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OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: DRAWN BY DESIRE

TOM RYAN

IN 1942 AT OXFORD, in a sermon *The Weight of Glory*, CS Lewis began: ‘If you asked twenty good men today what they thought to be the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness’. He went on to say that if they had asked the early Christians, they would have replied, ‘Love’.

A negative term has replaced a positive one. Lewis points out that the Gospels have lots to say about self-denial but not for its own sake. We take up our cross to follow Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The call to discipleship is His answer to our craving for happiness.

And so, continues Lewis, in nearly every description of the goal of walking with Jesus, there is an appeal to *desire*. Perhaps, lurking in the background, yearning for happiness, and even more, enjoying it, is not Christian. Lewis rejects this firmly as more Stoic than Christian.

Lewis continues. If we consider the staggering and unblushing nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels

...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

Lewis is right on two scores. First, we can too quickly settle for second (or third) best. Second, it is desire that drives and animates our lives and, more specifically, the spiritual quest. What insight, then, does our Christian tradition, past and present, offer us about yearning and desire?

Our Desire

Desire has many faces—from the life-giving and uplifting to the dark and destructive. The struggle to sort them out is part of the human story, one mirrored in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Desire’s impact (together with a range of human emotions) on our relationship with God is mirrored most strikingly in the Psalms. For instance, there is a persistent use of the metaphor of thirst. Our desire for what ultimately (and completely) satisfies us is like the ‘deer that yearns for running streams.’ Alternatively, we pray in Ps. 62:

O God, you are my God, for you I long,
For you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you,
like a dry, weary land without water.

So, too, in the Church’s prayer we find, now at the interpersonal level,

It were my soul’s desire
To see the face of God;
It were my soul’s desire
To rest in his abode.

—*Hymn for Morning Prayer Saturday Week 1*

Underlying all this is a central thread. It is the desire for ‘I know-not-what’, for something *more*. Conn argues that the most fundamental human desire is for transcendence, or rather, self-transcendence, in our relationships with the world, other people and God.² This entails the impulse to understand the *experience of mystery* (of life and creation). This quest revolves around the big questions: about identity (who are we?), origins (where do we come from?) and destiny (where are we going?). At the same time, we are drawn to probe the *mystery of experience* (what happens to our awareness and attitudes when we

engage with the realm of mystery?). Thomas Aquinas said that, hidden in this yearning to understand, especially in wanting to be happy, is the desire for God.

We cannot, then, escape the questions: what do I really desire? what drives my life? Or, to paraphrase Jesus' words, who or what have I set my heart on? Ultimately, all human beings long for happiness. To have my deepest desires satisfied is central to God's relationship with us. Hence, we should take seriously Jesus' words to the blind Bartimaeus: 'What do you want me to do for you?' This question is emblematic of the human quest for meaning.

It is through desire, then, that God draws us, almost in spite of ourselves, to Himself, to where we are meant to be. Desire underpins Jesus' call to ask so as to receive, to seek and find, to knock for the door to be opened. Desire, then, implies that we are not complete yet it opens us to possibilities in the future.

Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican spiritual writer, is helpful here. For her, the human being, special and unique in creation, is open to receiving God (*capax dei* – a term used in the Christian spiritual tradition). She sees the religious urge to have a relationship with the Real, with mystery, with the transcendent, as a universal phenomenon.³ It is marked by two forms of desire: human yearning for Reality (God) and, alternatively (and more importantly), God's desire to reach out to us.⁴ The divine purpose (Absolute Will and love) revolves around this double movement.

Further, Underhill's imagery is such that the divine Spirit draws us to the Real, as a magnet, in sustaining our desire to engage and respond to mystery. Again, the driving force of the spiritual journey is not human effort. It is rather God who first seeks us out and desires to have a relationship with us. In all her writing, desire is central for Underhill (and the spiritual tradition)⁵. The magnet seems, for her, to be a root metaphor for desire working in creation and especially between the Spirit and the human being.⁶



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Underhill's approach mirrors Paul's—his vision of Creation as 'eagerly waiting', 'hoping', 'groaning' to be freed and to achieve its purpose (Romans Ch 8). The cosmos is drawn by desire. God attracts humankind through the urge to understand and engage with 'the more', to probe both the experience of mystery and the mystery of experience. Desire is the powerful undertow which is the heartbeat of creation.

God's Desire

But desire does not only impel us and the created universe. As Underhill implies, it is at the heart of God. In his discussion, Denys Turner cites the writings of the Pseudo-Denis who sees creation in terms of an explosion of divine *eros*. God's longing to share his life, goodness and love overflows in a surge of 'ecstatic energy'. This is a God who is 'beside himself' in love.⁷ John speaks of the 'love that the Father has lavished on us' in Jesus, most of all in his death and resurrection (1 Jn. 3:1). Hence, the yearning to see God's face in the hymn cited above is fulfilled: 'to have seen me is to have seen the Father' (John 14:9).

Take the title of William Barry SJ's book *God's Passionate Desire and Our Response*. Perhaps the same hesitation about desire as part of our divinely wrought humanity makes us uncomfortable with the idea of desire in God. A God who is passionate can suggest being out of control, even obsessive. There is also implied something of the erotic in God. Yet, if we image God in our humanity, our deep

emotions and our sexuality are integral to this.

Consider the images used of God in Scripture as the lover in relation to the beloved: in the *Song of Songs*, as flirting and playful interfused with absence and longing; in the Prophets, as a jealous lover, as moved to anger when rebuffed or when God's loved ones are threatened, harmed or, with the poor, ignored. Jesus of the Gospels feels deeply—he weeps, is angry, afraid, flooded with compassion, speaks of his longings (concerning the Father or Jerusalem) and, at times, is overwhelmed with love and joy.

As noted earlier, there are many forms or desire as they are many faces to love. Desire is particularly associated with eros-love, with our capacity to love truly with 'focused attention and a quality of dedication that is deeper than duty or will-power'.⁸ Helpful here is Edward Vacek's distinction between the three classic forms of love by the phrase 'for the sake of.' We may love the beloved (1) for the sake of the beloved (*agape*), (2) for our own sake (*eros*), or (3) for the sake of the relationship we have with the beloved (*philia*). While *agape* (or charity) is usually regarded as 'the distinctively Christian form of love', all three may be seen as Christian and as 'forms of cooperating with God'.⁹

Further, these forms of love are present in God. God's desire and love is (1) for our sakes—self-giving love or *agape*; (2) for God's sake (*eros*)—God as filled with love and ecstatically happy; (3) for friendship's sake (*philia*)—love desires intimacy and union. God's love means that God *does* get carried away, can be 'beside himself' with desire. God wants to share the delight and the mutual abandon of the divine love of the Trinity with us and Creation. Catherine La Cugna sums it up:

The deep yearning and desire for God we find inscribed in our hearts is more intelligible if that desire is rooted in the very nature of God, that is, if God yearns for and desires another.¹⁰

When God's Desire Meets Our Desire

Our deepest yearning, then, for happiness, or,

ultimately, for union with God, is matched by God's passionate desire that our longings be fulfilled. What happens when our desire and God's desire *meet in the person of Jesus*? Catherine of Siena has a striking comment in her *Dialogue*:

You have nothing infinite except your soul's love and desire

In other words, we have an unlimited capacity to receive God. We see this epitomized in Jesus. In Colossians 2:9; it says:

The full content of divine nature lives in Christ, in his humanity.

We are confronted by this extraordinary mystery. In Jesus, in his humanity and we in ours as creatures, there are no limits to what we can receive of God. We can truly say that there can be infinite depths to our knowing and loving God and to our sharing in God's knowing and loving the divine self. Any obstacles arise from us—from our fears, from our resistances or, in Scriptural terms, from our 'hardness of heart.'

In her quotation above, Catherine of Siena is in good company, that of St Augustine and his probing of the soul's capacity through its desire:

The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled.

Suppose you want to fill some sort of bag, and you know the bulk of what you will be given, you stretch the bag or the sack or the skin or whatever it is...In the same way by delaying the fulfillment of desire God stretches it, by making us desire he expands the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity...let us stretch ourselves out towards him so that when he comes he may fill us. 'We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.'¹¹

Limitless desire opens us to unlimited love. Paul prays similarly in Ephesians: that 'we are filled with the utter fullness of God.' Like Jesus, and through our union with him, we have to be open to 'receive the Spirit without re-

serve' (John 3:33). Like Mary—we must be empty so that 'what you have said be done to me' (Luke 1:38).

But is this the whole picture? What about the resistances, obstacles and opposition arising from our desires just mentioned?

***Desire as Dark, Destructive and our
Common Humanity***

While it is true, as Lewis remarked, that we may be 'far too easily pleased', we may also be easily 'deceived' by our desires. Human desire is something ambiguous, with the potential to be either life-giving or destructive. When the latter is the case, we recall the two qualities of evil that emerge (and endure) from distorted desire at work in the account of the Fall in Genesis Ch.3. These are deception (of oneself, of others, of God) and division (within oneself, with others and with God). While, then, given their intensity, our desires can energize and guide us, especially our deepest selves, they can also mislead and divide us, enslave us or 'dissipate our energy'.¹² Unlike instincts, desires involve a reflective element. Given their complexity and power, then, we need to attend to and 'befriend' them, including those 'negative', even potentially destructive, ones that disturb or shame us. As Sheldrake points out:

... unless we own our desires in the first place, we will never learn to recognize those that are more fruitful and healthy, let alone how to live out the deepest and truest desires of all.¹³

Clearly, desires need both our attention and our evaluation as to whether they are life-giving, namely with an orientation to what is truly good, to authentic humanity. We must remember also that depth of desires 'is not necessarily the same thing as intensity of feeling'.¹⁴ I can feel very angry and, even vengeful, towards someone who has hurt me. While this is normal and natural, it is important that these feelings be named, claimed and tamed.

But they must also be aimed, namely, directed in a constructive way, guided by a

deeper level of our authentic selves 'where the power of forgiveness can be found'. This reflects a pattern noted by Sheldrake that 'our deepest desires move us, to some degree, beyond self-centredness to self-giving... with the growth of the Kingdom of God'. They reflect, then, God's longing for each person and for the world. There is clearly a 'social or collective dimension' to authentic desires.¹⁵

This social aspect raises another consideration. Desires that enslave or are destructive have traditionally been categorized as the Seven Capital or Deadly Sins. This description is not because they are always grave but because they can easily be the sources or roots of other sins or of vices—habitual dispositions to sin. Their description is normally a variation of the term 'inordinate desire' within a generally individualistic approach to the spiritual/moral life.¹⁶ For all that, advances in psychology since Freud have made us more aware of the impact of unconscious motivation on our conscious life and decisions.

More recent developments have led to a greater consciousness of the extent to which social and cultural influences shape us as beings of desire. Theologians and spiritual writers have drawn on the insights of René Girard and his analysis of the imitative or 'mimetic' nature of desire.¹⁷ In essence, our desires reflect and are shaped by our social and cultural environment. For instance, parents know only too well what it is like when children begin to fight over a toy. If one child wants the toy, it immediately makes it more desirable for the other child. The roots of desire, then, are not so much in the object, or in ourselves, but are 'interpersonal'.

When internalized, this pattern of copying the desires of others can see others as rivals in competition for something prized. Robert Doran sums it up: 'Imitative desire, wherever it occurs, is always a desire to *be* another because of the radical insufficiency of one's own very being'.¹⁸ For Girard, this form of rejection of who or what one is, a desire to be other than oneself is a 'metaphysical desire' or 'a

will to self-destruction' that reveals 'a radical ontological sickness at the core of mimetic desire'.¹⁹

Despite this distorted form of mimesis, Girard's construal of desire indicates that human identity depends on relationality and that 'human beings seek to build identity by satisfying an existential yearning (or lack) that underlies desire'. Inherent in desire, then, as Hodge points out, is transcendence, that humans are oriented beyond themselves towards a 'higher plane of mimetic and spiritual fulfillment in unity and reconciliation with the Other, and so, all others'.²⁰

From these considerations, Ormerod highlights three things that have bearing on the reflective and evaluative imperative surrounding desire and its authenticity. First, we are not originators of our desires but shaped by our cultural and social contexts. Second, far from our spontaneous desires reflecting our true selves, Ormerod reminds us 'to most of us most of the time, the origin and direction of our desires is hidden from us'. Third, our desires are not the end of a process in expressing our deepest and truest selves. Rather, they are the starting point to which we must attend, about which we must ask questions, weigh up and make judgments.²¹

This brings us to our final consideration: how does the redemptive action of Christ transform the pattern of mimetic desire and its impact on individuals, societies and cultures? How is the yearning for transcendence within desire reclaimed and harnessed?

The Risen Jesus: Transformation of Desire

As noted earlier, for Girard, at the very core of mimetic desire, there lies a 'radical ontological sickness' which, observes Ormerod, is 'not unlike or unrelated to the notion of original sin'.²² In relation to Concupiscence or the disordering of desire, Girard's account of internal mimesis through the mediation of society and culture 'helps us appreciate the ways in which the desires of others shape our de-

sires without any decision or responsibility on our part'.²³ How, then, can we be healed of this deep ontological malady of desire?

Ormerod, building on Doran, suggests this occurs through the process of 'positive mimesis' through the social and cultural mediation of grace. 'Grace conceived as interiority involves a shift in affectivity, a realignment of my desiring, a turning of the heart's desires to the things of God'.²⁴

Such a process is associated in the spiritual tradition with the imitation of Christ and the saints. More foundationally, it occurs through identification with Christ in a shared life and in the formative impact of the Church's liturgical and sacramental life. The ecclesial community, then, can practice and model 'positive forms of mimetic relationality'.²⁵ This reminds us of two things. The transformation of our affectivity as an aspect of deification is primarily the work of God and not of our efforts. Second, while acknowledging this, the transformation of desire is still a collaborative process. We are responsible for our deliberations and decisions in the exercise of our affective life.

In relation to personal affectivity, Sebastian Moore can be helpful. Girard's exposition of 'metaphysical desire' as an 'ontological sickness' revolves around the formative role of society and culture on the individual's affective life resulting in a distorted sense of oneself. It is a weakness that 'undermines us' creating what Sebastian Moore refers to as 'an inner wobble', a weakened sense of our own worth, which inclines us, with statistical inevitability, to sin'.²⁶

Moore sees the human person as a being of desire. We desire because we are desirable, from those feelings of self-esteem at the very core of our being. This underpins the urge to reach out to the horizon of mystery, for intimacy with others and with an 'Other', in an attitude of complete trust. The historical and anthropological context of this process from infancy involves a separation from one's mother and the push to be involved in the wider

world. Negotiating all this generates a deep uncertainty in us about whether our deepest desires can be trusted. For Moore, Original Sin is one's hesitancy to accept one's deep lovability and to trust the impulse to reach out for full intimacy, 'to become the desired of God'.²⁷ It is a profound resistance to growth manifest particularly in fear. One feels caught between being a self (separate) and being in intimacy (communion).

Moore argues that, through the Abba experience of being totally loved and desirable, Jesus does not experience the tension between his desiring, separate self and his desire for communion. According to Moore, during his ministry, Jesus awoke indirectly in people, especially his disciples, a sense of being desirable and lovable, through his teaching, deeds and interactions with them. In giving them new hope, he was creating the Kingdom of God. But with his death, this hope collapsed. Moore argues that Jesus' encounters with his disciples after his Resurrection effect a divine awakening. But now God is known directly. There is an immediate arousal and awareness of a sense of being desirable by the One who desires us into existence. It is done through Jesus present in their midst.

What are the fruits of this for the desires and affective life of the early disciples, and ultimately, for ourselves? First, their shared experience of Jesus as Spirit-giving brings a peace beyond understanding and a restoration of primordial communion of the self and the world. Second, the symbol of this transformation of desire is the cross. As Moore notes:

What we learn from the cross is the difference between liberation *from* desire (the latter equated with the insatiable self-promoting ego) and liberation *of* desire from the chains of my customary ways of thinking about myself.²⁸

Real desire is to be 'more and more myself' done in relatedness to 'everything and everyone in the mystery, trying to realize myself. Desire is love trying to happen. It is love that permeates all the universe, trying to happen to me'.²⁹

Third, the experience of the Spirit's interior transformation is the gift of the New Covenant, fulfilling the promise of a 'new heart and a new spirit' adumbrated in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. This has three effects. There is an interior divine influence modifying the 'heart' understood in the Hebrew sense of the moral core of the person involving understanding (beliefs), will (commitments) and affections (attitudes, dispositions and responses). Second, the indwelling Spirit gives a new energy and power to humanity to realize the plans of God. Third, the Risen Jesus' presence in his community points to a reconciliation of the unresolved tension of the inner/outer dimensions of experience, of the relationship between the personal and the communal and, finally, clarification of what is authentic and inauthentic in a way of life centered on God revealed in Jesus.

Final Thoughts

We are drawn by desire to God? True, but desire, as we have seen, is multi-faceted and complex. Varied though desire might be, we return to the magnet as a telling if not a controlling metaphor.

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, acknowledges that our hearts are restless and will not rest until they rest in God. In his book *On Religion*, John Caputo suggests 'impudently', that this could be interpreted as saying that 'we are all a little unhinged'.³⁰ We are driven hither and thither by one desire after another, sometimes by a smorgasbord of desires at once. How do we bind them together and give them a clear direction? For Augustine, we shall not get any peace until we 'rest' in God, 'the name of what we love and desire'.³¹ It is encapsulated in the words that life consists in loving God, 'obeying his voice, clinging to him' (Deut. 30:20). The magnet has locked into the object of its desire.

So we need to join St. Anselm in the 11th century at his *prie-dieu* as he starts his *Proslogion*. Before engaging in theology, he

prays:

Teach us to seek you, and reveal yourself to us as we seek; for unless you instruct us, we cannot seek you, and unless you reveal yourself

we cannot find you. Let us seek you in desiring you; let us desire you in seeking you. Let us find you in loving you; let us love you in finding you.³²

NOTES

1. CS Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory' in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (London UK: Collins Fontana Books, 1965), 94-5. This article is an expanded version of one topic in a series, 'Our Senses: Five Pathways to God' published in the *NZ Marist Messenger* August 2008—May 2009. My thanks to its present editor.
2. Walter Conn, *The Desiring Self* (New York: Paulist, 1998), 5.
3. Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Homebush, NSW: Society of St. Paul, 1976), 45.
4. 'The deep desire to reach out for "the Perfect" and, most importantly, the fact of the living Reality 'over against man, who stoops towards him, and first incites and then supports and responds to his seeking,' *The Spiritual Life*, 48.
5. In 1911 she writes 'Desire is everything in nature; does everything.' Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A study in the nature and developments of Man's spiritual consciousness* (New York: A Meridian Book, 1955), 117 citing Bernard Holland and his introduction to Boehme's dialogues. Towards the end of her life she remarks that we are 'drawn, almost in spite of ourselves, 'to the real end of our being, the place where we are ordained to be.' Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*. 34-5
6. The Perfection which is the object of the awakened soul's gaze is a 'magnet drawing him (*sic*) towards itself.' *Ibid.*, 76.
7. Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (USA: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 48-9.
8. Philip Sheldrake, 'Desire' in Philip Sheldrake (Ed), *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Louisville KY: John Know Press, 2005), 231-233, at 231.
9. Edward Collins Vacec, SJ, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 57-8.
10. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 353.
11. 'A reading from the Treatise of St. Augustine on the first letter of St John', *The Office of Readings*, Friday Week 6 of the Year.
12. Philip Sheldrake, 'Befriending Our Desires', *The Way* 35:2, April 1995, 91-100, at 93. For St. Ignatius, superficial, misplaced or enslaving desires were known as 'disordered attachments.'
13. *Ibid.*, 91.
14. *Ibid.*, 93.
15. *Ibid.*, 95-6.
16. For example, an inordinate desire for honour/ approval (pride), material possessions (avarice), sexual gratification (lust), or sadness, even resentment, at someone else's gifts or good fortune (envy) etc.
17. This section draws on Neil Ormerod, 'For What Are We Responsible? *Gaudium et Spes* 34 and the Human Project', in David G Kirkhoffer with Robyn Horner and Patrick McArdle, *Being Human: Groundwork For A Theological Anthropology for the 21st. Century* (Preston, Vic: Mosaic Press, 2013), 191-202, at 193-202.
18. Cited in Ormerod, 195.
19. Doran cited in Ormerod, 195.
20. Joel Hodge, 'How Free Are We? Individualism, Freedom and the State', in David G Kirkhoffer etc. *Being Human*, 315-331, at 317-318.
21. *Ibid.*, 195-8. The process of Ignatian discernment is relevant here as noted by Sheldrake, 95.
22. Ormerod, 196.
23. Ormerod, 196.
24. Ormerod, 200.
25. Hodge, 'How Free Are We?', 330.
26. Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007). 24, citing Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You: The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ*, (London: DLT, 1985). xiii.
27. Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You*, 76.
28. Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (Crossroad, NY, 1989), 91.
29. *Ibid.*, 93.
30. John Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 24.
31. *Ibid.*, 24.
32. Adapted by William A. Barry, SJ in the Foreword to *God's Passionate Desire and Our Response*.