

Detachment

God made us ‘in his image and likeness’(Genesis 1:26). God is communion in love and God’s will is that we share in this communion, the communion enjoyed by Jesus who invites us: ‘Come to me’(Matthew 11:28), and who prays: ‘May they be one in us, Father, as you are in me and I am in you’(John 17:21).

In his love, God gives us many things, but we must not confuse the gift with the Giver and we should not become so attached to God’s gifts that we continue to hold them tightly when God is asking us to let them go in order to draw closer to him. How can we embrace God with open arms while refusing to loosen our hold on what is less than God?

What matters in any love is the gift of self. The whole of the New Testament, makes it clear that the sacrifice which Jesus offers to God is the sacrifice of himself. Whatever we may offer, if we do not offer ourselves, it is not an offering of love. No one and no thing can substitute for ourselves when it comes to communion in love. In the words of Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you’. We long to be in communion with God, and it is for our selves that God longs. Because Jesus offered himself, he entered into perfect communion with his Father. In this he showed us the way.

‘When Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, See, God, I have come to do your will”’(Hebrews 10:5-7).

As a young woman, Mary knew that, left to herself, there was no way she could carry out the mission revealed to her by God. God was offering her an unprecedented intimacy. He wanted her to conceive the Word-made-flesh. This could only happen if God himself embraced her and breathed into her his own creative Spirit. God offered her this special love. God could give it only if she consented. He did not ask her to do anything, but rather to allow him to love into her his only Son. Her response was perfect: ‘Let what you have said *be done to me*’(Luke 1:38).

To be so open to allow God to achieve his loving purpose in us, we need to hold everything that is not God so reverently that we are willing to let it go the moment God calls us to do so. This is the meaning of detachment. A Carthusian author writes (*The Way of Silent Love*, page 84):

‘There is no peace without detachment. There is no detachment without effective renunciation. There it is, the hard saying! Our passions carry us towards what is pleasing and delightful, towards what we love. Thus they cause us to avoid what is unpleasant and hurtful, the things we fear or hate. The way of resurrection is the way of death, a curtailment of life, a mortification of the senses etc etc. Today, as always, we don’t want it. But listen to Christ: “If you would follow me, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24).”’

The purpose of detachment is that we might be free to make a whole-hearted gift of ourselves to God. The discipline required to maintain this freedom is called asceticism. In her *Way of Perfection*, Teresa writes:

‘It is essential that you begin well by making an earnest and most determined resolve not to halt until you reach your goal. You must do this, whatever might come, whatever might happen to you, however hard you may have to labour, whoever may complain about you, whether you reach your goal or die on the road or have no heart to confront the trials you meet’(ch. 21).

‘The aim of all my advice to you in this book is that we should surrender ourselves wholly to the Creator, place our will in his hands and detach ourselves from creatures ... We are

preparing ourselves for the time, which will come very soon, when we shall find ourselves at the end of our journey and shall be drinking of living water from the fountain I have described. Unless we make a total surrender of our will to the Lord, and put ourselves in his hands so that he may do in all things what is best for us in accordance with his will, he will never allow us to drink from it'(chapter 32).

Authors speak of 'abandonment' when the gift of self is such that there is no holding back, when we entrust ourselves without reserve (with abandon) to God's will. In her *Life*, Teresa writes:

'The mistake we make is to not leave ourselves entirely in the Lord's hands; yet He knows best what is good for us.'

'God cares for us better than we can care for ourselves and He knows of what each of us is capable. What is the use of governing oneself if one has surrendered one's whole will to God?'

The essence of abandonment is expressed in the following statement from an ex-General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupé:

More than ever,
I now find myself
in the hands of God.
This is what I have wanted
all my life, from my youth.
And this is still what I want.
But now there is a difference;
the initiative
is entirely with God.
It is indeed a profound
spiritual experience
to know and feel myself
so totally in his hands,
in the hands of this God
who has taken hold of me.

Listen to Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits:

'Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, whatsoever I have and possess. You have given all these things to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them all according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.'

(*Contemplation for Obtaining Love* found in his Spiritual Exercises)

Listen, too, to Charles de Foucauld:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my spirit.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord,
and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve,
and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.

Ruth Burrows, a contemporary English Carmelite, has some helpful advice in regard to asceticism in her book *To Believe in Jesus*. Christian asceticism is reaching out in love to Jesus,

knowing that we cannot savour this love in this life, but refusing, in faith, to seek those assurances of feeling for which our nature craves.

‘For the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy our senses, we must take care not to so encompass ourselves with the good things of this world that our need for God is not experienced. If our desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire for a feeling or emotion, then we will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace ... We cannot seek God always and serve our neighbour with a disinterested love until we have looked at ourselves, and then positively denied this self-seeking and worked against it’(page 71).

‘Prayer is self-surrender to God at every moment; the reality of our prayer will be the reality of our self-surrender, not how we feel, what we experience, the lights we get and so forth. Prayer is necessarily hard because self-surrender is hard’(page 85).

In her book, *The Ascent of Love*, she explains that we experience two conflicting movements. The more profound movement is a longing to release ourselves and be taken into the embrace of One who loves us. However, we also seek to control, possess and achieve a fulfilment that is ours. This latter is the self-seeking ego. We must determinedly choose to persist in denying it. Asceticism is flushing out the ego which motivates us, whether we know it or not, to do things that increase our importance in our own or in other people’s eyes. Only God’s love can annihilate the ego, but we must do all we can to resist it, for God respects our choice and chooses to annihilate it only when we have rowed all night against the stormy seas. Ruth has this warning for anyone committed to a life of prayer:

‘Are our reactions prompted by the desire to please God or to have a spiritual life, become a spiritual person? In other words, is our tenacious egotism operating in what is the most supremely satisfying sphere of all?’(page 56).

If we want to drink at the fountain of contemplation we must be determined to do God’s will:

‘All that the beginner in prayer has to do - and you must not forget this, for it is very important - is to labour and be resolute and prepare yourself with all possible diligence to bring your will in conformity with the will of God ... You may be quite certain that this comprises the very greatest perfection which can be attained on the spiritual road.’

(Teresa, *Interior Castle*, II Mansions 1).

Let us listen to Elizabeth of the Trinity, an early twentieth century Carmelite saint:

‘If by a simple, loving gaze of faith we remain ever united to him and if, like our beloved Master, we can say, “I do always the things that please him”, he will be able to consume us, and we shall be lost in the immense fire, to burn there at our ease for all eternity”.’

(Letter to Mlle Blanc, October 1906)

Asceticism is not the same for everyone. God knows what each person needs to let go in order to draw close to Jesus and so enjoy divine communion. For the rich young man it was material possessions. For the scribes it was pride in their learning. For others it was their negative sense of themselves, and for others their inflated ego. Essential to asceticism is that we are not the ones to decide. We must wait on the inspiration of grace. The goal is to do God’s will. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he did not dare to leave the boat of his own decision. He wanted to go to Jesus and so he prayed: ‘If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water’. It was only when Jesus called him that he knew that he could leave the boat and, keeping his eyes on Jesus, walk towards him (Matthew 14:28-31). The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so.

It is essential that we keep our eyes on Jesus and that we follow his call and not turn the focus on ourselves. When the servants in Jesus' parable suggested that they go and dig out the weeds that were growing in among the wheat, the master told them to leave that to him (Matthew 13:29). They did not have the wisdom to discern wheat from weed and they might dig out wheat by mistake. Similarly, if we were to take charge of our own asceticism we might do ourselves harm. We might even fall into pride, congratulating ourselves on the success of our asceticism. In her last retreat, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes:

'It is God's word that will directly achieve the work of stripping in the soul; for it has this particular characteristic, that it effects and creates what it intends, provided, however, that the soul consents to let this be done.'

The Carthusian writer quoted earlier goes on to say:

'In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ... The true contemplative doesn't need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God. The true contemplative realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from him. He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it'(*The Way of Silent Love*, pages 85-86).

The following prayer is from Saint Nicholas of Flüe (quoted in the Catholic Catechism n.226):

'My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you.
My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you.
My Lord and my God, detach me from myself to give my all to you.'

Teilhard de Chardin in his *Divine Milieu* writes:

'Everything is needed, because the world will never be large enough to provide our taste for action with the means of grasping God, or our thirst for receiving with the possibility of being invaded by him. Yet, nothing is needed, for, as the only reality which can satisfy us lies beyond the transparencies in which it is mirrored, everything that fades away and dies between us will serve only to give reality back to us with greater purity'(page 122).

'Raise me up, then, O matter, to those heights, through struggle and separation and death. Raise me up until at long last it becomes possible for me, in perfect chastity, to embrace the universe ... Now the earth can certainly clasp me in her giant arms. She can swell me with her life, or take me back into the dust. She can deck herself out for me with every charm, with every horror, with every mystery. She can intoxicate me with her perfume, her touch ... She can cast me to my knees in expectation of what is maturing in her breast ... But her enchantment can no longer do harm to me, since she has become for me the Body of Him who is and of Him who is to come'(page 154).

We conclude our reflections on detachment with the famous words of Teresa (*Poesias 30*):

'Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you: all things pass; God never changes.
Patience attains all. The one who has God finds he lacks nothing: God alone suffices.'