth is to engage in a process that can be both peaceful and exciting.' I really relate to that! I hope that others have plenty of the peace and excitement, and much less of the pain that I experienced.

Two things might have made it easier for me: if I had been more in touch with the fact that shedding images is only that, and if I had not felt so alone during the experience. I wish I had understood what Aquinas said about our act of faith's terminating not in the propositions of faith, but in the very *reality* of GOD, whatever, whoever that may be. I had put a few 'definitions' into wineskins which I unconsciously expected to remain unchanged. What relief I experienced when I finally realized that I didn't have to *replace* inadequate images with better ones, but simply to accept 'the god who isn't'!

Shedding images would also have been easier for me if I had known others who shared the experience. I needed support and help. I believe this need will increase with us and others. Walter Brueggemann tells us that 'The beginning of justice requires a new discernment of who God is.' REQUIRES! This, then, may be the greatest 'want of our time'!

Mary Jean Irion, poet and essayist, writes in 'Crisis in Contemporary Theology: the Doctrine of God':

> ... what is important is that there is a growing willingness to face the issue of changing concepts of God, truth, absolutes — the very basics of the Christian faith. This willingness ... is the all-important first step in solution, re-creation, and in a very real sense, salvation for the world ...

I'm eager to continue this 'peaceful and exciting' journey into 'the God who isn't'. Surely there is no more rewarding enterprise than exploration into GOD; none more impossible; none more necessary.

O OBANI

Eileen Sweeney SHCJ

O Obani
do you care
whether we call you
God or chuckwu
Allah or Olodumare?

Will you refuse to hear
a woman's cry
because her tongue says
O Obong Abasi
and not Cheneke or Yahwe?

Do you really care
For sounds or shapes of names?

I think you always hear
Your children's cry.
You are the nameless Holy One
It is not sounds of tongues
That move your being
But our great need
For pity, love, forgiveness, strength,
For courage, true humanity.
These are the wordless cries you answer
Our depths calling to yours.

I do not think you care
for names
However beautiful
O _____

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