

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

FROM (NON-) GOD OF CULTURE
TO A SPIRITUAL GOD

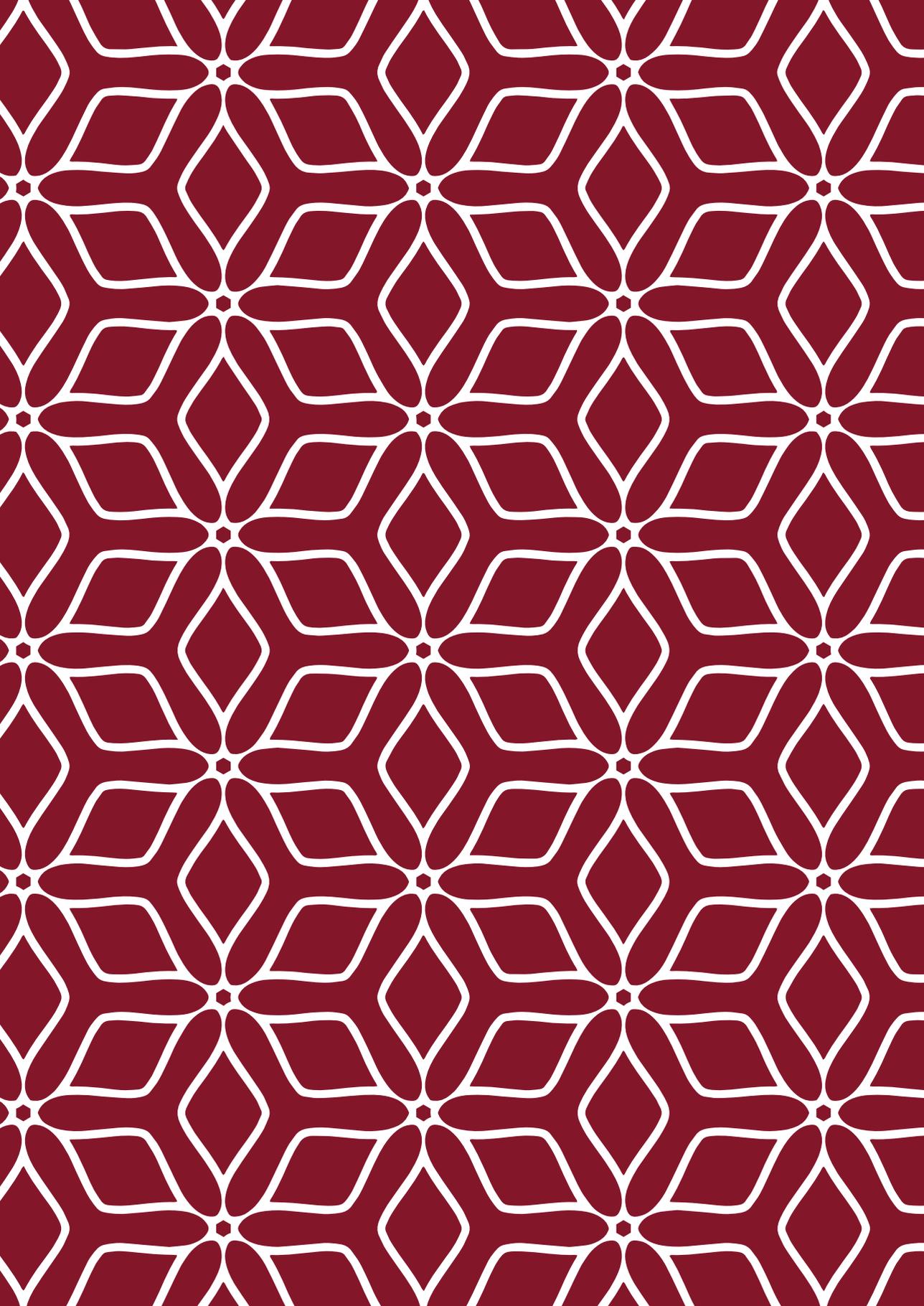
A RETURN TO THE GOD OF LOVE

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La  Salle

MEL BULLETIN

55



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**Brothers of
the Christian
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MEL BULLETIN 55

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A return to the God of Love

“*The big enemy of the idea of and about God in the West today is not atheism or relativism or any similar threat, but the cultural idea of God which has been produced over the centuries by those in religious authority, and which has been made into a dogma, a morality and a cult. The spiritual God is love, light, truth, goodness, justice, beauty. In his relations with humanity, God is kindness and mercy and hospitality.*”

PRESENTATION

The present reflection deals with a reality that is full of significance for today, namely God. When it comes to God, indifference is not possible, and we encounter a great variety of views ranging from a life that finds great meaning in God, to a negation of God which sees the idea of God as an obstacle to human development.

In dealing with this important and significant topic, our focus will be existential and phenomenological. Nevertheless, we shall need to take account of the contributions of theology, the history of religions, philosophy, sociology and psychology. In the same way, we shall keep in mind the context and effects of ideas about God in the lives of individuals and of groups. In addition, we recognise that catechesis and Christian initiation programmes have always given priority to a healthy experience of God. They have always stressed the importance of trust, protection, love, pardon and mercy. Christian initiation and Christian life take place in a cultural context in accordance with the broad characteristics of their culture. Christian initiation has always been careful to present the individuals concerned with the best ideas about God and Jesus. In its turn, Lasallian pedagogy has been guided by and has guided according to the images of God as love, as shepherd, as neighbour, as guardian angel. It insists on the concern to preserve from evil and provide strength in the making of options for the good.

It is the desire of God that people should live as free, mature beings capable of loving, and it is also the principal goal of this presentation to enable us all to make a better commitment to living a happy life, in union with God and in union with those with whom we are living. This same desire of God is also the centre of our Lasallian educational mission, when we make ourselves more aware of being mediators of God, and when we behave accordingly by showing concern for the promotion of holistic salvation. We all seek to maintain an adult standard in our activities, but there are still difficulties in living as adults. The present text stresses the fact that a lot of our difficulties concerning God are due to the stages of immaturity that exist in individuals and are reflected in institutions through certain laws, moral principles, lifestyles and life options.

There exist individuals and groups who are obstacles to human growth and to the realisation of universal fraternity. Here I shall focus more on the situation of the Christian experience, while appreciating other forms of religion. Christianity is the product of Greek, Roman and Jewish cultures with the addition of new elements which came especially through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his life and mission among people.

On the other hand, I recognise the limits of my understanding of the religious ideas found in other religions, although there are no doubt similarities in lifestyles and beliefs, given the nature of global humanity which includes the religious dimension. The ideas and processes presented in this text can be read equally well in the light of local situations.

It is through psychology, especially psychoanalysis, that we can appreciate the principal characteristics of the stages in human maturation and the ways they are expressed in daily life, including in the complexity of religious experience. It is in the light of this that we need to assess all the positive experiences of the religious and spiritual life. We must also recognise the negative aspects that religion and an incomplete understanding of God have left in some groups and individuals in the course of history. Sometimes the forms of religious life reflect immature humanity in a magnified way, with the danger of it being taken to extremes, so that it becomes the negation of God and his loving presence with regard to humankind.

It is important to take account of the diversity of human and religious experience and of the different interpretations of spiritual experience. This is a topic which concerns all of us, directly or indirectly, especially educators, students, leadership teams, educational and pastoral authorities, parents and the whole Lasallian educational project in which we are all involved. The bibliography is meant as an aid, inviting the reader to go deeper into the topic. I have not wished to be exhaustive in the bibliographic references, and I have taken account of other works in preparing this text. At the same time, I know that people are quite capable of filling out the bibliography, especially in their own languages.

The topic of our capacity to understand our own experiences and those of other people and cultures continues to be a great challenge. In general, we carry out the analysis and reach an understanding on the basis of our own perspectives, hoping that the others will understand us. Communication is real and possible, but it is complex. Communication can be successful, but there may also be a lack of objectivity in it. This is true for all human views of reality, including those about God. That is why we talk about a cultural God. It is the result of the interaction between humanity and God expressed in images taken from our human world. Some images express the reality of God, but others are more human and are taken from a human world which is immature and wounded. The spiritual God is total perfection which cannot include limitations or negativity. Human culture, especially through its leaders, has fostered processes that use ideas about human likeness to God. This can be seen in the history of cultures, especially in the religious domain

with its doctrines, cults and rituals and in its ways of approaching limitations and conflicts such as infirmity, guilt, poverty and death.

We are in an era of change in many areas of human life, including a new and significant change in our image of God, and we are moving to one which is more positive and closer to our human situation. Why? Because the image we have of God has repercussions in many areas of human life, especially in the realm of ethics and our co-responsibility for the wellbeing of others. Our point of reference is the anthropological reality already affirmed in the Bible, namely that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and that God is love, light, truth and justice. This present text will give a brief historical survey in order to show the difference between the cultural God and the spiritual God in those aspects which can facilitate understanding and be of consequence for humans. Thus among other problems, we shall need to tackle those of limitation, of fragility, of evil, of sin, of infirmity. Jesus Christ came in order to help us know better Who God is, and to make us understand that God wants us to have fulness of life. That is why Jesus cured the sick and lessened suffering as part of his proclamation of the present reality of the Kingdom of God.

An understanding of God that is too human leads us to introduce human features and attribute them to God. They are features that come chiefly from the physiological and psychological domains, and in truth they may show aspects that are immature or even idolatrous.

Consequently, we find there is now a counter-current return to a spiritual God with characteristics such as those presented by the present Pope Francis. This movement is reflected in doctrine, cult, rituals, ways of living and strategies for overcoming evil. All this puts us in touch with a God Who stands beside us and is the first to desire our happiness and the defeat of evil of every kind. Here we see the full meaning of our commitment to the provision of “a human and Christian education ...” (Cf R3).

For reflection:

What is my image of God? How did I acquire it? Is the image that I have of God a motive for me to live in joy, love and hope? How does my image of God affect the development of our Lasallian educational mission?

INTRODUCTION

One of the most central human experiences concerns the religious sphere understood as a structuring on the spiritual level, which includes the search for meaning through ideologies, philosophies and religions, etc. It also includes the reality of God, our understanding of Him and the different ways of relating to Him. It includes the different ways of expressing the existential meaning of our life as individuals, communities, cultures and humankind. What part does God play in our daily life? The central mission given to humanity by God is the process of human development, and this mission is also entrusted to the different religions. We too are part of this process of becoming human. Every educational community should be a laboratory of continuous humanisation which takes account of God's salvific plan.

The reality which we call 'God' has helped and continues to help many people. God has created different situations in this world. Occasionally, God has assisted in the process of humanisation, either by mediation or by inexplicable intervention. On other occasions, experiences of God have been manipulations of God and his will carried out by individuals in political and/or religious power. This produces many and varied results. Many individuals and structures continue in a childish dependency or with different levels of immaturity in relation to their lives and their religious commitment. The humanising process is a very complex one and cannot be effected on the basis of a single human science on just one level. It must be achieved by a broad and positive interdisciplinary collaboration involving all the sciences that refer to human nature.

In the reflection that follows, I have tried to maintain as far as possible a holistic vision, making use of contributions from different sciences. I realise that it is not a common thing for people to think about God or to understand the value and importance of God in their lives. Nevertheless, such an understanding of God can help us to live more meaningful lives.

We begin our reflection with an analysis of human communication, in order to situate more clearly the question we are considering. After that, there will be a short historical survey of the images of God, including those presented by the Bible. Attention is paid to the power of the cultural setting in the assimilation and structuring of the experience of God. Among other things, our aim is to put forward a better understanding of the idea of the

cultural God in order to distinguish that from an understanding of the spiritual God. The cultural structures that exist in the finite world marked by a culture make it necessary to retain aspects which are finite but still positive when referring to God.

The cultural attributes applied to God can be seen in moral structures, in doctrines, credos and dogmas, in rituals, in social structures, in forms of cult and communitarian organisation. We constantly tend to move towards a cultural version of the spiritual God who is love, light, truth, goodness, beauty, justice. We shall continue to insist on this point and also on the anthropological features in which our motivations and our actions manifest themselves.

1. CONTEXTUALISING OF THE TOPIC AND ITS CURRENT RELEVANCE

We all become sensitive to the words and gestures which are necessary to convey thoughts, messages or feelings. There is no neutrality in human relations or in the communication of our experiences to others. After an encounter with a person or a group, we are changed ‘for better or worse’. Indeed, there exists in us a continuous process of change which, qualitatively speaking, can be one of growth or stagnation or regression.

Growth changes may develop in a positive way some aspect of ourselves or ourselves as a whole. The process of education aims to be one of these great opportunities for growth. We can synthesise this dynamic process as being one of ‘progressive symbols’. Regression is the result of the gratification of our wounded and immature aspects and the abandoning of growth because of the difficulties in life. Some family or group contexts can be obstacles to authentic growth. We can synthesise this dynamic process as being one of ‘regressive symbols’.¹ These processes include both a conscious and a subconscious dimension. Because of the complexity involved in understanding the subconscious, we shall not enter very far into that aspect, but those who are familiar with the formation, structure and dynamics of the subconscious will find it easier to understand the following reflections².

We all hope to be understood and appreciated, when we are with others and when we are trying to communicate something of our interior. We are afraid of misunderstandings and rejections. The fear of being rejected, unappreciated and isolated becomes a constant threat. Other processes of a

¹ The concept of progressive and regressive symbols was elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, with reference to the idea of the referential look. Regressive symbols look more towards the past and progressive symbols find inspiration in the future. Freud could be taken as the reference for regressive symbols and Hegel as the reference for progressive symbols. Luigi Maria Rulla applied this same terminology, but used it in a more psychological sense. For him, regressive symbols are those that point to schemes and forms of living that belong to the past, while progressive symbols are more directed to ideals and values and to the future, to whatever is deeply desired. Everything that promotes qualitative growth can, according to Rulla, be understood as a progressive symbol.

² Like Bergson, we take the subconscious to be all that has been experienced. Everything that has been experienced up to now creates a predisposition in our interpretations and actions. The subconscious is a way of maintaining lived experiences. It is not just psychological or repressed psychology. Rather, our experiences, especially psychological and spiritual, have a positive quality (love) or a negative quality (disaffection). Nothing is extinguished, and our total experience becomes part of our life and predisposes us to act. See more on this topic in *As Chaves Do Inconsciente*, Renate Jost de Moraes, Rio of Janeiro, Ed. Agir, 1990.

more healthy nature are acceptance, appreciation, esteem and respect from individuals, and they provide stimulus and healing as well as growth. Consequently, there exists in every relationship an intentionality which is the result of the interiority of each individual. This intentionality can be more central and profound or more peripheral and superficial. When intentionality is more profound, it tends to become concretised in actions which have the purpose of expressing and strengthening our intentionality and our deeper desires.

Intentionality and the processes of communication are very important when it is a question of our relations with people or with God. What do I really want when I enter into relations with people or with God? In our processes of communication with God, we tend to use the same figures of speech that we use in our relations with people. Our point of reference lies in the processes of communication which we learn in our families during infancy and in the course of our lives. These models may be improved on, modified or substituted, but the determining reference point continues to be that of human communication. We note, for example, that the vocabulary used in relation to God (or relations with God) copy quite closely forms of expression derived from human experience. All the processes and forms of communication make sense when we view them in terms of intentionality and the desire to communicate. Communication is based on the likeness that exists between ourselves and God. However, in view of the difference between human individuals and God, the models of language require a certain specificity and adaptation, rather than mere equivalence.

When we also take into account developments in the present day situation (called an epoch of change), we can verify changes in many aspects, human and otherwise, some of which are radical and others more superficial. The question is 'What changes do we not *want* to make?' or 'What changes are we *unable* to make?' Thus, it is not possible to change basic human nature which is oriented towards love, good, truth, beauty and justice. Many changes are part of the internal process of personal or collective growth. Other changes are based on the dissatisfaction felt at not succeeding in loving or being loved sufficiently. Such dissatisfaction may be felt in any aspect of human nature, and it can develop into a driving force for change. Other changes derive from reality itself which has its own dynamism. Change in more immediate aspects is easier and more readily perceived.

Changing a human element based on love or lack of love (over many years) becomes a difficult task. Once love is felt, there may be a tendency to want to transform the moment into a lasting experience. Thus, the choice between change or no change is determined by the satisfaction or lack of satisfaction found in living out specific aspects, dimensions and experiences. Change covers a great variety of features and processes, and we must add that recent decades have seen a significant acceleration in our understanding of reality, material, physical, chemical and biological changes. The insights into human nature provided by human sciences also have their effects on the different forms of human expression. This includes tension and the need to discern what to abandon and what to preserve in our understanding of human beings and their relationships, meanings and searches for meaning. As a result, we see great ethical challenges arising from human experience. These include abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and others.

Developments that have taken place in the domain of education are well known, as are those in the intercultural realm, in the need to respect human dignity and in research into the means of overcoming illnesses whether physical or psychological. A similar process can be seen taking place in the spiritual dimension. Many praiseworthy spiritual experiences have been developed into methods, doctrines, interpretations and philosophies of life. Unity of life is arrived at in and through the spiritual dimension, not just as an experience in itself but also as a continuity in time. Thus, the unity of narrative identity³ is by nature essentially spiritual. As we tell our story, we remain the same selves and our awareness of this increases in physical, relational and psychological terms. At the same time, the reason for the narrative is based on spirituality, interpreted and reinterpreted in a search for meaning that goes deeper and deeper and becomes increasingly unitary.

When we enter into the religious domain, we sometimes get the impression that we are entering into a very traditional world. Although every culture does evolve and tends to respond to the reality of the present in its religious forms and rites, the style of morality constructed, the ideas about God, and all of these tend to resist any attempts to update them and any

³ The use and contents of the term 'narrative identity' were developed and explained by Paul Ricoeur, especially in his books: *Tiempo and Narrativa*, *Ser a sí mismo como otro* and *Caminos de reconocimiento*.

encroachments from other cultures, especially in the area of language. In the formulations used to express religious experience and in the concepts used to refer to God, frequent and often exaggerated use is made of expressions taken from human life, especially vocabulary borrowed from the physical and psychological spheres. Such formulations can have positive or negative aspects. They may be mature or immature and can, in short, express love or the lack of love. By its nature, ritual is based on salvific experiences of the past which are seen as still present today. In time, fidelity to ritual may come to consider present day experiences and their expressions as insufficient. To be effective, ritual makes reference to the past, but at the same time it was the preservation of a living present that initially constituted the ritual which can also preserve its relevance in changed circumstances. Thus, for example, the profession of faith of the Church (the Credo) expressed the faith and dogmas of the community of a particular time. Each Christian community needs to find its own form for expressing the contents of the faith in up-to-date language, so that its faith and life may be proclaimed, affirmed and celebrated by individuals and the community and be for them a means of expressing the contents of their faith and the faith of the Church.

As we study the topic under consideration here, we shall find that certain cultural and personal features, many of them constructed by people in power (parents, rulers, religious to God), end up being transferred and transmitted as descriptions of God and of his action in relation to humans. That is why the cultural dimension has taken on such exaggerated importance in descriptions of the Divinity. Many of the features of God introduced in the course of history and maintained up until today constitute an obstacle to belief in God and disfigure his loving presence. Certainly, in times past, there could have been some link between these characterisations of God and people's social lives, but nowadays they tend only to encourage the abandonment of faith in God and in his significance for human beings. Indeed, such abandonment of belief in God can be observed today. However, we find on further analysis that it is not the abandonment of a belief in God as Supreme Being, but rather that of a belief in the God constructed by our cultures which has become separated from the spiritual God of all humanity.

It is for that reason that I have chosen the title *From a (non-)God of culture to a spiritual God* for this MEL Booklet which deals with the subject. I am referring to the positive and negative aspects of human experience, which have been adopted by a culture or by people in power and attributed to God. Accentuating immature human aspects and transferring them to God can increase people's rejection of God, and it may also be a disincentive to growth towards 'human adulthood' by individuals and groups. In the final analysis, the attribution of these negative aspects to God is contrary to human nature and to God. It is not possible to sustain an infantile attitude that produces passivity and dependency in relation to God. God is the God of history, in effect, and He cannot be known and loved outside of a culture. Nevertheless, God's revelation to humanity allows us to grasp the idea of a spiritual God Who is total positiveness and Who stimulates life and love. We live within this constant dialectic of tension between the cultural God and the spiritual God, between God as He is in himself and God as He reveals himself to humanity and is understood by us. Is it possible for one period in history to place more stress at a given time on the God of a cultural nature and at another time more on God Who is love, light, truth and goodness? Our historical vigilance requires us to make this the object of permanent discernment in the interests of God and of humanity as an exercise in responsible liberty. The search for a permanent equilibrium in practice between the cultural God and the spiritual God is one of the responsibilities of parents, educators and those in charge of any Lasallian educational centre. The need for sensitivity in responding to the profound desires of God at any historical moment has always been the object of attention in the teaching of the Church, in catechetics and other expressions of the presence of the Kingdom of God. Throughout the ages, Christians have been careful to make a praiseworthy effort to ensure a permanent discernment of the images and formulations about God and his saving will used in literature and art. And this continues to be so especially in our own times.

For reflection:

Do my processes of growth, my relationships and my commitment to our Lasallian educational mission interact with my experience of God? How do I perceive this in the community in which I live? How do I express my interiority in my spiritual life, in the liturgy and in the contents and forms my prayers?

2. THE QUESTION OF GOD IN OUR PROCESSES OF UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATION

In order to deal better with the topic of the images of God, we need to see its place in the process of communication. That will give us a clearer understanding of what we are proposing.

We all have had a wide variety of experiences, starting from the day we were born and continuing up until today. Nothing we experience (directly or indirectly) is permanently erased, although we might dearly like it to be suppressed. Even when we cannot remember the event, we feel its consequences in our lives, whether we are aware of the fact or not. Nowadays, more and more psychological and spiritual methods are being developed for recovering events we have experienced and which in one way or another remain in our memories. In fact, the things we have forgotten are still part of our memory, and it is all recoverable provided we have a deep interior life and can access the right methods which will allow us to reach into our deepest interior. Thus it is that we express what we have experienced, perceived, felt, and imagined, etc., using body language and other different kinds of language, as can be verified by looking at the many different literary genres. These experiences may arise from a source that is physical, psychological, affective, relational or spiritual (religious). They may be more or less intense, profound or significant. They may express the whole of us or just one dimension. It will all depend on what we have experienced, on how we interpret that and how we use what we have experienced to establish our ideals, our values and our hierarchy of meanings and choices.

The richness and complexity of human experiences and their expressions when being communicated as we relate to others mean that we are led to admit and accept that there will be a certain amount of loss in what we communicate and also in what is received. In other words, we can never communicate what we have experienced in a fully objective way, given that we are communicating within the limits of our understanding and interpretation. In the same way, what we are communicating is received within the limits of other people's understanding and interpretation as determined by the situation of their lives up to the present.

The result is that in communicating our experience we need to keep two difficulties in mind. Firstly, there is the problem that the thing we have to communicate, namely our experience, is a single one-off thing when it

happens (actively or passively⁴), but it is communicated in fragments. That is to say it follows a narrative pattern of communication which cannot be global and integral in the way the initial experience was. Psychoanalysis pays careful attention to the narrative, to the order it follows, the details and the omissions, because they all have their reasons, conscious or unconscious. Secondly, there is the problem of relating to the recipients who also have their subjective dimension. It involves their wider situation and identity and is therefore more or less objective or subjective. We are always interpreting, but we are not always aware of the past and present aspects that we use when interpreting.

Communicating and understanding what is presented to us from outside involves a learning process that is lifelong. It is something that is sometimes wrongly evaluated in the educational process. Some experiences are simpler and closer to day-to-day activity than others. Consequently, they are easier to communicate and understand. Others are more distant in time, deeper and/or more complex, and it is difficult to find the right language with appropriate analogies for communicating them. For example, some mystical experiences are complex and hard to express. As a result, recourse is sometimes had to similarities taken from other experiences, including those in the erotic sphere. This is especially true in expressing anything that refers to fullness and pleasure. Obviously, the ideal would be for every human experience to be adequately understood and for the right language to be found for expressing it to others. Something similar occurs when we are talking about an experience of God, using a vocabulary borrowed from other areas of human expression or one elaborated in other times and in other cultures.

There sometimes exists a great gap between the experience being communicated and the form in which it is encapsulated and developed. This is all the more likely the greater the fragility that exists in the conjoint whole of individual and group psychodynamics, and the greater the immature features, conscious or unconscious, which are decisive in making choices

⁴ Paul Ricoeur would say “I agent and I suffering” in the sense of being the author of an action or the object of actions by others. The word ‘suffering’ here is not necessarily linked to suffering pain, but it does refer to something external that affects us interiorly, consciously or not. It will all depend on the quality of what is offered. Everything connected to progressive symbols facilitates growth.

and understanding situations and interpreting them. This can be seen in every human aspect and at any level, because the phase of maturity manifests itself both in the whole and in the most insignificant experiences.

This same process manifests itself in everything referring to God and religious experience. Religious experience, too, is taught and/or communicated via the same 'laws' of communication used for other experiences. These state in short that practically everything is learned through indication, identification and imitation. In one way or another right from the start of our lives, various individuals show us how to (or how not to) exist, think, act, choose, relate and live. We learn by identifying ourselves with individuals, institutions or causes. In many cases there exists a ritualised process of imitation to ensure that the learning will be effective and efficacious. And we transmit the contents and the experiences to others following the same forms of learning. It is possible that there may be a poor understanding of the experience in itself and a lack of models for understanding it. There may also be some weakness in the elaboration of the processes for communicating that experience. Consequently, there is always an inevitable loss of quality and objectiveness in the communication of any experience, including the experience of God. This leads to a permanent need for discernment of motivations and forms of acting.

All in all, communicating so many things to others and understanding others is always a marvellous gain, because when we communicate in any way, we are also understood and able to enter into a dialogue for mutual growth. The sharing of experiences is one of the great wonders of human life, and it is an aspect of our likeness to God. Success in communication results in happiness, peace, joy and the feeling of fulfilment in life.

In all this complexity, situations arise in which it is possible to perceive a certain distance and difference between what is being communicated and the understanding of what is communicated. The fact that there are limits to communication which must be accepted is all part of our human condition. Consequently, personal, cultural and social factors may be responsible for there being different forms of communication for different experiences. We can always learn to decipher the different codes of communication characteristic of cultures, experiences and stages of maturity. This process develops into a permanent hermeneutical circle in which we understand better in order to communicate better.

In order to communicate, we use different means, styles, resources, figures of speech and literary genres, with the aim of making what we are communicating more accessible and comprehensible. This diversity is present in education, in our significant relations and in our experiences, physical, psychological and spiritual. The Bible avails itself of literary resources such as narrative, metaphor, legend, history, symbolism, myth, allegory, fiction, poetry and novella in order to communicate the message of God. These resources demand to be duly contextualised and interpreted. Communication requires interpretation to be a permanent part of the process. But there is no single interpretation for everybody or every culture, and even less for all occasions. Every interpretation can be reconsidered, revised and enriched. The same thing applies to the different forms of language. Nevertheless, a more general interpretation does exist, as for example in the idea of the alliance of God with his people and the ways for celebrating this. God's alliance with humanity (its processes and forms) is the fullest expression of God's communication with humanity and with every individual. However, each individual event, such as the passage of the Red Sea, contains other significations and details which have to be understood in the context of that occurrence. It all carries the stamp of the culture, of the historical era, of the personal stage of development and of the maturity in human affectivity of those directly involved at the time and of those who still today make contact with the past events. The more complex the experience and the further removed it is from sensory verification, the greater the need for care and attention in the interpretation. That is why we can say that the further back we go in history, the less trust we can have in literal interpretations, and the greater the need will be for a hermeneutical interpretation of the experience narrated. Only in this way can it be transformed into meaning for life today. On the other hand, we must always keep in mind that every historical period and every culture creates new realities which are taken up into the present frame of reference in the forms of language and experiences communicated.

Experiences and the understanding of them may be either personal or cultural, but it is culture which decides the processes of communication, understanding, interpretation and language. This applies to all human experiences, whether physical, psychological, spiritual, social, affective,

intellectual, organisational or anything else.⁵ Situations which exist on a given level are not interpreted only on that level, because the individual is a single indivisible whole, and it is the whole which employs the different interpretative criteria, even though one particular experience may be the dominant one. A dominant physical experience will make use of the psychological and spiritual dimensions to effect its understanding, interpretation and communication. Affective experiences will use a cultural language for their expression. The spiritual dimension, which is the broader and more difficult to make explicit, will use the language of nature and the physical, psychological and social languages, in order to make itself understood. However, all these experiences seek to be communicated and symbolised in one way or another.

For reflection:

Communication is possible and is an undertaking which hopes to be successful. Success in communication produces peace, joy and a meaning to life. Do I have any memories of this success in communication and making myself understood? All the sciences can help us to understand one another, including with regard to our experience of God. How can we achieve this? Culture selects and interprets experiences. How can I verify the presence of culture in my experiences and in those of the community?

⁵ “Culture can be understood as being the complex combination of specific elements that are spiritual, material, intellectual and affective, and which characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and literature but also styles of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs...” (UNESCO).

**3. GOD COMMUNICATES
WITH HUMANITY;
HUMANITY INTERPRETS
AND RESPONDS**

The question about God needs to be considered in the above context. We do not have access to God outside of a context and a culture. Nevertheless in a very personal way, our minds project images and symbols which we have acquired through a determined culture or cultures. Every understanding passes through some kind of image or figure of speech. Part of being human means that context and culture are reflections of the situations of individuals with their possibilities and fragilities which have been experienced or are being experienced. This same process enables us to understand the socialisation of our images of God and about God and also the attributes and characteristics developed regarding Him and maintained throughout history. In these images, we undoubtedly find projected the experiences and structures of our culture. Some images and understandings of God have been overtaken and abandoned, while others have been retained up until today. Every culture had its reasons for choosing, defining, developing and maintaining its images of God. The possibility of anthropomorphism has always been there.⁶ It involves taking human features and applying them to other things (animals, inanimate things) including God. This will always exist. Such approximations acquire a feeling of realism to the extent that people attribute names and experiences to a variety of things simply because of the anthropological make-up that goes with our being human.

There is a difference in levels of being, when we begin to talk about humans in relation to God. The disproportion that exists between God and humans explains in part the diversity in experiences of God and the corresponding diversity in the language used in order to express and communicate those experiences. God is spirit and as such belongs to the interior realm and is beyond any anthropomorphism. The dialectic process of speaking about God requires a continuous effort to match and reconcile our personal visions of God that depend on culture and religion with the vision of a spiritual God who is accessible only in the deeper interior of ourselves either through experiences that are intense and profound, or by the adoption of an intensely focussed concentration, whether conscious or unconscious.⁷ There can be

⁶ Anthropomorphism, in our case, refers to the way features are taken from the human world and applied to God.

⁷ Methods of concentration, especially at the subconscious level, and a direct approach to the subconscious give us access to a profoundly spiritual interior and hence to a God Who is a spiritual God.

no possibility of distortions in relation to the spiritual God, but they can exist in the cultural God. The cultural God can be subjected to various influences of a manipulative, dominatory or compensatory nature. The spiritual God is simply the totality of love, free from personal, cultural and historical characteristics.

Social and cultural changes and developments in science, especially in the human sciences, all have their repercussions in figurative language and interpretations and in their underlying moral vision. In many cases, the thinking which in the past attributed things to God now finds that it has no need of God. Indeed, such attributions were far too human. So can we do without Him? Or did He never exist? Must He recede? And were these attributions just cultural constructions, while human experience and intelligence have now developed other forms of understanding in response to things previously attributed to God? On the other hand, we cannot measure the scope of the human mind's ability to understand all that exists, or deny the existence of that to which we do not have access. Reality is not limited to what is intellectually verifiable and understandable. God is a mystery, just as life is. We know enough about Him, even though our vision remains limited. We have some approximate ideas about Him as an inexhaustible mystery, but our understanding of them can always be improved on and better expressed. The fact that we have this understanding makes it possible for us to clarify the similarities between human beings and God and the greater or lesser adequacy of the language used. In other words, science helps us to have an increasing understanding of religious experience and its expression. In the same way, science helps us to have a more adequate understanding and image of God and of his relations with humanity.

Individuals, cultures and civilisations all develop their own ways of understanding reality, including that regarding God. How objective is this? Or how far do these features of God portray God, and how much do they retain of their origins in experiences of this world? We must assume in principle that there is some more or less positive relationship between the reality and the processes for understanding it and communicating it to

⁸ This was already said by Edward Schillebeeckx, in *God and Man*, chapter 1, where he refers to "God in the dock", meaning that God is 'obliged' to withdraw progressively from situations which previously were attributed directly to Him.

others. The ideal would be to reduce as far as possible the gap between subjectivity and objectivity when dealing with different realities, including that of God. However, we must always take into account the fact of human limitation and finitude.

A large part of our understanding of and talk about God is derived from two variables. As we go through the reflection that follows, no doubt we will all be able to recognise ourselves one way or another in this process.

- 1) One variable arises from the fact that we use images from the physical, human world when we are referring to God. So, for example, we say that God has a face and hands, stands up, bends down, turns his face, is seated, looks favourably on people who are on his right, looks unfavourably on those who are on his left.

We also frequently attribute to God ways of being that are 'copied' from our psychological dimension. Since human beings can have a variety of psychological moods, both positive and negative, we likewise attribute to God similar feelings, joys, envies, grudges, vengefulness, anger,⁹ regret, changes of mood, etc. In the Old Testament we come across all these human feelings attributed to God. Thus, God sees that his work is good, defends his people and the prophets, destroys the enemy, punishes his people, promises prosperity and land for his people.

We also find mention in the Old Testament of the spiritual aspects of God such as supreme goodness, strength, inspiration, support, trust and presence.

- 2) There is another variable that we draw on for inspiration for devising images and attributes for God, and it is one which follows very closely the level of maturity of the individuals involved and the cultural expressions they use to describe God, however approximately. Examples of it can be seen in the figures of speech such as the metaphors used: a child in the arms of a parent, dependence, trust, guilt, pleas for protection by a God Who is omnipotent and omnipresent, etc. On the other hand, the experiences people have of God, the images they use for them, their

⁹ Brother John, of Taizé, in his book *La ira de un Dios de amor*, Editorial Perpetuo Socorro, Madrid, 2020, presents a good historical survey of the 'anger' of God.

autonomy or dependence and the expectations they have will all depend on the level of maturity of individuals and the leaders of the groups and on the cultures involved.

The form of a religious experience and the forms of its expression correspond closely to the different stages in human maturity. Nonetheless, it is also important to keep in mind that the same situation regarding the stage of maturity shows itself in other relational areas such as friendships, work, trust, security, faith, belonging to a community, social aspirations and participation.

In order to better understand the stage of maturity involved, it helps if we can interpret the contents and the spontaneous process of our prayers. In prayer, we are being sincere and hence authentic. The contents and forms of our prayer often reveal our state of development and maturity. In our ways of praying, for example, we can identify prayer that is more narcissistic, in which the personal or group “I/We” is the goal and centre of reference for the contents and process of the prayer. We can also identify prayer that shows more maternal dependence and a search for the security and comfort which leaves to God all responsibility for individuals and groups. Or we can identify prayer that shows paternal dependence by handing over to God responsibility for the situations in the world and in society. We create a prayer of dependence on a protecting and providing God who is like a father in relation to his children. Finally, we can identify prayer of trust and compliance with the will of God. This last form of prayer expresses an adult submission to God and his designs.¹⁰ When the Gospel says “ask and you will receive”, it is referring especially to this form. We are aware of how Jesus prayed to the Father in order to know and follow his will. The lasting effect of prayer is related to this process of discernment and a decision to follow the will of God rather than to the recitation of formulas, some of which smack of magic. By contemplating Jesus, we obtain access to greater maturity in relation to God and in the use of images which express intimacy, unity and submission to his will.

¹⁰ Going up to Jerusalem with Jesus (salvation) calls for the overcoming of resistance due to maternal dependence (security and comfort) or paternal dependence (sticking to tradition and the past), and the overcoming of wounds from one’s personal story, such as homelessness or the death of someone. Cf Lk 9, 57-62.

Many images of God may also be inspired by the natural world or by using cosmic symbols¹¹ such as the heavens, the sun, the moon, mountains, etc. In extreme situations, people tend to express more intensely the image they have of God and the reasons behind their use of it. It cannot be denied that quite often elements are used which project our interior state or are transferred from significant figures of the past and the present. In situations of conflict and/or feelings of helplessness or loneliness, many people tend to blame others or to seek help from someone stronger or nearer to them. This can also be seen in some relationships, and not only in the religious dimension. Joys and sadnesses tend to be expressed primarily to people who are near to us or more significant, including God. This also partly explains why it is difficult not to involve God somehow in all significant experiences, positive or negative.

This background context interferes with our image of God and in the practices that follow on from it. From time to time, it becomes necessary to revise the different images of God in order to bring them into line with a change to more adult human processes. The contrary is likewise true. Human cultural processes which interfere with our understanding of God need to be revised. Revisions of ideas, experiences, narratives and understandings are continually taking place in the history of every culture and in universal history, and they affect the different cosmological visions involved in the physical, psychological, social and religious dimensions. One of the areas in which there is least development of such ideas is that which refers to the question of God. Today there is an urgent need for an 'updating' of the image of God. "The effort to construct a new image of God involves finding one which speaks to the present day sensitivities in such a way that the women and men of today can find renewed encouragement for living their lives with deep meaning and hope."¹²

¹¹ In reality, there are three types of symbols. According to Paul Ricoeur, they are cosmic symbols, dreamlike symbols and poetic/artistic symbols. The cosmic symbols were further explored by Mircea Eliade in his valuable work, especially in *Tratado de historia de las religiones*.

¹² Queiruga, André Torres. *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, Hacia una nueva imagen de Dios. Navarra, Spain, Ed. Verbo Divino, 2016 (4th edition), p. 11.

In the Lasallian tradition, we can call to mind the recommendation of St. John Baptist de La Salle that we look upon God as our Father, Jesus is seen as the Saviour and the Holy Spirit as the One we need to inspire us and show us the path of virtue. It is clear that over a long period of time, the spiritual interpretation of these ideas has led to the spirit of faith and zeal becoming the sound criterion for our motivation and the spiritual reference for our life. Paying attention to the signs of the times makes it easier for us to perfect our vision and understanding of God and of his presence in us and in the world through his saving love.

For reflection:

Our experiences of God include aspects of the physical, cultural and social worlds. Looking at my personal experience and at the educational or religious community in which I am, what are the images that are used most in our rituals, liturgies and prayers? Can we identify aspects of immaturity and maturity in our forms of celebration? Can we identify aspects of maturity especially in the central position given to the will of God? What types of prayer can we promote more as the expression of our adult commitment to God?

4. THE NATURE AND NAMES OF GOD IN THE BIBLE

Up to now, we have dealt with the situation regarding the communicating and structuring of the different images of God. We shall continue by looking more closely at the reality of God. Religions, sects and faiths, great and small, have devised ways of living based on their images of God and his action in the world. Across our historical, cultural, circumstantial and personal diversity, our names and attributes for God have become established. This is seen more clearly in theocratic populations (such as Israel) where God is the supreme authority to whom responsibility is attributed for human events such as war, revenge, plague, protection, election and privilege. God is the good force of existence, the divine. In the history of Israel, the perception of God mostly followed the nation's awareness and culture as it developed with the passage of time. The Bible presents us with names related to God, which were created according to certain variables,

- a) In relation to the world, He is called Creator and Father.
- b) In relation to the quality of his actions in the world, He is recognised as the Beginning, Goodness, Justice, Peace, Love.
- c) In relation to what He is in his essence, He is seen as Mystery, Totally Other, Transcendence.

When we are referring to God using cultural characteristics (the cultural God), we can see that this is only a partial interpretation of God as God, and that is why we find the presence in this cultural God of human features that are immature. Sometimes they are not even very human, but they are nonetheless phenomenologically and historically inherent in language about the cultural God. Thus, it is said of God that He is led by the desire for power, for omnipotence.

In our modern era, humanity has realised the insufficiency of God to represent its ideals of goodness and justice because of the limitations evident in the goodness and justice which are aspired to but scarcely even partially realised. Many people attribute to God the idea of destiny as the force which gives the true explanation of everything. Are events things that just happen? Or are they predestined and necessary? Do they come from God as spirit? Or are they the result of the spirit of the world, a mixture of apparent good and real good? Today, because of the deeper understanding of human nature in its individual and collective aspects, in its cultural aspect, its historical setting (past, present, future), its conscious and unconscious dimensions etc., it is possible to explain

more objectively things that were previously seen as 'destiny'. One has to admit that the stronger and more unconscious the experience, especially when less than human in terms of liberty and responsibility, the stronger the predisposition to present it as some sort of destiny.

The Bible also speaks of God as Trinity, although this is a later development. The notion of Trinity is the truer and more up-to-date interpretation of God, and this perspective is essential if we want to do justice to the global truth of human existence and experience. It is the only coherent way by which God can be seen as understanding our negativity, our fragility, our sorrow and the suffering of all living beings. God is a balm for many wounds and the power which cures the deepest suffering. Our innermost being always desires to be free from ills and limitations. It is our likeness to the goodness of the Triune God which leads us to desire the curing of our wounds and the conquest of suffering and evil, whether personal or social. The Trinity is centred not so much in the person of the Father, the person of the Son and the person of the Holy Spirit, but more in the way those three modes of being are expressions of our own deepest reality and ontological composition.

To obtain a cultural image of Israel in relation to God and the different anthropomorphisms attributed to Him, we can find enlightenment in what the Bible transmits to us in the different names given to God. These various names are attributed to God in order to signify Him in depth, while at the same time they provide understanding by using human experiences projected or transferred. The names are the results of Israel's different experiences and human situations. The Bible speaks of God as Lord, as Lord of the Armies, as Omnipotent, the Most High. We can see that some of these names relate very much to what God is, while others are cultural attributes and are the result of experiences that were not very humanising, but they were very real and came in the shape of the exercise of power by the 'leaders' of the people in their positions as judges or kings. We should also recall that similar names to these are found in a number of religions and not just in the case of Israel. Christianity continued to be generally tied to the vision of God offered to us by the Old Testament. We are invited to understand and make ours more and more the God of Jesus Christ, experienced every day through kindness, mercy, understanding, love, welcoming, hospitality and care for the weak and infirm. Queiruga says:

We urgently need to change our idea of God. We have images of a God who is strangely particularist and arbitrary. We say, for example, that God created all men and women, but that He revealed his love solely to a small minority. This looks too much like a man who has many children but only cares for one, his chosen one. Within the one household for all, why are some told 'Yes' and others 'No'? How was it possible that God would keep "his people" in ignorance about eternal life almost up to the second century B.C., provoking terrible crises for people like Job? How could it be said that He was ready to put entire cities to the sword? Or that He was prepared to send a plague on the people because the king had sinned? Or that He would punish to the third generation for the sins of the fathers? Or that He gives death and life and causes prosperity and ruin?¹³

In other words, we have developed a vocabulary based on the idea (the conviction almost) that as Christians we are the elect, the chosen, the privileged. This does not properly reflect the truth about God, since for Him all are equally loved, and there is no place for developing the idea of privilege. The use of words such as 'election', or 'chosen people' is not appropriate, because they do not reveal the truth about God. We are all loved, and it is we who ought to turn towards Him with gratitude and make a commitment to incorporate the image and likeness of God in ourselves and our surroundings. Every person should feel individually loved. We cannot accept contradictions such as: "*God spoke only to a few (in theory), but He loves and cares for all (in practice). God spoke only in the scriptures (in theory), but He communicates with us in our prayer and lets us know his will.*" Why should this revelation be restricted to one people and one period in history? With respect to this, Queiruga says:

The different religions are developments of the idea of the presence of God. Consequently, as the phenomenology of religion shows, they all consider in one way or another that they are the recipients of a revelation from God and of a message in relation to the world and to themselves. And in reality they are. For that reason, we ought to say that all religions have the truth, although it be in a provisory and limited way, often through deformations and even perversions.¹⁴

¹³ Queiruga, *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, p 21.

¹⁴ Queiruga, *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, p 30.

Certainly, some religions are better at developing an understanding of God and of humanity and also of the relations between humanity, culture and God. A more profound study of the history of each religion helps to advance our knowledge of the journey followed by religions in order to establish, credos, dogmas, rites and doctrines of a theological or moral character. This is not the right place to go into that now, but the bibliography provided will enable readers to follow up on these journeys of religions. The same thing applies to educational and organisational processes and other customs. Nevertheless, the fact that some religions have gone further forward than others is no indication of divine favouritism. It is the result of the finite histories of the different cultures. God thinks of all and freely offers Himself to all. Inequality arises from the ways in which human beings receive Him. In spite of this, his love seeks equality. All religions uphold a certain equality, although they accept some differences and distinctions between the people on the one hand and those in authority, civil or religious, on the other. Many religious leaders enjoy privileges that people accept simply as part of their religious option. This has often led to comparisons between religions and to claims of superiority for one's own religion with regard to the use of privileges on the part of its leaders.

God is in continuous communion with humanity. The various images of 'alliances' express this very well, and revelation is for all humanity and not just for a privileged people. The differences lie in the historical and cultural understandings and in developments of the awareness of the presence of God. In this respect there are differences in populations and religions, but the differences cannot be interpreted as some being more privileged than others, or that some are chosen by God rather than others, or that some are purer than others. Each individual and every group can feel privileged when they know and live a religion which has developed a healthy and wise understanding of God and his action in the world.

God talks to all and all of the time. 'God is love.' God created us by love and He lives by love as a 'Father/Mother', concerned for our story from the outset, in order to help us all and save us all, without any kind of discrimination. If we Christians can be sure of anything it is precisely God's universal, unconditional and unrestricted love. If God creates every person by love and solely for love, it is evident that He desires to give Himself to all, totally and always.¹⁵

¹⁵ Queiruga, *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, p 26-27.

For reflection:

The names attributed to God are based on the experience of God and the meaning He has for individuals and for cultures.

If I were to describe my experience of God, what name would I use to designate God?

God is God for all. How can we create a culture of equal human dignity for all?

5. METAPHORS USED IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO US

We also need to consider the way in which many titles and attributes of God occur in the form of figures of speech known as *metaphors*. A metaphor points to the similarities between different things in order to facilitate our understanding of them. They may be more or less cosmological, relational or structural. Ideally they are living metaphors,¹⁶ in the sense that they are interpretations of realities that are new and dynamic. In the Bible and in the Church, various metaphors have been applied to religious models and to ways of relating to God, and in this way images of God have been created.

The complexity of the reality of God and the difficulty of having a more objective experience in relation to God have lead people to elaborate comparisons by using various metaphors in particular.¹⁷ Let us also remember that many of these metaphors are still used in the social and family spheres where they originated. They refer to features which are part of human experience, and so it is quite understandable that the area of our relationship to God should find itself reflected somehow in these metaphors. The following are probably the more important metaphors.

- *Commercial Metaphors* These are images and analogies taken from the world of commerce, e.g. buying and selling, putting up bail and being surety, rescuing someone at a price, paying an outstanding debt, etc. Such metaphors are used a lot in developing the concept of evil and sin, notably in order to explain the death of Jesus on the cross as redemption by paying off a debt which had its origin in sin. In this view, sin has serious consequences and is an infinite offence against God, and it can only be made up for by someone infinite, namely by Jesus, Son of God, equally divine with the Father and the Holy Spirit. A metaphor like that can increase the guilty feeling of being always in debt and that nothing can make definitive, adequate reparation for the damage caused. There are individuals who have feelings of guilt, starting in the womb and at birth, due to conflicts between their parents. In any context of conflict, such people always judge themselves to be culpable. And they feel the same way also in their relation to God. They feel guilty and think that they can never sufficiently make up for the fault committed, and that

¹⁶ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *La metáfora viva*.

¹⁷ Cf. Mardones, José María. *Matar a nuestros Dioses. un Dios para un creyente adulto*, Madrid, PPC, 2013.

- they do not have the right to be happy. There is the underlying idea of a 'trade off' to obtain a better life of peace and meaningfulness. Some religious leaders support and even strengthen this feeling, so that the faithful will always feel themselves to be 'in debt'. At times, it is a pedagogy of domination and submission.
- *Medical Metaphors* These relate to the world of health, and they deal with illnesses and weaknesses, with medication that will enable us to overcome infirmities and with healing, or they may deal with death which surrounds, threatens and terrifies us. Right up to the present, people have been searching for a God who will cure our infirmities, our weaknesses and sufferings and free us from death. For a long time, it was affirmed and some still affirm, that death entered the world through sin. Of course, we know that death is the result of our material, physiological condition, but it is often attributed to physical evil, sin or the lack of faith. The inability to find a solution for infirmity can show itself in processes of auto-culpability, and recourse may be had to reconciliation with and pacification of God. It is true that infirmity is innate in us and confirms our fragility, but its causes are not simple to understand or easy to overcome. Religions tend to dedicate a large part of their teaching and pastoral care to the curing of illnesses. God is the first one to be interested in overcoming evil, suffering and infirmity. However, in doing it He respects our freedom and invites us to enter into the mystery of fragility, pain and infirmity in order to find the cure. God's contribution consists in having created us in such a way that we have the ability to discover evil, whether physical, psychological or spiritual, and to overcome it by developing different ways of showing openness, understanding and love. Love can cure, and where there is love, infirmity can be overcome and meaning can be given to it.
 - *Legal Metaphors* These are taken from the legal world of justice and laws, where we find talk of judgement and condemnation, declarations of guilt or innocence, being charged and judged, legality and illegality, offences and reparation. Such ideas were frequently used in order to explain the misfortunes of the people of Israel, including their deportation. In addition, certain ideas about hell arose out of the condemnation of guilt and evil, and those ideas became strong enough to dominate and control behaviour that was unacceptable. The commandments were produced as

part of this system. In contrast to the messianism of the primitive Church, with its idea of the imminent second coming of Christ, people realised that the end of world did not arrive in the way they expected. As a result, the idea of the end was developed in more detail in terms of a final judgement which would separate ‘the sheep from the goats’. God sees the innermost intentions of the human heart. How was it possible to be so radical as to think of a judgement involving eternal condemnation? If God knows the innermost hearts, then He accepts and welcomes everybody.

- *Political Metaphors* These revolve around the topics of freedom and lack of freedom, rights and the denial of rights, belonging as citizens to an earthly realm or to the heavenly Kingdom of God,¹⁸ and they use terms like kings and emperors, lords and vassals. Often the idea is of a privileged rule by a few saved elect, while the others are condemned and excluded. The kingdom of God means freedom and salvation. The role of humanity is to accept it, welcome it and collaborate in its realisation. For a long period of time, God was looked on as an important and omnipotent authority, and the domination by authorities (kings and emperors) was justified by using political images of God. By their nature, political and religious authorities had certain privileges, and their importance was often magnified to give them prestige, power and access to finances. Still today, this situation is present in many who claim to be religious leaders. Many of them have not assimilated the idea of Church as the People of God or a ministering Church, and they cling to the forms of privilege of a hierarchical Church. However, it is clear that such desires (for power, prestige and financial comfort) are contrary to the genuine Christian spirit as presented by Jesus Christ. This sort of clericalisation is one of the greatest problems and evils of the Church today. The temptations of prestige, power and economic privilege still form one of the greatest temptations for many individuals, especially political and religious leaders, and nowadays, as we know, all this has a connection with the question of justice. The justice of God is related to his plan of salvation and freedom for all.

¹⁸ The decision to employ the designation “Kingdom of God”, which is also used by Jesus has its base in this metaphor. You can see in it a reference to the personage of the “king”. Historically, the designation included the idea that the “king” was the only one who was really free. And God wants us to be free.

- *Military Metaphors* These talk of victories and defeats, good and evil powers, friends and enemies, freedom and slavery, oppression and salvation. Such metaphors were very evident in the Old Testament and also in the Church in the not so distant past. The emphasis on friends and enemies, freedom and slavery, privileged and excluded were frequently transferred to language about God. Still today, in our Christian vocabulary, the use of the word ‘struggle’ is quite frequent, and it presupposes an awareness of the existence of enemies to be overcome. Undoubtedly, we should all make an effort to remain faithful to what is good, and we can find it difficult to overcome various obstacles. The word ‘religion’ itself includes this way of thinking and viewing things. The Latin *re-ligare* is linked to the idea that we have become separated and unworthy, and that we need a continual conversion to and a *re-uniting* with God. Baptism is said to have this ‘power’ to reconnect (*religare*), and it is based on the idea that we are born separated and needing reconciliation. It starts with the idea of separation rather than union. In reality, we exist in God and are born in and by his love. Difficulties may have their origins in our freedom, fragility and limitations, but in themselves they are not morally evil. We are invited to see the deepest human essence as existing in the desire for union and reconciliation rather than as a struggle and confrontation with enemies.

- *Cultic Metaphors* These are taken from the religious world of cult, sacrifices, holocausts, propitiatory victims, offerings, celebrations, banquets, scapegoats, fasting and expiation. These activities are products of the human religious dimension as it seeks to celebrate and expiate in a unified manner on religious grounds. It was the feeling of guilt that led to the creation of rituals of pardon and expiation, including the ritual of the scapegoat.¹⁹ This same process, with due reservations and adaptations, can be seen in structures of social organisation which are not directly linked to religious experience. It suffices to observe the processes for excluding minority groups, suppressing individuals who might ‘threaten’ the social stability, casting the blame onto weaker ethnic groups. We seem to need to suppress individuals and groups who stand in the way of our efforts to be happy. This principle of the scapegoat was

¹⁹ For a better understanding of the ritual of the scapegoat, see René Girard, especially in *Violencia y lo sagrado; el chivo expiatorio*; and other works.

applied to some extent to Christ Himself. "It is better for one man to die for the people." Jesus often used the image of the banquet to talk about the Kingdom of God, but He did not link it directly to religious experiences. It was not found among the ways in which people celebrated in the temple. The last supper is profoundly existential. The celebration of the eucharist begins with a rite of pardon followed by one of praise, and it continues with stages of enlightenment and transformation, culminating in communion as a banquet for life according to God. It is a structure of transformation as a creative experience, and it does not talk through metaphors but in a ritual of transformation. Cult has often been used to create domination and dependence on leaders. Nowadays, we seek rather to celebrate life when we come together to pray with adoration, thanksgiving and petition.

All these various kinds of metaphors help us to understand the different kinds of anthropomorphisms, especially the psychological ones, attributed to God. Metaphors and comparisons seek to facilitate understanding. Ambiguity arises when we take experiences from the visible, human world and use them in order to describe the divine world which is spiritual, without making the necessary adaptations. There is a huge difference between God as God and the exaggerated attributes placed on Him borrowed from various experiences in the human world, and this has consequences today not only for the image of God but also for the way humanity organises itself on the basis of that image in the moral, ritual and doctrinal spheres. We are never free from anthropomorphisms. Nevertheless, they are in permanent need of critical interpretation, because they are taken from historic cultural experiences and so can always be explained in one way or another.

Many anthropomorphisms are quite adequate, but others are inadequate or insufficient to explain what God is. They are generally taken from and based on physical and psychological situations in order to find answers to delicate questions of fragility such as illnesses, misunderstandings, guilt, loneliness. Very few images about God have their origins in spiritual reality. There are indeed images which come close to that, such as light, love, goodness which exist in the human world, and those images do awaken an experience of the divine in those who hear them and in those who use them. There are also spiritual images of God both in the Bible and in spirituality literature, which

refer especially to mystical experience or to the innate human experience of deep interiority. All the same, it is preferable to avoid any anthropomorphisms that have a negative connotation when we are referring to God, especially nowadays. One of the greatest and most enduring duties for humanity and religions consists in avoiding the attribution of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual human aspects to God as if He too were part of their reality. As co-responsible for human development, we in the Lasallian realm with its spirituality and charism of community and mission are in a position to contribute to the purification of the images of God for those entrusted to our care. This will happen when we establish individual and group experiences which share the characteristics of God, namely love, care, protection, welcome.

For reflection:

The various metaphors seek to elaborate on the human condition, especially the reality of fragility, sorrow, suffering and death. God created us for freedom and responsibility, and He respects these characteristics of his creation.

Which metaphors for God do we encounter most in our context, and which ones are most prevalent as we carry out our Lasallian educational mission? How can we fulfil our responsibility for giving scope to the positive dimension of human nature by seeing in it the likeness to God and the work of God?

6. SOME HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When describing the above situation of which we are all aware, Vito Mancuso²⁰ speaks of a certain inadequacy in the representation of the reality of God and our experience of it. It may not be so obvious, but we would prefer to attribute our difficulties to others or to God rather than face up to the way we ourselves have created them and maintain them. Projection is easier than the acceptance of responsibility. It is not always easy to accept, courageously and freely, responsibility for our personal, social and cultural growth. This is a challenge because of our fragility and wounded self-esteem. The mechanism of transference and of projection is very evident, especially when we are confronted with our limitations. According to Mancuso, the true enemy of the idea of God in the West is not atheism, or relativism or any other threat. Rather it is the idea of God that has been produced over the centuries by religious powers and made into a doctrine using coercive measures such as excommunication and other forms of blame.²¹

Jesus Christ did not teach dogmas but a way of living, although that later became the object of dogmas. Jesus did not use coercion or attribute blame to people. Neither did He draw up a list of ethical and moral principles. Jesus taught us to live by love and justice, which are the central features of God and should be so for humanity. Justice is meant in the sense of a chaste and respectful love in relation to everything that exists and the promotion of the common good of all (God, human beings, the animal world and the material world), and it ensures fidelity to the original plan of creation. Justice is also an expression of love. Jesus always kept in mind the healing or relief of suffering as part of the proclamation of a new state of reality in the Kingdom of God. Those who wish to follow Him are asked to take on these aspects of human experience.²² We are made as images of God, and it is the realisation of and commitment to that likeness which form the task entrusted to humanity. In many ways, we can see some success in this humanising process, although we all still experience difficulties, suffering, aggression and death.

²⁰ Mancuso, Vito. *Dio e il suo Destino*. Milano, Ed. Garzanti, 2015.

²¹ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo Destino*, p. 29.

²² Cf. the reflections of José M. Castillo, in *La humanidad de Jesús*, Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2016.

6.1 Evil and the effort to overcome it

Humanity is very wounded, but it has always had difficulty in accepting the reality of its wounds and the awkward relationship between them and morality or religion. Above all, the feeling of fragility is seen as a moral evil, and leads to a series of projections, desires and counter strategies, including the creation of images of a God who is expected to relieve the insecurity which results from an unaccepted fragility. The lack of perfection leads many to feel guilty. They have been taught as much. Intolerance of limitations is very widespread. We often judge, compare and reprove. To a large extent, this attention to the limitations and failures of others is due to a kind of interior dissatisfaction. Our minds are fixed on a model of perfection copied in part from the Greek world. In order to overcome and eliminate the feelings of guilt, humanity has found many rituals and formulas. But many doctrines and rites have the aim of increasing and developing the sense of guilt. They talk of the seriousness of actions or thoughts in order subsequently to control things by developing rituals which aim at restoring peace and joy through reparation.

Certain abstentions and sacrifices seek to restore interior peace and reopen the way to God, and this is evident in the widespread practice of fasting and sexual abstinence. Human nature feels that both eating and sexual activity produce pleasure. For a long time, the Church itself viewed as negative and even sinful those experiences that involved or resulted in any kind of pleasure. Consequently, such things had to be avoided in order to be free from guilt.²³ The development of guilt feelings is, to a large extent, the result of the education received and various forms of domination. There does exist a kind of guilt that is felt because of some action that is contrary to love. I would call this 'ontological guilt', because it is the result of an experience that is not genuinely human. This is a good and legitimate kind of guilt. However, some guilt feelings by nature are intense and burdensome. They are the fruit of education, and they can be reinterpreted in order to overcome repression and passive forces. Nevertheless, guilt nowadays is impressed on children by the control which the adult world has over them through indications and identifications of a more moralist nature. In one way or another, parents and teachers provide input aimed at forming young

²³ For more detail see Walter Schubart, *Eros e Religião*.

people's consciences. We cannot remain indifferent in this matter, but we need to keep presenting human and Christian values using a methodology which is consistent with the contents of what is offered.

Equally widespread is the idea that renunciation and sacrifice are pleasing to God. For a long time, the view was held that the value of an action, or even of a life, was proportional to the suffering and sacrifice experienced. Nowadays, we see a trend that is just the opposite, especially in young people who believe sacrifice needs to be avoided and the principle to be followed is that of pleasure. In themselves, sacrifice and pleasure are insufficient as indicators of the right way forward. Sacrifice that is not grounded in love as its motivation tends to end up in rigidity, bitterness, moralism and aggressiveness. Pleasure without love produces a feeling of existential emptiness which inevitably ends in depression.²⁴ In fact, what pleases God are the qualities of love, goodness and mercy in dealing with others. Many religious leaders today still create culpability in order to obtain personal advantages by 'selling' liberation from guilt. Many people feel almost an 'obligation' to make up for their faults in order to be accepted by God once again. Sometimes the feeling of guilt is so intense that it leads to rebellion against or abandonment of God.

This does not mean that finite reality is evil in itself. It is good, but in an incomplete and unfulfilled manner. In other words, it is good but affected by evil, and there is always a need for constant vigilance against evil. Complete victory over it is never attained, and in many instances it is not possible to exclude the eventual experience of failure.

Finitude is not an evil. It is only a conditionally potential state. Its appearance is inevitable at some time or another, but that does not mean to say that it is a concrete fact with no qualification. Otherwise, good would not exist, and it surely does exist and should be normal. Evil only comes about in fact when particular conditions exist which cannot be reconciled with one another.²⁵

²⁴ This perception is explained well by Viktor Frankl, especially in *Homem à procura de sentido*, and other works.

²⁵ Queiruga, *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, p 195. This same view can be seen in the writings of Hanna Arendt, principally in *A condição Humana*. Paul Ricoeur says something similar, especially in *Conflicto de las interpretaciones*.

For reflection:

The problem of evil and limitations are a constant challenge for individuals and groups. How do I understand the evil which exists, and how can we fight to lessen it in a civilisation of love?

7. FINITUDE, THE QUESTION OF EVIL AND THE VISION OF GOD

The reality of wounds and human suffering constitutes a topic that has been and is being used as a reason for seeking external help, and it has shaped people's images of God. There is a tendency to assume that God can intervene directly in the healing of infirmities and the curing all evils and suffering, because He is all-powerful and omnipotent. Evil is a challenge for humanity and it is a very concrete reality. In the face of evil, nobody can remain indifferent. In general, evil arouses in us the will to lessen it in ourselves and in other people, in institutions and in social conditions. Trauma, grief and physical, psychological and spiritual suffering are all signs of the absence of goodness, love and justice, which are the characteristics of God and of true human nature in its inner depths. The wounds of evil are produced by many factors, and they are largely present in different forms. They can be the result of aspects linked to the following dimensions.

- a) The physical dimension, including acts of violence, nourishment, bodily weakness and infirmity, physical and psychological decay and death, although trauma, frailty and infirmity may also be the results of psychological causes.
- b) The psychological dimension, including acceptance of self, awareness of one's place in the world, the difficulty of having to exercise different social roles (father, mother, son, daughter, etc.), egoism, aggression, envy and jealousy, sadness, depression, isolation and existential emptiness.
- c) The social, political and economical dimensions of living and the struggles they entail.
- d) The emotional dimension with the manifestations of an interiority wounded in love from birth to the present, especially in interactions with significant individuals.
- e) The intellectual dimension which often reinforces the memory of the reality of a trauma and blocks any openness to what is beautiful and wonderful.

There are also spiritual evils resulting from unfaithfulness in love, the inability to find meaning in life, the lack of solidarity, kindness and mercy.

Knowing one's situation objectively can provoke joy but also torment. Our religious situation can carry the same ambiguity, as Rudolf Otto observed: the Mystery which makes us fear and tremble and the Mystery which fascinates and attracts. Fear and attraction do not necessarily refer to negative aspects. Goodness can also cause a certain fear or attraction, especially when it involves a change in life, an option to take a direction that is not clearly discerned and defined, even though it is good. Thus for example, we can understand the reaction of the apostles at the moment of the transfiguration, when they saw the white cloud (a symbol of something good and new), and they began to be afraid, not because of possible danger but because they had to leave aside the vision of the Old Testament and adopt a new way of being that was presented to them in the words "...This is my beloved Son, listen to him". This mystery of fear and of fascination will also depend largely on an individual's stage of maturity and the greater or less support received from the immediate surroundings. A life that is very fragile and dependent may create images of dependency and fear. The context also tends to produce ideas of dependency and fear in order facilitate control and a continued generation of guilt and inhibition.

Alongside all these various wounds that people need to overcome stands the whole problem of evil. This is not necessarily a problem of sin or moral evil. It could be: a) an interior evil from within somebody or an exterior evil from the wider social context; b) an individual evil felt within us and viewed as a personal evil which can be imputed to us individually and for which we are held responsible, or a collective evil in a family, in society, in the culture; c) an evil that already existed in our past, because we were born into a world where the evil was already present in some form, and it is still present in our context today and will continue to be so in the future because we cannot eliminate it, although we may lessen the evil by associating with others.

The Bible presents four possible causes for evil, namely God, mankind, the devil, the world. We are all able to recall those passages which think of evil as being indirectly attributable to God, for instance those in which He is constantly asked to eliminate it. From our own experience, we see how evil

²⁶ Cf. Mt 17, 1-8.

²⁷ Algunas ideas sobre este mal y figuras del mito antropológico de la caída pueden ser encontradas en: Paul Ricoeur, *O Conflito das Interpretações* (disponible en varios idiomas).

exists also in human beings and how they provoke it. Another trend is to attribute evil to the devil, making him partly responsible as the enemy of God and of love in human beings. The world when viewed as standing in opposition to the Kingdom is always considered to be the source of evil. The Gospel of John reminds us that the world is evil, while the tradition of the Church has repeatedly stressed the negativity of the spirit of the world. Christianity has largely continued to accept these same explanatory causes for evil and says it is necessary to avoid the world. This has promoted the idea of withdrawal and flight from the world as a life option and as something to be valued. Nowadays, we need to join together to defeat evil by committing ourselves to live in the love of God and according to his will.

The more sensible approach is to consider evil as something innate in humanity, resulting from choices freely made within the framework of human finitude and fragility in an effort to become closed in on oneself or to destroy the others. It is in our physical and psychological dimensions that our finitude is more apparent, which renders it more difficult to exercise freedom and heightens the possibility of opting for evil. The idea that limitation and fragility are something evil is partly due to the fact that our deeper orientation is towards maintaining the search for perfection and refusing to accept that limitation is part of the human condition, rather than a moral evil. It was long thought that the origin of evil lay in original sin. Today, this 'explanation' is strongly called into question. Evil is part of human nature and not the result of some action done in the mythical beginnings. The doctrine of original sin does little to explain the complexity of the fact of evil that cannot be escaped. How can we understand evil? It can be understood as a whole set of options for closure, for aggression against self and others and for isolation within a fragile, limited horizon through a wrong use of freedom. In other words, evil is the absence of love, the absence of good, the absence of light, the absence of justice, and it has existed in human nature from the beginning up to this day. Since we do not know all the deeper motives that produce an action, we cannot equate a particular action with sin, although sin does exist in some way. Where interior freedom is lacking there is less moral blame. Evil exists in the context in which we are born and live. Hence, just as love when it is felt, experienced and expressed can light up the whole human being in every aspect and dimension, so also the lack of love, 'suffered' and expressed, is verifiable in every human dimension. Good and evil are experienced on the physical, psychological and spiritual levels, that is to say, in every single human

dimension. It is both an individual and a collective reality, and we are called to vigilance in order to lessen the evil in us and in the world by installing a culture of tenderness, kindness, mercy and love.

We are all asked to work for the good by having a positive attitude towards all, especially the weak. One way of doing this is by prayer, as the text of 1 Timothy 2: 1-8 encourages us.

First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all. This was the testimony at the proper time. For this I was appointed preacher and apostle (I am speaking the truth, I am not lying), teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument.

For reflection:

The complexity of the existence of evil provokes the desire to avoid and overcome it. It has been attributed to various causes, including God, in order to play down the implication of human responsibility. God does not require us to be perfect, but to be capable of loving.

How do we react to the reality of evil and how can we turn it into an occasion of salvation?

7.1 Jesus and the reality of evil and of good

The aim of the Kingdom of Jesus and of God is to establish the good by overcoming physical, psychological and spiritual wounds. It is always the individual person as a complex unity who is wounded or infirm, and not just in one aspect only. We have developed a clearer understanding of human nature. We can distinguish the different aspects of it as studied by the various sciences which have sought to explain and describe how it works and the different processes of healing available.

- 1) We are able to heal the body by various kinds of medication. We are all aware of the power of medicine and other psychosomatic or neurological treatments which improve our understanding of the body and the correlation with infirmity. In spite of its real effectiveness, medical science is sometimes accused of forgetting that it is the whole person who is sick. One way or another, practically all sicknesses have some relation to the lack of a sense of meaning in life and to a love that is wounded on the psychological, personal, relational and social levels and to experiences of loneliness, rejection, misunderstanding and breakdowns in social relations. That means we need to study more closely the connection between the physical and the psychological in terms of the variable of being loved or not loved. The greater the love in individuals, institutions and people, the greater will be the possibility of lessening evil.
- 2) In our psychological dimension, we find healing through a variety of sciences which deal with that aspect of our make-up, conscious or unconscious. It suffices to mention the sciences of sociology and psychology. These two disciplines have highlighted the complexity of human nature, but they have also succeeded in learning more about people individually and in groups. They both have their own ways of understanding human nature, from which they derive their methods of interpreting the symptoms and finding suitable methods of treatment and healing. The test of their methods and processes lies in their effectiveness, and that is linked to their anthropological views and their capacity to help individuals and groups to know and understand themselves, to accept and reform themselves in line with freer and maturer standards.

- 3) As free spirits, we are healed through spirituality and through goodness. Spirituality heals by generating the light of goodness and exposing individuals to it. Only goodness can heal. In anthropological terms, the healing power of Jesus resided in his goodness, in his love and in the profundity of his all-knowing and all-embracing gaze.

*“The conviction that it is goodness from which we come and to which we are going is the most efficacious ointment for the wounds of life. We are made for the good, and when we are immersed in the good our whole being flourishes”*²⁸ We have been made for the good simply because we come from the One Who is Good and are created in his image and likeness. How can we live our lives without reference to God and to goodness and to love? Our positive feelings about goodness and love indicate that they correspond to our true nature as human beings. Evil always leaves a certain feeling of dissatisfaction and suffering, conscious or unconscious, because it does not correspond to the profound truth about human nature. God is the life of life, the essence of essence, goodness, beauty, justice, love, friendliness, the uprightness which does not betray ideals, the will to generate goodness and justice without pretension to power and with no financial reward.

In the descriptions in the New Testament, we find a triple proclamation of the divine identity. “God is love” (1 John 4: 8 and 16), “God is light” (1 John 1: 5), “God is spirit” (1 John 4: 24). None of these statements is qualified by an adjective such as God is ‘eternal’ light, ‘compassionate’ love or ‘pure’ spirit. They are descriptions of God in his mode of being. It is impossible not to use certain images when thinking of God to clarify our understanding of his revelation. But as we have said already, they need at least to be used as part of a positive analogy and not included in formulations derived from structures based on wounds originating in different aspects of the life of individuals who are unloved, like expressions of vengeance or anger. In one way or other, we all share the responsibility to be vigilant in this matter and to avoid projecting human features onto God, especially those of a negative, immature character.

In equal manner, Jesus also used some anthropomorphisms, for example by calling God ‘Father’. Through Jesus, we have access to God’s way of being good, namely his mercy, his loving care and his rejoicing in the good. It is

²⁸ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo Destino*, p. 52.

always necessary to relativise the images created by human experience and thinking, and we must look at them objectively and in the light of love, goodness and justice.

The real problem does not lie with the physical anthropomorphisms, since it is easy to understand that God does not have a nose or feet or the head of a jackal. The real problem comes in the psychological anthropomorphisms, especially the ones that attribute negative feelings to God such as rage, and changes in mood. Sometimes God is thought of as demanding praise, glory and honour in the same way worldly powers require them, thus turning God into a kind of grandiose dictator who takes delight in seeing the military parades where he is saluted respectfully.²⁹

At the same, it is inadequate to say that God cultivates desires, sentiments and strong feelings such as pity, tenderness, love, compassion, mercy, repentance, envy, rage and anger. Nevertheless, this psychological language is drawn from our human reality. It may reflect some likeness to God if the feelings are positive, but it separates us from God when they are negative. Thus, God as Father reflects a God who is near and welcoming. The image of God that Jesus transmits is one of a God of the interior life in the depths of the soul and 'in secret'. He is the *summum bonum*, total love, and we exist in Him and not just in his presence.³⁰ Jesus used few anthropomorphic images of God, but He did use images that talk of God as spiritual. What was new about Jesus was something else. It was contained in the expression *Kingdom of God*, and it referred not to God as He is in Himself but to God as involved in a relationship with the world. The Kingdom shines out as a mystery of absolute and gratuitous salvation with the light of a purer mercy and goodness. It is evident in various parables.

The core of Jesus' teaching is found in what He describes as the call to the 'Kingdom of God'. This is seen not as an event bringing political liberation (in contrast to the zealots) or a cosmic cataclysm (as seen in the apocalyptic literature of the period) but as the moment of God's time, when every individual is inwardly moved and called to repentance, mercy and above all love. (*agape*

²⁹ Mancuso. *Dio e il suo destino*, p. 123.

³⁰ For a better understanding of this point, see the very useful work by Giorgio Bonaccorso, *Bellezza e Rivelazione e Liturgia tra fede e cultura*.

became a decisive key word in Christian vocabulary, and it stood in contrast to *eros* and *philia*) It is the time when individuals are called to make a conscious commitment to God and to their neighbour.³¹

A negative anthropomorphic vision of a God who is intimidating, punishing and childish has led to the need for intercession through the multiplication of figures of the Saints and “Our Ladies” who can provide a more personal mediation. This has led to the growth in veneration of Mary³² and the Saints which reflect a wide range of human experiences. Many of these devotions are expressions of different social situations and reflect different levels of human maturity. The positive side of such devotions is that the act of calling to mind what is good and merciful stimulates us to do good as we utter invocations and petitions of a more pragmatic and immediate nature. Our devotions sometimes indicate our need to be closer to God. The God of the Old Testament was a distant God Who, by the incarnation in Jesus, became closer and was dwelling among us. The one mediator is Jesus Christ, as Saint Paul said.³³ The more we experience Jesus as mediator and the model of identification, the more God will be visible among us. Schillebeeckx has shown how the various attributes and names given to Jesus point to distinct historical moments. He lists: Christ as Victor, Sun God, Light of Light, Redeemer, Child Jesus, Sacred Heart, Christ the King, our Brother.³⁴ Finally, we come to Jesus as the visible presence of God and as love, mercy and goodness.

³¹ Gesché, Adolphe. *Jesucristo, Dios para pensar*, Salamanca, Ed. Sígueme, 2013, p. 67.

³² “The history of popular piety in the West will show the triumph of the innumerable Saints and of the innumerable and very different ‘Marias’.” (Mancuso, *Dio e il suo Destino*, p. 287).

³³ “There is only one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ.” (1 Timothy 2: 5)

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Jesus: una História de um Vivente*, S. Paulo, Ed. Paulus, 2008. On page 56, he speaks of these various designations in line with their historical situations: Christ as Victor, Sun God, Light of Light, Redeemer, Child Jesus, Sacred Heart, Christ the King, our Brother.

For reflection:

Jesus brought news of the Kingdom of God. It means overcoming evil and suffering. But Jesus always looked on the whole person (physical, psychological and, spiritual) who needed to be healed. Where can we find signs of the Kingdom and healing in the place where we are.

How can we experience in our lives and mission the positive features of God as revealed by Jesus Christ? Can we see some relation between human maturity and the images of God and the diversity of devotions?

8. THE SPIRITUAL GOD

Let us leave aside for the moment the influence on our vision of God of anthropomorphisms taken from physical and psychological situations and ask the question as to how we can understand God on a spiritual level, seeing that God is Spirit. We have already referred to this question to some extent. God is the totality of goodness, and as we have said above, our search for goodness, our favourable reactions to good and unfavourable reactions to what is not good all reflect our nature as human beings. Mancuso refers to synonyms such as peace, gentleness, amiability, justice, truth and love. The New Testament defines God as spirit, light and love. Mancuso expresses it as follows. *“My God is the light which illumines my mind in the darkness of existence, the energy which moves my freedom and attracts me towards the Good. By ‘Good’, capitalised, I do not refer in this instance to the goodness which is the disposition to be subjectively good. Rather I mean the process of relational harmony which allows being to flourish. The Good is primarily being and truth. It is goodness only secondarily.”*³⁵

Goodness and mercy are features that proceed from God insofar as He relates to the world and to individual persons. Since they come from God and express God, they can only be positive. It is also appropriate to add to them the features of welcoming hospitality and free generosity. God welcomes humanity in the act of creating it. He prepares the world by evolution to receive human beings whom He invites to participate in his divine reality. He is always ready to receive us. We are like God whenever we show hospitality, but especially hospitality for the weak and the wounded such as children before and after birth, hospitality for elderly people and for those who are abandoned, hospitality for the infirm, for those wounded by rejection and/or violence, hospitality towards strangers and all those who are unloved. All find their place in God.

Unconditional hospitality is one of the basic features of Jesus Christ.³⁶ Hospitality is one of the more immediate ways of recognising God and being like Him, as we can see in Jesus’ central approach of welcoming everyone in all their varied conditions. Today, hospitality is one of the stronger imperatives for faith in God Who is love and welcomes all.

³⁵ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo Destino*, p. 353.

³⁶ See the enlightening contribution on this subject by Christoph Theobald, *Urgences Pastorales, comprendre, partager, réformer*, Bayard Éditions, 2017, especially pages 85, 97 and 200.

Gratuity, or free generosity, is somewhat similar to hospitality, and it is the expression of an anterior gratitude.³⁷ Gratuity is one of the principal characteristics of received love, because it is a sign of gratitude. And we have many things to be thankful for. “Everything is a grace, a gift”. We can all recognise the importance of gratuity and the need for it in today’s world. The lack of a capacity for gratitude is a sign of the presence of some sort of suffering, of immaturity, egoism and frustration. We have all received and give thanks in life, and we express our thanks through gratuity. As human beings, we are more like God because of our capacity to love, our kindness, compassion and hospitality, and also for our dedication to ensuring that goodness and love can be felt by other human beings, especially those who have had less opportunity to experience the positive mediations effected by those who mediate God.

Faith in God consists in giving Him the final say in terms of the justice and goodness that I see in myself and in people of worth, past and present. “*God dwells in the innermost being of everyone. An interior-directed person lives in God.*”³⁸ Consequently, we live in God and not just in his presence. And we try to see the world and other people in God. In that way, we avoid focussing too much on their faults and limitations.

In the same way, kindness is the expression of this goodness, love, light, justice and truth, while mercy is the expression of goodness for those who for various reasons find it difficult to love. Mercy is found in one who loves, but it is also present where love is lacking. When its liturgies speak of pardon and mercy, the Church is looking with eyes of love and salvation. Profound joy is the experience and the expression of those who love and find love beyond themselves in other people and in various situations. Thus, the Church rejoices when it experiences salvation *ad intra et ad extra*, as in the Easter celebrations, where the word ‘alleluia’ sums up this feeling of joy in the face of goodness and love. Joy and love are celebrated in rituals of light, hospitality and gratuity.

³⁷ Christoph Theobald, *Urgences Pastorales*, p. 89, 97 and 229.

³⁸ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo Destino*, p. 419.

God as infinite and ever active love presents and manifests Himself to all, from the beginning of time and to the maximum possible extent. Any restrictions on this revelation of God are mainly due to limitations in human beings who are not prepared to receive it and/or understand it, and who may even resist the revelation. Hence the importance of giving witness in the form of personal and communitarian example. In his writings, St. John Baptist de La Salle insists on the need to be witnesses of God for children and young people. This will facilitate their understanding and commitment to God and Jesus Christ. When we relate to other people, especially children and young people, we do so with the totality of our being, consciously or unconsciously, and this is a sign of intentionality based on the love of God and a likeness to Him.

For reflection:

This section describes the spiritual God. We can now discuss these characteristics and how we meet them in our lives.

What characteristics of God can we spread in our environment? How does this vision of God stimulate us to be better, and how does it help us to give our pupils a better experience of God?

9. ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING GOD AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

To summarise what has been said up to now we can say that cultures and religions develop very varied images of God. We cannot do without some kind of image which mediates the idea God for us. That is due to the simple fact that we possess physical, psychological, relational and spiritual dimensions which require some kind of mediating image or symbol in order to facilitate a differentiated understanding of realities of a different and spiritual nature such as God is. We use these varied dimensions in order to communicate and to produce the various forms of figurative language. However, it frequently happens that the anthropological images do not have their origins in God, that is to say they are not based on God for their development. Instead, they undergo the influence of individuals, especially those in leadership roles, who define God in a way that will ensure the continuation of their domination and power processes and their role in validating images of the action of God. In addition to this, there is the way in which humanity in general deals with the question of fragility and evil, and the way in which the construction of images reflects their state of human maturity, their values, perceptions, needs and feelings of guilt as well as their various successes.

We all want to banish evil and fragility, and so we allow ourselves to be influenced by rituals and by people in authority who claim the power to eliminate them. To a great extent, it is due to this ability to make people see the elimination of evil as the role of political and religious authorities that humanity has always accepted the existence of differences in rights and privileges for those who are invested with political and religious power. Many individuals have taken and still take advantage of the respect and honour accorded them to further their own prestige, power, material welfare and economic gain. The faithful allow them to keep those privileges, although they do not form part of being Christian, and they do not conform to the model of Jesus Christ who spoke and acted in quite the opposite manner. He lived almost in anonymity, avoiding power and serving. He did not seek financial privileges but made Himself available to the poor, doing good to all. His power came from doing the will of his Father.

A lot of this construction of images goes on in the language that religions use in their moral teaching, liturgies, rituals and doctrines. The more Catholicism itself became identified as a religion, the more it found itself involved in these power structure processes, which were not always inspired

by love. Nevertheless, as a following of Jesus Christ,³⁹ Catholicism is a way of life that stands apart from that view, because it is marked by equality, charity, welcoming hospitality, and by the recognition and defence and the dignity of each individual and of all human beings.

Saint John clearly brought out the consequence of a deeper understanding of God, when he wrote his superb and audacious definition that “God is love”. It is a dazzling expression of key importance. Everything else follows from it. If God is love and at the same time the origin of everything that exists, we are brought to realise that love is the essence of reality, the last word in understanding, the definitive criterion for judging.

“When Saint John defined God as love, he was taking a really huge step forward from all the current ideas of God. God ceased to be a threatening God. From then on, we humans would no longer be threatened but freed from ‘our enemies’, namely the darkness we have inside of us and which terrorises us.”⁴⁰ From then on, humankind could serve God without feeling threatened and without being a threat to itself. Only in this way is it possible to move towards the centre. The alternative is to lose oneself irremediably. The reality is love. Being a man or a woman involves living a life of love.

In what follows, we shall describe more explicitly some of the ways in which our pedagogy can be developed. The contribution of Jose Maria Mardones⁴¹ will be very useful in this effort to describe practical aspects ranging from the negative to the positive poles.

³⁹ In the time of the historical Jesus, there were forms for expressing the invitation to come and follow. In the period of monasticism, the idea of discipleship was generally reserved for religious. Since Vatican II, the Church has begun to speak of the discipleship of all Christians based on their options of a state of life. (See further on this in Martínez Díez, Felicísimo: *Cristología e Secuela. Creder in Gesù Cristo, vivere da Cristiani*, Ed. Borla, Roma, 2008. Original title: *Creer in Jesucristo, vivir en cristiano. Cristología y Seguimiento*, Ed. Verbo Divino, 2005).

⁴⁰ Gesché, Adolphe. *Jesucristo*, p. 54.

⁴¹ Mardones, José María. *Matar a nuestros dioses. un Dios para un creyente adulto*, Madrid, PPC, 2013.

For reflection:

Saint John defines God as love. Love accounts for all human motivations, central and less central. Love confronts limitation and evil.

How can we find practical ways for living this life of love today? How can we overcome the temptations of power, prestige and economic comfort in our structures, including our religious structures? What implications does all this have for the style of our Lasallian education?

10. IDOLATROUS IMAGES OF GOD

We must allow God to be God. Idolatry consists in placing our trust in someone or something other than God. Clinging to distorted images of God is a weakness which harms the spirit and seeks to manipulate God for our own benefit or for the sake of our structures. This is an inappropriate temerity. We are not the ones to know best what is right for us and for other people. We do have some idea of it, but always within the framework of our own limitations and fragility. There are always obstacles in the way of our making a good discernment. As human beings, we need figurative language to express our inner thoughts and feelings. We cannot live without using expressions that have a meaning determined by our culture and which need constant reinterpretation on the basis of the original human experience and its formulation in historically and culturally controlled terms. It takes a continual effort to understand and adapt them. Cultural images of God include aspects that are the result of human experience combined with an understanding of God and of his revelation to humanity. Seen in this way, they are not empty or neutral or devoid of any purpose or meaning. As we have already said, it is right to avoid seeing any equivalence between these images and the true reality of God, between the God of culture and the spiritual God. There is a permanent need for clarification regarding the experiences we have and our expressions of them. Some expressions can be far too human, while others may come closer to the nature of God. Which of these expressions can we observe in action today? And how can we move closer to the idea of a spiritual God? We are called on to create meaning for ourselves and for others inspired by the beauty of living life as revealed by the spiritual God.

10.1 From the God of fear to the God of love

A certain fear of God is an image found in many religions, cultures, communities and individuals, and fear has some relationship with power. The greater the power of the other, and the greater our own feeling of inferiority, so much greater is the feeling of threat and the feeling of fear. Fear and power often go together, and they determine a lot of our behaviour. The establishing of a climate of fear facilitates domination and control. Fear makes people develop a false respect, so that they sometimes cover their faces in an attitude of fear and respect before the power, including before God. In religions, people often refer to God as sovereign and threatening, in order to quiet the fear that comes from the vulnerability and uncertainty

prevalent in themselves. Vulnerability and uncertainty often take fear and use it in order to have power and obtain the submission of others who are weak and fragile. The will to survive can lead people to be submissive and to develop different kinds of fear, real and imagined. We note that fear is an emotion that arises because of real threats that are physical and often external. Fear has often been used as a threat in order get people to seek God or in order to prevent sin and insist on conversion. For some people, God is a 'super-policeman' who controls everything by a look and who will demand an account of everything we do. He often appears to be more a God of vengeance than a God of love.

In opposition to all this, the New Testament defines God as love. The word God means a God Who loves, and whose being consists in loving. And Jesus is the image of God's love. He draws people to Himself, and all those who throughout the centuries have turned to Him in various situations have been welcomed, understood and healed. He conveys to us the true image of God. God is the partner of humanity in its growth towards completeness. The spiritual life consists in living this loving relationship with God. We come from goodness and love and we are meant for goodness and love. In the profoundest Christian vision, therefore, there is no place for fear or for the exploitation and manipulation of fear in terms of power. On the other hand, there is room for trusting confidence, welcoming, understanding. The experience of God's love is the best incentive to be good and to improve by opening ourselves up wholeheartedly to others in line with God's nature.

10.2 From the interventionist God to the intentional God

There exists a very widespread image of God the Almighty who directs all things and is omnipotent and omnipresent. The Credo of the Catholic Church begins with the words "I believe in God, the Father Almighty". This view sees everything that happens in this world as being willed by God, whether it be positive or negative, an occasion of great joy or a grave infirmity, good harvests or ecological and natural disasters, including the deaths of children. We have been brought up to accept it all as being the will of God. If it is true as they say that everything happens because God wants it to, then everything must have been previously fixed by Him one

⁴² Véase, para esto, Teilhard de Chardin, *Ciência e Cristo*.

way or another, and we end up with determinism by God, and there is no room or meaning for our freedom. This kind of fatalism leads to resignation, inhibition, the dulling of pain and passivity. Conformity to the supreme will of God helps to lessen the complexity in understanding things that happen and the deeper reasons for them. It makes for pacification and a diminution of personal suffering, especially in relation to things that happen which are beyond our comprehension, like the deaths of innocent children. Nevertheless, this attitude is a way of denying a life of freedom and autonomy which are the central characteristics of the human condition, and it can also signify a naive, infantile abandonment to God in which suffering is seen as connected in some way to a lack of love, so that the best thing to do is to trust in God and place Him in the centre of our lives, accepting whatever He wants of us. But God wants us to be free and responsible for many of the things that happen. He gave us intelligence and the ability to overcome pain and the other negative aspects related to human frailty.

This interventionist God frequently appears in our understanding of miracles, thinking that if we ask with faith, God is capable of working miracles to please his chosen ones. But why for some and not for others? If He is the God of love for every human individual, we cannot speak in terms of help being available through miracles for just a few, when, for example, thousands upon thousands are dying of cancer or in accidents and disasters. Instead of interpreting events as the action of God, we are called on to develop the healing power of personal and communitarian love, and to find ways of overcoming the various kinds of infirmities. It would be even worse to think that disasters are the will of God. Only a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and of the miracles of Jesus could maintain that kind of talk. Of course, we would all like to be the privileged ones whom God heals, but that does not match the idea of God's universal and gratuitous love for every human being, whether believers or not, Christians or not.

Our trust in the love of God leads us to ask that only 'his will be done'. This would lead to a diminution in the number of our petitions, since they could be seen as suggesting that God does not know what we need, and that He requires us and even demands us to ask Him for what we think is good for ourselves and others. But God is always concerned for our good and does everything for us. If something is lacking, it is largely due to our weakness

or to our individual, social or cultural resistance. *“The authentic response on our part should not be a petition. Rather, He is the One who is continually asking us to allow ourselves to be moved and persuaded by his grace”*,⁴³ by his love, by his salvific plan. God asks for our collaboration in the construction of his Kingdom.

God is present in the world as creator and sustainer, as the One who facilitates life and encourages us along the path of human development. That is his intention. He is not an interventionist God but an intentional one, and He has saving desires for all humanity and the whole created world. The happiness we feel when we meet goodness, kindness and truth shows us the way that will lead us to the ultimate goodness, love, truth and light. These healthy feelings mean that we are showing a loving obedience which respects our status as human beings, and that we are living with a chaste love in all the expressions of our human relationships. To imagine that God is enacting and directing everything in this world is to have a very bad idea of God. God created us as free beings and not as marionettes. The exercise of that freedom means we should be the ones who determine our actions with responsibility within our limitations and conditions, and that there is never any question of determinism. Our limitations do not come from God but from the human condition structured throughout the ages. God is ever present but He leaves the world in the hands of human beings. He is always with us.

A miracle-maker God would be an arbitrary, interventionist God, with no respect for our freedom. It is not possible to accept the idea that we can attribute to God the fact that one individual is cured or rescued from a dangerous situation, while thousands of others die in similar situations. The God of love cannot give special treatment to one person and abandon so many others to die in various ways. When someone is physically healed, it means certain natural forces intervened to make it possible, and we need to learn to understand those forces so as to apply them more and more in society. And can we say: ‘If God is love and He does not solve the problem of poverty and lack of peace, then it is because He does not want to or or that He is unable to’? Both those situations and considerations lead to the denial of God. Humanity needs to improve its understanding of the causes

⁴³ Queiruga. *Del terror de Isaac al Abbá de Jesús*, p. 234.

of evil and the forces of healing. Healing comes to one individual through the skill and love of another, especially those who are close to us. Overcoming evil and suffering is a challenge laid down to humanity. Beyond the possibility of miracles, there exists the spiritual force of goodness and love. Is there any cure available to us, physical, psychological or spiritual, that would bring about a personal and communitarian cure in us for all the deep-seated causes of evil? A cure that could be applied to past generations, to personal histories, to the present context in which we live and to the meaning of life in relation to the future? The best answer humanity can have lies in the healing power of a civilisation based on love.

Prayer. Something similar occurs when we hope for God's healing intervention, especially physical healing, as a result of prayers of petition. Prayer puts us in contact with God, and we know that He loves us. Prayer is a relationship of love. In prayer we turn to God in forms of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, asking for forgiveness, intercession, abandonment, listening, etc. The only really adult petition we can make to God consists in asking to know his will, so as to accept it and carry it out in our lives freely and without seeking any reward. Group prayer is very praiseworthy and supportive. What would not be appropriate would be to motivate spirituality and prayers in a narcissistic way, focussing on the benefits and advantages as incentives for us as individuals or for the little privileged group to which we belong. And we should not be motivated by maternal dependence in asking God for acceptance, security, comfort and affection, or by paternal dependence which needs someone to organise, protect and provide security in life.⁴⁴ These last two types of prayer of petition express characteristics of human immaturity, and they give rise to and encourage the development and continuation of false images of God. Such false images of God sustain expectations that are illusory or smack of magic. Often, the fact that prayers which ask God for something inappropriate are not answered leads some individuals or groups to abandon the faith and lose their trust in God. This, however, is the result of a false image of God and an inadequate form of prayer. The more truly human form of prayer consists in prayers of abandonment, seeking to know and follow the will of God.⁴⁵ Saint John

⁴⁴ A good example of the difference between mature and immature prayer can be seen in Carlos Domínguez Morano, *Orar después de Freud*.

⁴⁵ When wondering about eternity at the end of his life, Paul Ricoeur said: "Let God do with me what He wants".

Baptist de La Salle frequently stressed the need to entrust to God the work of human and Christian education. He realised and he proclaimed that the work is God's work, and that we must trust in Him. His work for the cause of human and Christian education was summed up at the end of his life in an iconic adult declaration of love, fidelity and trust. "I adore in all things the will of God in my regard."

10.3 From the God of sacrifice to the God of life

In various areas of late, repeated efforts have been made to create a Christianity that is more vital, festive and joyful, which is affirming and which emphasises life rather than tragic situations.⁴⁶ This more joyful view of life stands in contrast to the image widely held in the past of a God Who requires sacrifice, Who is thirsty for blood and Who did not rule out even the cruel sacrifice of his own Son. It was as if sacrifice and suffering in themselves were a positive moral sign. In some times and places, it was thought that the value of something was in proportion to the amount of sacrifice attached to it. Renunciation and sacrifice were highly valued, and the emphasis was placed on the value of willpower with little attention paid to affection and intelligence. None of this is supported in the Gospel. It reflects more the ideas of Christianity found in the vision of the Pauline Church (basically Greek, Roman, Jewish) rather than in that of Jesus Christ. With the exaltation of death and the cross, suffering is made sacred, and this has a series of negative consequences, some of them masochist. This view stresses the idea of a God who prohibits things by laws, commandments and regulations, and who threatens us with punishments which include hell. This is a God who orders, imposes, prevents and prohibits. However, it remains true that people and religions continue in all sincerity with the tendency towards the good, and so they establish laws which will guarantee life. Nevertheless, those laws reflect the characteristics of the times and cultures in which they are elaborated, and therefore they can be always be revised in the light of other key factors.

The vision of a God who controls and prohibits is based on the idea that God is opposed to satisfaction and pleasure. At any rate, the Church took a negative view of pleasure. This was in fact one of the positions it held for

⁴⁶ We recall *Evangelii Gaudium*, by Pope Francis.

centuries, and it was the grounds for developing doctrines of guilt around certain topics linked especially with pleasure and satisfaction. It was in this context that the idea developed that sacrifices are pleasing to God, along with fasting and sexual abstinence, as if God were opposed to human nature and to this world. Repression and sacrifice in themselves do not make an action morally good. We are good not because we keep the law, carry out the rituals and frequent the sacraments, but because God loves us, and we develop in ourselves everything that is like Him. The fact that God loves us is what makes us good. And God requires us to be ourselves and to be truly free, good, fraternal, welcoming and inclusive.

10.4 From the distant God to the God all around us and in Whom we exist

When talking about God, many people still think of 'up there' or 'out there'. For them, God is in heaven. The most popular prayer in the world begins with the words "*Our Father in heaven ...*", and it directs our thoughts to One Who is 'up above', and it suggests that where God is, freedom and happiness exist. We frequently catch ourselves looking upwards as we are praying, as if pointing to a place that is external, distant and unknown, somewhere in the sky that is viewed as God's place. Something that started as a symbol suggesting the divine transcendence is transformed into a vague location up in the clouds. Still today in catechesis and religious education, misuse is made in various ways of spatial vocabulary by representing God as being outside of us. The phenomenology of religion shows a development in the symbolic use of cosmic height, of the sky and of mountains, which are used to signify what is positive, good and important, while things that are 'down', like hell or the depths, are used to signify what is negative and evil. Our everyday language is permeated with this kind of spatial symbolism. So it is easy to see how the idea of God fits in with the polarity of 'high', 'up', 'sky' (as good) as opposed to 'down', 'lower', 'hell' (as bad). Such words are deeply rooted in the language we construct to express our lives.

These images have a negative aspect, since they place God outside of the world, as external and distant from human beings. In this way, God is turned into an observer, watching over and controlling the world, superior to it and not very interested in things of this world, not very close to us. As we have already mentioned, this view has led to increased importance being attached

to mediators such as Mary and the Saints. Indeed, as human beings we want to be close to those we love and those who love us, including God.

In fact, God is within us and in all that exists. We are in God and God is in us. *“In Him we live and move and have our being.”* (Acts 17: 28). We are not alone and never will be alone. God dwells in us and will always be with us. We find ourselves in God.

Intimacy and transcendence are two aspects that need to be kept in mind when we talk of the presence or the indwelling of God in us and in all that exists. The thought that we are in God can give us a feeling of being accepted and understood, and that can be a big stimulus to our trying to be like Him, as well as a guiding principle for a life lived in goodness, freedom, responsibility, happiness and peace.

10.5 From the individualistic God to the God in solidarity

Today, there is a kind of individualistic Christianity arising from spiritual trends which see religion as dealing with the development of interiority, without much value attached to caring for one's neighbour. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, the development of this kind of religious feeling is encouraged to some extent by the clergy.⁴⁷ Many of these teachings or philosophies adopt an approach which neutralises negative aspects and cuts us off from anything that might promote sensitivity to suffering in the world and all the cries for some kind of salvation. Such personal forms of faith and religion have been criticised especially for their withdrawn, narcissistic nature and for their lack of social involvement, and this criticism has mostly focussed on the fundamentalist religious sects. However, there are certain forms clericalism, promoted by very traditional clerics who are self-centred and intent on power and prestige, which embody for many an exaggeratedly individualist side to spirituality. Religion should include dimensions that are both horizontal and vertical, personal and communitarian. In other words, it is essential to ensure some form of social commitment as well as ways of relating to the transcendent. It is important that progress in interior growth through a fundamental Christian option should be accompanied by

⁴⁷ Liberation theology calls attention to the horizontal and communitarian dimension of the faith. We are witnessing the multiplication of fundamentalist sects and clericalist groups which are quite individualistic and narcissistic.

the sharing of faith in community which celebrates life and the different manifestations of the Kingdom present within it. Sharing the faith is directly related to charity and helping others. The Acts of the Apostles, 6: 1-5, points to the three characteristic actions of a Christian, namely prayer, proclaiming the gospel and providing a service of charity to the needy. When we look at history and examine it in terms of the four dimensions of faith and religion (horizontal and vertical, personal and communitarian), we can see the difficulty in maintaining the right balance between them while respecting all their aspects. A still greater challenge comes when we try to develop them creatively and energetically with all one's heart, mind and will. In some periods of history, emphasis was laid on the vertical dimension, in others on the horizontal dimension and still others on the individual or communitarian dimensions. Placing the stress on one or more aspects may be the result of external circumstances and also of personal dynamics linked to maturity and objectivity. These imbalances interfere with our understanding of God, and they influence the attributes we give to Him and the expectations we have in relation to Him.

The Kingdom of God is something very human, and that means that the cause of humanity is God's cause, and it is not so much a question of cult or religious actions but more one of liberation, healing and reinsertion into the community. Liberation means deliverance from those things to which people are attached and which prevent them from being truly human. In other words, it means deliverance from the demoniacal, the healing of physical and psychological infirmity and the healing of a lack of meaning in the spiritual domain. Jesus teaches us that helping other human beings out of goodness, love, kindness, hospitality and mercy is the best way to ensure our access to God.

Violence and the death cannot have their origin in God. God is the God of peace, and those who believe in God should be peacemakers. Since God is peace, religions should contribute to the construction of peace. God is the God of all human beings and not just of those who think they are privileged because they perform certain rites and cults and follow certain moral systems. Salvation is for all, and God wants all people to be really free and responsible. The process of holistic human development is the challenge facing Christians in the construction of the Kingdom of God. In their work of human and Christian education, our educational communities have an important role to play in ensuring a balanced and adult expression of the faith.

For reflection:

It is really hugely challenging, when we undertake to give people a wonderful experience of God, both personal and communitarian. Through discussion, we can try to better understand the different aspects involved by considering their historical and cultural development and the benefits of adhering to certain ways of looking at God.

How can we overcome all these various kinds of "idolatry"? How can we make our life and that of the ecclesial, educational or family community a saving experience as intended by the God of love, the God of life, Who is in us as we are in Him, and Who is in solidarity with us? How can we communicate this to others?

11. SOME PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS

One of the elements that has contributed most to the continued power of the cultural image of a rather distant God lies in the role played by authority and in the way it is exercised. Religious feelings and faith will always exist. Nobody lives without believing in something. *“For that reason, it is important that everybody should be able to declare (to themselves in the first place) what is the central aspect to which their freedom is attracted, and what is the fundamental ideal that directs and determines their impulses and desires. According to this understanding of God (as the fundamental desire which moves freedom), there is no such thing as a human person who has no God and hence has no faith.”*⁴⁸ Everyone has faith. The difference lies in the object or person that is the reference for their faith. That is why everyone should be able to declare, to themselves in the first place, what is their own fundamental philosophical faith, in the sense of the origin of their desires and the deeper motivations which unify their lives. As Mancuso says, *“With a tendency to the good and a desire for the good, and not only for my good but also, as far as possible, for the good of all, the common good which we call justice”*.⁴⁹ For some people today, the contents of what is understood by faith in God is expressed in terms of ideology, security, the power of money and financial resources,⁵⁰ and this all comes under the heading of what we call ‘idolatry’. There is a certain relationship between the disappearance or weakening of faith in God and the subsequent multiplication of fragile structures, religious, political, educational, family and others. This results in a weakening of faith and a searching for other forms of security which then become other gods. Money is one of those gods of today. From this it follows in the long term that people feel an existential vacuum and a lack of meaning in life. That favours the emergence of various radical life options, and they could include the possibility of self-destructiveness. Putting one’s faith in anything other than God can lead individuals and groups to destroy themselves and others. Jesus presents us with the true God, and our faith acquires meaning when this God of Jesus becomes the ultimate point of reference for our freedom and for our individual, communitarian and social responsibility.

⁴⁸ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo destino*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Mancuso, *Dio e il suo destino*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Cf. Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus. Breve historia del futuro. (A brief History of Tomorrow)*. Firenze e Milano, Giunti Editore, 2017. (Translation from the English by Marco Piani).

In the face of this scenario, it is necessary to contextualise the experience of God in order to allow God to be God. It is also important to overcome the idolatrous views of God developed by cultures and by individuals. These views of God have endured over the course of time, because they answer the needs that gave rise to their creation, and they are not just a secondary matter of individual or collective gain. Although the idea behind their creation may have been a sound one, in time they have produced effects which are lacking in humanity. Many of these idolatrous views were created by individuals and groups in power so as to keep people in submission, justifying the elimination of innocent opponents and treating the population like children. We are all aware of the systems of blame and repression that have been created to obtain power, and the way in which many moral systems have been set up to ensure an obedience that has more to do with dependence than growth or virtue, and how certain forms of conduct are highlighted because they are considered meritorious. There has been some exaggeration in the way virtues have been made out of blind obedience, repentance, humility and the abstention from any form of pleasure. In addition to all that, doctrines about authority have so often been presented as ‘the voice of God’. Authority does not possess the privilege of being the exclusive recipient of God’s revelation. God is manifested to every human being, as well as to those authority. Legitimate authority points to God when it shows kindness, welcoming, mercy and when it is inspired by gratuitous love to produce good.

God cannot be vindictive, moody or repenting, and He cannot punish and create ritual structures of suffering like scapegoats or purgatories. God shows Himself as One who seeks to stimulate the full development of our human potential on the basis of love. Many individuals experience and express a love that is free and respectful. They are drawn to the God of Jesus. All the various forms of leadership tend to reflect a transference of some idea of God and a need for security. In many types of leadership, power is exercised as coercion or as recompense, as a benchmark or as a specialised means for producing growth in all. Hence those who exercise any kind of leadership bear great responsibility for all the others.⁵¹ It is the responsibility of those

⁵¹ French & Raven goes into these various ways of exercising of power, including by legitimate authority. See also Pe Rulla in *Antropologia da Vocação Cristã*. He also deals with the possible long-term effects for individuals and institutions in terms of complacency, identification and internalisation. Most of the forms of power and influence described by French & Raven keep people in a false stage of development which is not adult.

who are legitimately invested with power to create structures that support growth, equality, justice and the holistic development of everybody.

We do need the cultural God, because healthy views of God are also found in our culture. But we must always remember that the essential thing is not to use those cultural features which show negativity in feelings, such as moodiness, aggressiveness or blaming, when talking about the way God is. There are many healthy cultural features that facilitate an approach to God and his nature, and they need to be integrated into our daily living and social structures. These positive forms can be a stimulus for all and a sign that the path being taken in human development is the right path for humanity to come to God.

Culture can develop a good understanding of God. The Gospel has become a very useful point of reference for a healthy image of God. It presents God as light, love, justice, and goodness. In relation to the world, God reveals Himself in his goodness, mercy, welcoming reception and hospitality, in his profound respect for human freedom and responsibility, in his healing and salvific presence.

An improved vision of God leads to an improvement in morality and judgements, and it gives us a more balanced view of others. It also leads us to practise welcoming hospitality, fraternity, listening, kindness, joy, mercy and sensitivity. It brings us likewise to make a doctrinal revision of our idea of God. It brings about a qualitative change in our manner of praying and making petitions, in the way we use the texts of the liturgies and celebrations and in our apostolic plans and actions. Sometimes our prayers can be routine and our petitions can be narcissistic or extremely infantile in their dependence on God.

We should avoid too much negativity in our approach to God. Human life itself needs to be seen more as something positive, incentivising, fostering good experiences and the satisfaction that comes from carrying out good actions. We humans need recognition, appreciation, stimulation and love. Dwelling on negative memories simply reinforces the bad feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, and this can have a bad effect on individuals, especially in their subconscious dimension, which shows up in their communication with their environment. It is important for us to have healthy references in our interpretation of the world and the full reality of

the human condition. It is moreover stimulating for us to use a vocabulary of recognition in order promote our self-esteem. The “Joy of the Gospel” can express our good experiences and our experience of God as love, light, truth, justice and goodness. In order to become re-educated in this way of seeing things and acting, we will need to exercise great vigilance, collaboration and collective effort in promoting human development in every individual, every group and every culture.

For reflection:

Many ideas of God were created and maintained by different kinds of authority as a form of power. God manifests Himself in his love in ways that improve life.

How can we promote a better experience of God, one which will inspire us to commit ourselves to making the effort to be more like Him, experiencing the happiness of salvation and joyful hope?

**12. THINGS THAT CAN FACILITATE A
WISE UNDERSTANDING OF GOD
AND OF HIS ACTIVITY AS MERCY
AND KINDNESS**

A deep discernment of the will of God puts every individual person face to face with God and with all defences down. That allows them to feel free from any pressure arising from ideas of fear, guilt and insecurity, and it ensures that peace, harmony and happiness will predominate. Consequently, prayers that were originally created as formulas recapitulating the story of God's relations with humanity require a certain amount of adaptation in order remain faithful to the experience that gave rise to them. On the other hand, they also require a reapplication to present experiences and in the language of our time. It is important to recall that God accompanies his people, is compassionate and merciful, gives blessings to the thousandth generation,⁵² sends us the sun every day, loves every human being totally and infinitely, knows what we need without our having to ask, sends us his love and gives us the commission to show love by the fulfilment of a specific work. It is right to pray in thanksgiving and praise and to ask God for the grace to know and do his will faithfully and patiently. We ask God to help us eliminate poverty, violence and failings in love. These sad wounds of humanity are the fruit of our fragility and the various temptations into which we fall, and they accentuate the difficulty human beings have in fulfilling the work of human development in freedom and with responsibility. Humanity has been given the responsibility of working to overcome evil. In some cases, our efforts have had good results, but in others we have hardly started. The core of Lasallian education associates us with this mission.

In prayer we also ask for the courage to promote human dignity, especially of those who are most wounded in their dignity in the different cultures, social conditions and ages. Praying for the grace to know the will of God and have the courage to carry it out forms the nucleus of our prayer, and in it we feel united to others and to the general project of humanity. The feeling that we are supported by being united to other human beings in the task of human development produces a praiseworthy power in all of us. According to Gesché,⁵³ it would be a good idea if, in saying the Our Father, we were to add after the 'deliver us from evil' the phrase 'deliver us from fear'. Similarly, when it comes to the idea of fatalism, Christianity warns us that we should not live in fear or allow ourselves to be guided by fear. A relationship with

⁵² "I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love down to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." Ex 20, 5-6.

⁵³ Gesché, Adolphe, *Jesucristo*, p. 54.

God without fear gives birth to a surprisingly new and freer humanity, one which needs to be more and more recognised and celebrated.

We offer prayers of praise for life, for the good that takes place in the universe, and we unite ourselves to all those who have been faithful to God in the course of history. We give thanks for the incarnation and the power in Jesus and for all that He means to people, as individuals or groups, throughout the universe. We ask that his presence may continue to be significant for all of us. We accept our weaknesses and limitations, and we resolve as individuals and as a culture to live responsibly in order to diminish evil. We pray that we may have the strength to bring about the Kingdom of God today and tomorrow. We ask for the grace and strength to show goodness and mercy to all those entrusted to us in our apostolic activity.

Our liturgies and celebrations become more of an expression of our life, in which we see what we have achieved and what we lack, so that in the light of God's word and of events we may adopt a way of life that is filled with reconciliation and peace. The communitarian dimension of our celebration of life produces the peace we desire and is a sign of the Kingdom of God, and thus it gives us the energy to continue to do good.

The processes of education, especially of Lasallian education, tell us to leave to one side the anthropomorphisms which look on God more as One who controls and punishes in the way authorities have often emphasised. As a result, there is a development in the process of growth which finds an echo in all aspects of human life, and a similar effect takes place in our image of God, when it develops into the expression of an adult experience of God's love. This revision of the images of God in the process of growth involves a culturally relevant reading of the Bible and an understanding that certain items of terminology attributed to God are overly human. As we have said above, given that we cannot avoid a God with culturally determined features, at least they should not include features with a negative connotation. On the contrary, they need to be solely positive, and as much as possible they should present God as love, light, truth and ultimate goodness.

For reflection:

The important thing is to pray in dialogue with God in order to know his will and to ask for the strength to carry it out.

What is the central element in my prayer? How does it relate to our experience as adults on the way to maturity? What ways of thinking and acting might facilitate our prayer? How can we help our pupils to pray?

13. FAITH IN OUR GOD

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that God is love.⁵⁴ Light and love are practically the same thing, and it is they that move the universe. “*God, infinite light, whose immeasurable mystery was perceived by Greek philosophers, this God has a human face and, we may add, a human heart*”. God revealed to us this new expression of a love which led Him to assume that human face of flesh and blood, with all that it means to be human. “*We need to remind ourselves repeatedly that the love of God and our neighbour is the central essence of Christian life*”. The spiritual God is goodness and justice, love and truth. We look towards Him, and are recognised by Him because of our goodness, joy, hospitality, fraternity, sensitivity and the curing and relieving of suffering, which are all signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God. That is true not so much of the God of religions, Who is mainly a cultural God, but of the spiritual God,⁵⁵ Who is total positivity and stimulates life for the good, for intimacy, for communion and fraternity.

In order to have access to this God, we could follow the shortcut used frequently by the Church in its catechesis to present the gospel message about God. In it, the faithful are invited to adhere to Jesus, to identify with Him and internalise his attitudes so as to come to a Christian, evangelical commitment. However, we know that, as a result of the many anthropomorphisms attributed to God, a whole moral, doctrinal and ritual structure has emerged for individuals and communities today, and that for many they are an obstacle to the development of a mature faith in God. In contrast, we should undoubtedly opt to follow the slower way, the more ‘indirect’ path to God by recognising Him in mediators, namely parents, family members, teachers and religious leaders. That is the human path of kindness, hospitality and gratuity, and it is the responsibility of all, especially those in religious, political and educational authority, as well as of parents or close relatives and friends and of anyone entrusted with a mission of ‘salvation’ in any way. Experiences of love, kindness, hospitality, listening, understanding, solidarity, healing and mercy are an invitation to recognise God in them. In this way, God will be recognised, loved and seen as expressed in those same characteristics.

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, Zenit, 23 January, 2006.

⁵⁵ In this connection, see also the idea of God that emerges in testimonies of clinical deaths (near-death experiences), as published by Raymond Moody. Youtube: *Life after life*.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle made it one of his educational practices to regularly recall the presence of God, and he bequeathed to the Institute the spirit of faith and zeal in order to express this saving presence. We recognise this presence when we say the salutation Live, Jesus, in our hearts! For ever! The document from the General Chapter of 1986 entitled Declaration on the Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today, provided some practical ways of understanding and experiencing the spiritual God in the educational mission. The Centre of the Institute has just published a *Declaration on the Lasallian Mission*.⁵⁶ It contains many significant elements, but the first part summarises our living inheritance, especially its foundation in human fraternity, in the fundamental insights of De La Salle, and in the idea of shared mission in our new situations. The fourth part is of special importance from the point of view of our present text, because it looks to the future and the challenges to come for the educational mission. It recalls, among other things, the concrete form of our action together and by association, in total human solidarity with one another.

For reflection:

Nowadays, God is recognised not so much by intellectual understanding as by the salvific attitudes of individuals, especially the significant individuals who are close to us.

Can I talk to others about the presence of God in certain individuals in my life and in our community? What were their attitudes? How did they inspire me to live better, and how did they bring me to God? How could we be more creative today in helping our pupils to discover and/or to deepen their faith in God?

⁵⁶ De La Salle Brothers. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission, Challenges, Convictions and Hopes*. Casa Generalizia – Rome, 2020.

14. SOME CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

We have finished our survey of the topic of God as a reality and a cultural and spiritual experience. In the survey, we have sought to call attention to the diverse understandings of God and their existence within cultures. The exercise introduced the idea that some views are healthy, while others are not so healthy because they are overly human, especially the views influenced by our wounded limitations, by our structural and social experiences and by social or religious authorities.

We have seen how the different understandings of God have their origins in the different aspects and levels of human maturity or immaturity. Although it is possible for spiritual development to follow a rhythm different from the psychological one, the stronger tendency is for human maturity and spiritual maturity to develop at the same pace. In this way, we allow God to be God, and we accept our freedom and responsibility as human beings and move nearer to full and complete maturity. The beauty of being 'in God' gives total meaning to our personal and social life. It is desirable that this should be reflected in our prayers, rituals, doctrines and social structures.

Our faith is filled with meaning when we can live in the image and likeness of God Who is love, beauty and fullness of light. Idolatrous and mistaken understandings of God can be obstacles to the efforts to humanise all humanity. We all need to be ready to make the commitment to living in God with love, freedom, responsibility, mercy, kindness and hospitality. It is down to us to ensure this saving presence in the world of education by helping those involved to grow in human maturity and to be adults in their faith in Christ. We may not be able to do everything to ensure that those who have entrusted themselves to us will be adult and free, but we can do our best for every single one of those whom God in his providence has entrusted to us. The work of salvation is from God, and it has been revealed to us fully by Jesus Christ. God expects the Church to carry out its mission until it is complete, and the Church is made up of a diversity of human expressions and charisms, including our Institute. So, the salvific mission of promoting holistic human development comes from God and is entrusted to us. It is down to each one of us to develop an awareness of this saving mission and to feel happy and honoured to be committed to it through human and Christian education, especially for those in greatest need.

For reflection:

In the light of this overview, which aspects caught your attention most, and which aspects can we develop into life-long projects for our lives and mission? Are there any other aspects that would be important for making our lives more Christian as expressions of the cause of the Kingdom of Jesus Who died and has risen?

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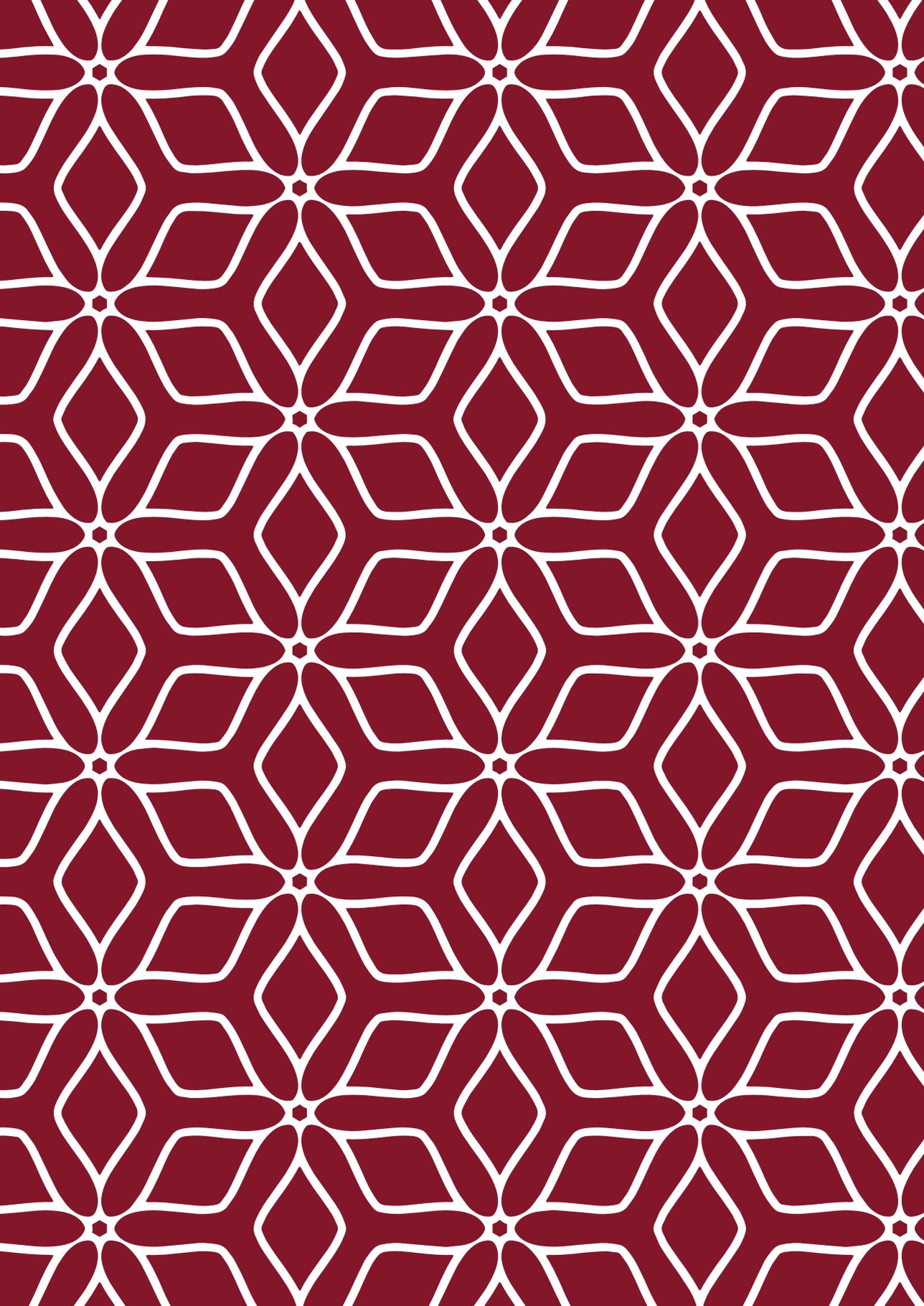
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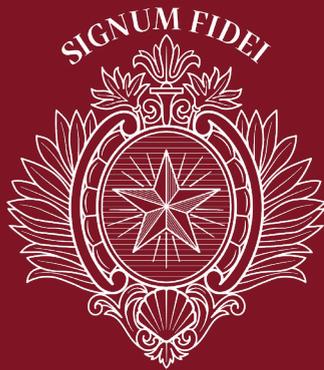
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