

I want to feel God. Genuine and Invalid Experiences (Archimandrite Varnavas Lambropoulos)

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An unhealthy desire for experiences.

The Pharisees and Sadducees sought a sign from heaven from the Lord. They asked for a miracle that would have the features of the miracles of the Antichrist, that is one that would satisfy people with a corporeal outlook and feed their vainglory and egotism.

When the Lord heard this request, His answer was: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah' (*Matth. 16, 4*).

By 'the sign of Jonah' the Lord meant the signs that would accompany His death and resurrection:

This was when 'a sign from heaven' was given by God.

This was when the sun saw Christ crucified and was darkened, though it was midday, and darkness lasting three hours covered the land. The curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem was rent in two, from top to bottom. An earthquake occurred and rocks were split. Tombs were opened and many of the saints were resurrected and appeared to many in the city (*Matth. 27, 45-53*).

And when the Lord rose, there was another earthquake. An angel clad in white descended from heaven to the holy Tomb, as a witness to His resurrection and terrified the guards, who'd been set to keep watch over the tomb by the very people who'd demanded a sign from heaven. These guards themselves announced the Lord's resurrection to the Jewish Sanhedrin. But when its members heard about this sign from heaven, they treated it with the same disdain and the same hostility they'd shown to all of the Lord's previous miracles. This is why they bribed the guards and attempted to shroud the miracles in murky untruths.

(Saint Ignatij Brianchaninov 'Miracles and Signs').



DIVINE EXPERIENCES -GENUINE AND INVALID

1. When people seek God, they don't want simply to satisfy their curiosity. They don't just want to find the answer to some metaphysical concern. They aren't looking for an interesting philosophy or an exciting theory. They want to find God. And- if possible- to see Him with their own eyes, to hear Him, with the eyes and ears of their own body, to catch hold of Him.

When people seek God, they want to solve a problem that will have enormous consequences for their life. Because if they ever do find Him, God will, of necessity, become the centre of their life. And if they accept God, beautiful thoughts and slogans aren't going to be much good. They'll want tangible knowledge. They'll seek experiences, they'll seek concrete proof that God exists and is with them. They'll want to know this through their senses. With the senses of their body.

Because they're what we rely on.

Everybody's made of the same stuff. Same body. Same thinking. Same emotions. Same worries. Same questions. And the same desire for empirical communication is common to the whole of humankind. You find it in all peoples, in all four corners of the world.

This is why there's no religion which doesn't make some reference to experience. Experiences are a fundamental feature of all religions throughout history. From the frozen wastes of Siberia to the heart of Africa there are shamans and witch doctors who testify to the presence in our lives of a world outside our own.

In ancient Greece, focal points of such experiences were the pagan 'sanctuaries' of Delphi, Dodoni, Epidauros, Daphne and so on.

But even in modern times, especially in the most 'civilized' societies, even among the most 'enlightened' people on university campuses, we encounter the same thirst for a corporeal experience of God:

Rebellious students at Berkeley, California, in the '70s shouted, among other things: 'We don't want a God Who doesn't impinge on our existence. A God with no connection to our body is useless. We don't need Him, we don't want Him'.

Similarly, in the *Seventh Seal*, the great director Ingmar Bergman has his protagonist say in one scene: 'Why is it so painful, so impossible to feel God through the senses? I want God to stretch out His hand to me, to reveal Himself to me tangibly and to speak to me'. In other words, he wants to experience the presence of God through his senses.

And we have something similar in the Tradition of the Church. Even the saints express themselves in a similar manner.

In his work *On Icons*, Saint John the Damascan says quite clearly to the heretics who couldn't abide to hear a word spoken about icons or holy relics. 'I'm also a human being and I have a body and this is why I desire to see, in the body and to communicate with the things that are holy'.

Naturally, given such a universal and all-embracing quest, experiences have been noted and recorded as precious treasures.

(To be continued)

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