



Ron Hansen. "The first and foremost way of finding God for me is in the Eucharist and in other sacraments and rites."

How Can I Find God? Another Look

Two years ago *AMERICA* published a collection of 25 brief essays by a number of notable personalities (9/30/95). The editor, James Martin, S.J., put to his respondents the following question: "If someone were to ask you: *How can I find God?* what would you say?" The contributors were to imagine the questioner as a close friend, with no specific religious background. This month those answers will be published, along with some 50 more responses, in *How Can I Find God?* (Triumph/Liguori Publications, 1-800-325-9521). The new collection greatly expands the scope of the original article; Mr. Martin has included not only some of the "famous" but also some "not-so-famous" people from across the country, as well as contributors from six different religious traditions: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Native American and Buddhist. We present here a few of the new essays.

THE REV. DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, S.J., is professor of New Testament at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass. Father Harrington, an internationally recognized Scripture scholar, is the general editor of the journal *New Testament Abstracts* and the *Sacra Pagina* series of books. He is also the author of many scholarly articles and books, including *How to Read the Gospels* and *Interpreting the New Testament*.

I find God largely in and through the Bible. Most of my academic, spiritual, and pastoral life revolves around the Bible. It is for me the most important way to come to know, love, and serve God.

My love for the Bible goes back a long way. I stutter. I always have, and I guess I always will. As a young boy I read in a newspaper that Moses stuttered. I looked it up in the Bible, and sure enough in Exodus 4:10 Moses says to God: "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." But I found much more in Exodus 3-4. It is the story of God's self-revelation to Moses at Mount Horeb. It tells about the burning bush, the suffering of God's people Israel in Egypt, the revelation of the special divine name ("I am who I am"), God's promise of liberation from slavery, Moses' miraculous powers, and God's call to Moses to speak on God's behalf. I read that story over and over, and it gradually worked upon me so that it has shaped my religious consciousness to this day. As a boy of ten or eleven years of age I found God in the Bible, and I have continued to do so ever since.

As a Jesuit priest and professor of biblical studies I have been able to blend my profession



Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

"... to find God is to find the whole human family."

TOP PHOTO: DAVID LITTSCHWAGER

When she read the original article in *AMERICA* magazine, Jean Shea, who teaches computer skills at the St. Thomas School in Crystal Lake, Illinois, thought that the question, "How can I find God?" might be a good one to use for a typing exercise in class. "I try to make the word processor interesting to all ages," she explained. After some consideration, Mrs. Shea decided that her seventh-grade class would be an ideal class to answer the question. Three of their answers follow.

I find God in kids and babies. I think it's neat to see how kids grow, not only on the outside, but how they grow smarter and grow on the inside too. Kids can always cheer you up. You can really see a miracle in children.

I have a cousin, Bernadette, who reminds me of this. I have seen her grow up from when she was born to now, age four. She is very special because she is alive. She had whooping cough when she was a baby and was in a coma. It was amazing that she lived. We are all very happy to have her, and now she has a sister who is very healthy.

Jackie Chybik

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I find God in everything, but mostly in animals. They help me in everything, like in hard times. I always thought I can talk to the animals. A river otter is one of my favorite animals. I think I resemble a river otter's personality. They love water just like I do. Indians hunted the river otter. Indians hunt for food and I hunt for good grades and special feelings. When I look at people like Indians, I find God. God is trusting, loving, and caring. River otters, Indians, and all of us are all alike because we are all hunting for God.

Robert Schrempf

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I find God through dogs because dogs are full of love. They always make you feel better when you feel down. They make you feel special and loved. Dogs protect and guide you and give you companionship, just like God.

I have a dog at home named Mollie. When I go home at night I play with her, and she always brightens up my day.

Like I said, dogs are always there for you. If you take care of them, they will take care of you. Even though dogs cannot talk, they still love, just like God.

Katie Drury

and my love for the Bible. Many of my happiest personal experiences have taken place in the academic study of the Bible: reading the first chapter of John's Gospel in Greek, beginning the study of Hebrew, earning a doctorate in biblical languages and cultures from Harvard University, teaching Scripture to theology students, and preaching on the Scriptures every Sunday for over twenty-five years. As general editor of *New Testament Abstracts* since 1972 I see everything in the academic study of the New Testament. The Bible never grows wearisome or stale for me. I am deeply in love with the Bible as God's word.

Those who find God in the Bible often surround their experience with theological terms such as inspiration, revelation, inerrancy, canon, authority, and normativity. These terms have long histories and name significant theological realities. But more fundamental is the hermeneutical process that I illustrated above with reference to Exodus 3-4.

We bring to the biblical text ourselves, our experiences, our personal strengths and limits, our communal and individual identities. The Bible itself is a collection of books, written at different times and in different places. The Old Testament contains narratives about ancient Israel's patriarchs and kings, law codes, prophetic oracles, songs of praise and laments, proverbs, wisdom instructions, love poems, and apocalyptic visions. The New Testament consists of four accounts of Jesus' life and teachings, stories about the apostles, letters from Paul and other early Christian writers, and an apocalyptic prophecy.

Biblical scholars try to understand the books of Scripture with the methods of literary, historical, and theological analysis. They make available tools that enable readers today to understand and appreciate the text better than they could do on their own. And yet the Bible is not simply an object of antiquarian research or words on a page (no matter how sacred). In the encounter between the reader and the text the "word of God" comes alive. Something can and does happen. In that encounter—whether it takes the form of silent or oral reading, literary analysis, or preaching—the word of God comes alive for me. I see analogies, points of contact, between what the biblical text describes and my life. As I discover and articulate those analogies I develop a language for thinking and talking about the experience of God and about human existence. This in turn shapes my way of living and how I interact with others. And the whole circle of experience, biblical texts, assimilation of the text, and praxis—the hermeneutical circle—begins again.

The "word of God" is not identical with the text of the Bible. For me, it refers to the whole process of encountering God in and through the Scriptures. From the Bible we come to know the God of our religious tradition and what it means to be God's people. With the help of the Psalms we learn to express both our thanks and praise to God as well as our sadness and anger. We find what hope means through the prophets and seers. We meet Jesus of Nazareth whom we confess to be the "Word of God." In and through the Word/word, God tells us who God is and what God wants us to be and do. The Epistles show what it means to live out Christian faith amidst the realities of a sometimes dangerous and hostile world—one nevertheless under the sovereignty of God and his Messiah.

The encounter with God through the Bible cannot be programmed or forced. According to the Bible (and especially Exodus 3-4), God takes the initiative in this relationship and leads us where God wants us to go. There is, however, an ancient, simple, and effective framework for facilitating encounter with God through the Bible. It is often called by its Latin name, *lectio divina* (divine, or spiritual, reading).

There are four steps in *lectio divina*: reading (What does the text say?), meditation (What is God saying to me through this text?), prayer (What

do I want to say to God on the basis of this text?), and action (What difference can this text make in how I act? What possibilities does it open up? What challenges does it pose?).

The God of the Bible is the God of Jesus Christ. I experience this God in and through the Bible and my life. It is my privilege as a Jesuit priest to study and teach Scripture, to proclaim and preach God's word, and to celebrate the church's liturgies (which are largely cast in the language of

start my answer by reflecting on the values which were taught to me by my parents. My parents were generous and loving, and their faith helped to shape all of their children as individuals and as a family. In our home, faith and prayer were important values, and, as the years went on, Mother established the tradition of all the family saying the rosary together on special occasions or, sometimes, just sitting on the porch after dinner. Through her example, Mother



Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. *"I am deeply in love with the Bible as God's word."*

the Bible). In the midst of these wonderful activities (which are my greatest joy) I occasionally stutter. And this brings me back to where my spiritual journey with the Bible began. Though I am slow of speech and tongue like Moses, I still hear the words of Exodus 4:11-12: "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

THE HONORABLE JEAN KENNEDY SMITH is the U.S. ambassador to Ireland, appointed to this post by President Bill Clinton in 1993. In 1974 Mrs. Smith founded Very Special Arts, an educational organization affiliated with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which provides artistic opportunities for individuals with mental and physical disabilities. Ambassador Smith currently lives in Dublin, Ireland.

If someone were to ask me about finding God, I would

showed us that prayer was part of our everyday lives—that it was important to attend church on Sunday, but that it was equally important to stop in for a visit when we were shopping in town. In that way, we came to think of religion as a conscious search, rather than an authoritative demand, as something that enriches our life, rather than restricts it.

Over the years, I have become more and more aware of the many different ways in which one can search for God. There is no single path. In my work with artists, some who have overcome significant physical and mental challenges, I have often been impressed by the way in which they have found grace through their artistic expression. Through the arts, possibly unlike any experience, a person is able to transcend limitations, explore the imagination and discover the unknown. This process of discovery can awaken for all of us the profound wonders and the deep meaning in our lives.

The knowledge that spirituality reveals itself in many diverse places and forms has made me more aware of the intrinsic value of the different religions throughout our world. In my life, I have been privileged to witness a variety

PHOTO: GARY GILBERT

of religious traditions, each with its own richness and beauty, each marked by prayer and fidelity as pathmarks which point toward God.

I think that we need all need to realize that God and the search for faith are truly universal, and that there are many ways to express belief and to search for that which lies beyond. Our search for God is, I think, a search for a better humanity, one in which there is love and compassion for all people. It must be rooted in these values and marked by an openness and understanding of the diversity of human expression.

CHRIS ERICKSON works on the farm that has been in his family for over one hundred years. His ancestors emigrated from Sweden, settling in Nebraska in 1884. On his farm Chris grows 2,000 acres of corn, 100 of alfalfa, and 50 of wheat. Chris's education, a degree in agricultural economics from the University of Nebraska, and his family's experience have helped him to maintain a profitable livelihood, and one that he enjoys. "As a farmer, you're your own boss and can make your own decisions," he says. "Plus, I love working outside."

Chris, 33, was raised as a Lutheran and continues to attend church on a regular basis in his hometown of Holdrege, Nebraska.

If someone were to ask how to find God, I would smile and tell them that I see God every day. Being a farmer requires one to work with the earth and nature, and I cannot think of one occupation outside the clergy that would expose a person to God and His Creation more than farming. From the planting of the seeds through the harvesting of the grain, I see God's plan at work all the time. The complexity and magnificent aura of nature as well as the constant order under which it functions lead me to believe that only a Supreme Being could have come up with the idea for its existence.

I also see God in people: These may be people I work with, do business with, worship with, or friends whom I share spare time with. What better source for finding God than people? For we are created after His likeness. God is evident all around us and is easy to find, but in order to do this, one must first have faith in God. Without faith it can be difficult to find God.

To be a Christian requires an act of faith. My own faith has grown through my life and God's presence has become much clearer. I see Him in the daily work I do as a farmer.

Farming can be a very labor-intensive occupation. Many

long, hard hours are spent planting the seeds, tilling the fields, watering the crops, and harvesting the grain. But I have nothing to do with the seeds sprouting, the plant growing, or the production of grain that occurs within the plant. When God created the Earth, He had a master plan for how nature would work. Humans can't make seeds sprout or plants grow; it is God's plan through nature that does the work. All of this is a continuation of my personal relationship with God. In that relationship, faith is the key factor. When I plant the seeds, I have faith they will sprout. If I irrigate the plants, I have faith they will grow. Being a farmer allows me to experience God's Creation and my relationship with Him on both a physical and spiritual basis.

My assumptions of God's presence in nature are based on the fact that God created the Heavens and the Earth. Though I am no expert on the scientific origins of the Earth, I find it difficult to believe that Creation was just something that "happened." The complexity that occurs in nature leads me to believe that a higher being had responsibility. The intricate way in which matter is formed, via numerous bonding processes of atoms and molecules and the complexity of genes and chromosomes in animals and humans, demonstrates to me that only a highly intelligent being could have been the architect of our universe. There is also an order to Creation. The law of gravity, the sunrise and sunset, and the seasonal changes are just a few examples of the orderly way in which the Earth functions. All of this, combined with the magnificent glory of God's Creation, such as the natural beauty of the land and

sky, and the vastness of the oceans, makes me believe that God is our Creator, as is described in Genesis.

How can we find God? He is all around us. The essence of our very existence. When we look at God's Creation, we see the wonderful work of the Almighty Hand. I find God in the soil I till, the crops I grow, and the water I use—all working together to provide food for many around the world and myself with a living. I see God in other people through their acts of kindness and caring. And I believe you can find God in the way our universe functions, in the intricate and magnificent way it operates and the consistent order with which it functions—all of which point to God as its Creator. If you have faith, all you have to do is open your eyes, and God is easy to find.

FREDERICK BUECHNER is the author of twenty-seven works of fiction and non-fiction including the



Frederick Buechner. "... you will eventually find God whether you want to or not."

autobiographical books *Telling Secrets*, *Now and Then*, *The Sacred Journey* as well as *Godric*, the story of a medieval monk, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Mr. Buechner studied at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and served as a teacher and chaplain at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire during the 1960s. Today he lives in Hobe Sound, Florida.

Today Dee works as a receptionist at St. Aloysius Church in Harlem, New York City. Together with her late husband, Dee raised one child, Laverne, now forty, and is the proud grandmother of two girls. Dee decided to answer the question orally, in what turned out to be a lively monologue.

First of all, everybody has some kind of problem in their life. And you usually find God when things aren't all good.



Deotha Armstrong. "If God didn't breathe life into your mother's womb, well, believe me, you wouldn't be here."

Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit are the words C. G. Jung had chiseled into his stone lintel in Switzerland, which mean, freely translated, that you will eventually find God whether you want to or not. If you want to (even if you don't happen to believe he exists) all you have to do is find some quiet place, be quiet inside yourself, and ask Him to let you find Him (or Him you). As far as I know, it is a prayer that is always answered.

DEOTHA ARMSTRONG, at the age of six, was sent to a Catholic grammar school in her Harlem neighborhood. The following year Dee decided she wanted to make her First Communion along with her classmates. One of the nuns told her this might prove difficult since her parents might not approve. So Dee decided to ask her parents to become Catholic. "But you're only eight years old!" said the nun. "But what's the problem?" replied Dee, "God is God all over!" Thus began a process which led to Dee (and eventually her parents) joining the Catholic Church.

Usually, when there's a problem in your life you're looking for some sort of help, some kind of connection, because it's a heavy burden. And I always feel you should be able to go directly to God. Because, first of all, he made you, so he knows you better than anybody. He loves you. And all he is doing is waiting for you to ask him.

Now, he's not a fast person, he is a sure person. Swiftmess is *not* his best thing. So you have to realize that when you ask him to help you it will not be done in the next breath. Sometimes it is, but nine times out of ten it will be done in his time, not your time. But you have to have that faith to know that he will come to your rescue. Regardless of what it is. It could be something as simple as looking for a shoestring. You're in your house looking for that shoestring and saying, "God, where is that shoestring?" And you look up and down and say, "Look, Lord, you know where it is. Help me out. I need this!" And sure enough, you find it. You can say, "Oh, it was here all the time," but hey, did he come through?

When it comes to looking for God, if you even don't

PHOTO: JOHN TOOLAN

know what to look for, I would say that you're looking for peace of mind. Here's a situation: After working for an insurance company for 31 years I was fired. I was devastated. You know, 31 years of your life, and then someone calls you in one afternoon and says, "You no longer work here!" What?

At that point you're really in a dilemma. You know that this is your livelihood. What are you going to do? Who can you turn to?

When the man was firing me I said, "I can't believe this is true, but I don't believe God will allow you to close this door—which is my bread and butter—unless he had another door to open. So, knowing that he must have another door, and it *has* to be better than this after 31 years, I will leave and walk out of here knowing that he must have something else better for me." And, of course, he thought, "Oh yeah, that's a beautiful outlook," but I was serious.

True, I'm blessed because I know I can turn to God. But let's say you don't even know if he *exists* or not, OK? Now, if someone approaches me, and people have after something drastic happens, and says, "What am I going to do?" I'd say, first of all, you have to just sit yourself down and get yourself together. And the only person who knows you better than anybody is God, whether you believe it or not. Remember, you would not be in this world if he didn't make you. So you would go to the Creator. It's just like if you wanted a dress you'd go to the dressmaker, if you wanted your hair done you'd go to the hairdresser. So let's go to the beginning of this situation: Let's go to God.

Now, what do you say when you get there? You just speak on the situation. Not that he doesn't *know* the situation! He is *well* aware of the situation. But you need to voice it and let it come out of you. You need to say, "God, I am in trouble, I need some help. Please help me." Now, I was once told by a priest—and it's good advice—that when you're in big trouble sometimes you don't know how to pray, but "Lord, have mercy" is more than sufficient.

You know, you wouldn't be here without God. If God didn't breathe life into your mother's womb, well, believe me, you wouldn't be here. So let's go back to him. Just say,

"Lord, I'm in trouble. I don't know you, I don't know about you, but can you help me? And above all if you just help me through, I will try to learn about you." Believe me, he *hears* that. Now, like I said, sometimes it doesn't work overnight, but more than likely he will get to you, and you will see a change of some sort, and that will encourage you on this road that you have started down.



Chris Erickson. "From the planting of the seeds through the harvesting of the grain, I see God's plan at work all the time."

RON HANSEN is the author of the novels *Mariette in Ecstasy*, about the religious experiences of a young nun, and the recent *Atticus*. His short stories are collected in a volume entitled *Nebraska*. Mr. Hansen, who recently married, is the Gerard Manley Hopkins Professor of Creative Writing at Santa Clara University in California.

The first and foremost way of finding God for me is in the Eucharist and in other sacraments and rites. Meditation on scripture, especially the psalms and the gospel accounts of the public ministry of Jesus, has often afforded me overpowering experiences of God's abiding presence, mercy, and love. Retreats, when I can be alone and silent for a while,

have been wonderful occasions for getting rid of the turbulence and chatter that interfere with God's efforts at communication. I have profited from using as intermediaries in prayer holy people who have died—Thérèse of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, or Gerard Manley Hopkins—when I need a human face and life to focus on, and I also try to hear and see God in friends and family, and to look for the glorious signs of the Holy Being in nature and the sea. And finally when I write and I have no idea of the origin of a particular scene or image I like to presume that the Creator is using me as an instrument, and I am humbled, grateful, and thrilled.

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J., is the bestselling author of *Dead Man Walking*, a book about her experiences in prison ministry, which was made into a movie of the same name in 1996. Sister Helen, who has written and lectured extensively about prison ministry, the death penalty and other social justice issues, is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, and lives in Metairie, Louisiana.

The most direct road that I have found to God is in the faces of poor and struggling people. For me, it was just the connection with people in the St. Thomas housing projects, then with people on death row and in prison, and then with the murder victims' families.

I was forty years old before I realized the connection between the Jesus who had said, "I was in prison and you came to me, I was hungry and you gave me to eat," between that and the real-life experience of being in situations where I was actually with people who *were* hungry and people who *were* in prison and people who *were* struggling with the racism that permeates this society. And it was like the feeling of coming home. Finding God was like coming home, because you just say, "Where have I been all my life?"

I remember being in a homeless shelter—a food kitchen. My job was to serve the red Kool-Aid at the beginning of the line when people came for a meal. It was the first conscious act that I did where I needed to be in touch with poor and struggling people. This young man came up, a beautiful kid, he looked like Mr. Joe College. He was handsome, with blond hair and blue eyes, and his hand was shaking as he handed me the cup. And he whispered, "You have to help me, it's my first time here." The tears welled up in my eyes just from being touched. I was thinking, "My God, what is this young guy *doing* here?" It draws out of you this tremendous energy and gifts that you don't even know that you have.

My image of finding God is that our little boats are always on the river. We often are in a stall, and we wait and nothing moves, and everything seems the same in life. But when we get involved in a situation like this—for me it was to be involved with poor people—it's like our boat begins to *move* on this current. The wind starts whistling through our hair and the energy and life is there. And that brought me straight into the execution chamber. You see, it was very quick from getting involved with poor people in the St. Thomas housing projects to writing to a man on death row, to visiting a man on death row, and then being there for him at the end, because he had no one to be there with him. And that experience of being there with him, it's really life up against it: It's life or death. It's compassion or vengeance. All life is just distilled to its essence.

In that situation, I experienced a tremendous strength and presence of God, that God was in this man that society wanted to throw away and kill. And the words of Jesus that "the last will be first," came home to me. That is what those words meant: that God dwells in the people in the community that we most want to throw away. It's what builds the

human family and human community. Because what makes things like the death penalty possible, what makes things like the racism that continues in our society, the oppression of the poor, is that there's this disconnection with people.

To me, to find God is to find the whole human family. No one can be disconnected from us. Which is another way of talking about the Body of Christ. That we are all part of this together.

I feel that *everybody* needs to be in contact with poor people. That in fact, as Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine has said, we need to accept that one of the spiritual disciplines—just like reading the Scriptures and praying and liturgy—is physical contact with the poor. It's an essential ingredient. If we are never in their presence, if we never eat with them, if we never hear their stories, if we are always separated from them, then I think something really vital is missing.

The other thing I would want to add to the whole question of finding God is the journey wherever it takes us—to me it has been to the poor and the struggling—must be coupled with a reflection and a centeredness that comes from prayer and meditation. It's very important to assimilate what's happening in our lives. I find that I can't function if I don't have that sense of being at the center of myself and in the soul of my soul, so that I am truly operating from the inside out. And it's important to be very self-directed, because it is so possible to be caught on *other* people's eddies in the river and to get into a stim-

ulus/response type of thing. It's so possible not even to realize that we are really moved by other people's vision of life, other people's insights, other people's agendas and just to be caught on one current to another, that we have no rudder on our own boat.

When you hit something big like this, and you know that it's bigger than you—like working for justice in the world, or trying to connect faith with going against powerful and entrenched systems—you have this sense of "Yes, I am doing my part." But then you also need to be able to put it down and let God run the universe, so you can play a clarinet or be with your friends or work in a garden.

To be *whole* is very important. Wholeness, I think, is part of godliness. I don't think it's cleanliness anymore that's next to godliness, I think it's wholeness! To have a well-rounded life. To have a good intellectual life, where you're reading and thinking and discussing. To have a strong emotional life where you can give and receive intimacy with people. To develop friendships like a garden. Because there's just no room for these Lone Rangers who go and try to save the world by themselves!



Jean Kennedy Smith. "Our search for God is, I think, a search for a better humanity..."

