

6. A Humble Heart

We cannot progress along the path of prayer without growing in awareness of our real selves, for communion with God is communion between the real God and the real self. According to Teresa, this necessary journey of self-discovery is one that never finishes:

However high a state you may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon you, and this you will never be able to neglect even if you should so desire ... Self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it (*Interior Castle* I.2.8).

While self-knowledge obviously requires that we be attentive to who we are, it is not a simple matter of introspection. Our main focus is to be on God as revealed by Jesus. This accounts for the essential connection between self-knowledge and humility, the third virtue mentioned by Teresa as essential for anyone who is genuinely committed to prayer.

True humility is the most important of the three and embraces all the rest (*Way of Perfection* 4.4).

Teresa also assures us:

Ponder the grandeur and majesty of your God. You will discover your lowliness here better than by thinking of yourself (*Interior Castle* I.2.8).

As a good guide, she directs our eyes to Jesus:

Set your eyes on Christ ... There you will learn true humility and self-knowledge gained in this way will not make you cowardly (*Interior Castle* I.2.11).

This is an important point. Humility, which is the fruit of self-knowledge, has nothing to do with having a poor self-image or with putting ourselves down. Paul insists that 'we are God's work of art'(Ephesians 2:10). Teresa reminds us that 'to be humble is to walk in the truth'(Interior Castle VI.10.7). She writes:

Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquillity. Although we are distressed by our sinfulness ... this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived. Far from disturbing or depressing the soul, it enlarges it and makes it fit to serve God better. The other kind of distress only disturbs and upsets the mind and troubles the soul, so grievous is it ... When you find yourselves in this state, cease thinking, so far as you can, of your own wretchedness, and think of the mercy of God and of his love and his sufferings for us (*Way of Perfection* 39).

Speaking of beginners in prayer, John of the Cross notes that while they can 'experience intense satisfaction in living the spiritual life'(Dark Night I.1), they can also suffer from secret pride, complacency, condemning others and speaking ill of them, wanting others to notice their devotion, confessing their sins in the most favourable light, and loving to receive praise (see *Dark Night* I.2). Our amazing capacity for self-deception demands that we grow in self-knowledge, praying to see ourselves as God sees us. To the extent that we do we will experience great joy, for we will come to know how much we are loved by God. There will be pain as well, for we will see how poor is our response. John of the Cross speaks of the darkness of prayer and sees it as necessary for beginners 'to enter the dark night and be purged of their childishness'(Dark Night I.6.6).

The real me

It is the real me that God is inviting into prayer, the real me precisely as I am now. It is not the person that I used to be. It is not the person that I would like to be. It is not the

person that others think I should be. It is the real me whom God is wanting to draw into deeper communion. Of course, if I respond to this grace, I will not remain the same. How could such a love enter my life without changing me? But it is the real me, here and now, who is being invited into this intimacy. This is a very consoling truth. We do not have to be different to attract God's attention. We do not have to earn God's love. Whatever kind of mess I may be in, God is wanting to love me, here and now. When we doubt this, we have the prodigal son, Mary of Magdala, the thief on the cross, the leper and dozens of others from the gospels to reassure us that it is so.

A call to grow up

Only those who truly love us see us as we are. God is love. God knows me in my most intimate reality, and God invites me into communion. We may find this amazing, but it is true. It is the good news preached and demonstrated by Jesus. The more we respond to God's invitation to communion, the more we will see ourselves as God sees us – and God sees us as we really are. This is, indeed, consoling, but it does require that we be prepared to let our masks fall away. We have to be ready to stop deceiving ourselves, kidding ourselves, living in a make-believe world. We have to mature. We have to grow up. Love of any kind requires that. How much more the love of God.

Self-knowledge is not always pleasant

If we pray we place ourselves in the presence of God. We should expect that God will want us to come to know God as God is and ourselves as we are. This is obviously not a simple or easy matter. There is a temptation to limit God to something with which we are comfortable, and there is a temptation to avoid self-knowledge that is embarrassing. If we are committed to the truth, we have to be engaged on a journey that will require a lot of adjusting – something that we may not like. We will not like everything we see about ourselves, for the real self, the self that is called to holiness, the self that is drawn into the communion of prayer, is not all beautiful – not yet. We are weak, wounded people. Sin has polluted the environment in which we have had to learn to live, and we have given in to sin ourselves. We have been hurt, but we have also hurt others and ourselves. Even what is good in us has its shadow side.

Self-knowledge, therefore, is not always pleasant. We can be inattentive to our real feelings and to our actual motivation. We can be acting in ways that are not truly coming from our heart or from grace, doing what others expect of us or what we have come to expect of ourselves, living according to a pattern that we have learned, but which is not an expression of our real self and so is not helpful either to others or to ourselves. Failure to know ourselves can lead to behaviour that is quite destructive.

We are quite capable of deceiving ourselves. We can be working out of false assumptions. We can be swept along by some trendy opinion that claims to be spiritual. We may like it, but it may not be of God and it may well not be drawing us closer to God. We can be as gullible in spiritual matters as we are in other areas of our life. We can have quite unreal expectations of ourselves and we can live within quite unreal limitations because we fail to get in touch with the real passion that is somehow blocked off inside us. Others, even those who love us, can blunt our spirit, and we can accept to conform when God is calling us to our own special form of sanctity.

Who am I?

In the communion of love that we experience in prayer we will learn, first of all, that we are creatures held in existence by the love of God our creator. We are not 'lost' in God, or 'absorbed' in God. God continues to hold each of us in existence, and we never cease being the unique, limited, dependent, graced person that we are. Of course, of ourselves we are and remain nothing. But we are not 'of ourselves'. We are of God. To know myself in God is to know my real name (see Revelation 2:17). All we are and all we have is gift. This realisation is the ground of humility, of gratitude and of a real spiritual life, for then we realise that in being open to God there is no limit to the life we are called to live. As Jesus said: 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full'(John 10:10).

Secondly, I will learn that I am someone dear to the heart of Jesus. Because God is my Father-Mother, I have Jesus as my brother and he shares with me the intimate communion that is the essence of his life. Paul could write:

It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

We live because we share Jesus' faith in God. We live also because we share the faith which Jesus has in us. Because he believes in me, I can learn to believe in myself, in the sense that I can learn to believe in the designs which God has for me. Jesus' love for me encourages me to dare to live. We remember Jesus' own promise:

If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you (John 14:23).

Thirdly, I will come to know that I am a temple of God's Holy Spirit. Let us listen again to Paul:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:5).

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1Corinthians 6:19).

If I am to make these general truths personal, I will need to discover the actual ways in which God has shown graceful love to me. In what way am I personally made in God's image? Thanks to God's grace, each of us is capable of receiving and giving love in a unique, wonderful and creative way. We cannot love exactly as others love, however much we might admire them and however close we might feel to them. We each have to find our own unique way of loving. The key to discovering how I can love is found in being attentive to the actual ways in which God has graced me in my life. Grace is to be relished and remembered, for it is in the light of such graces that we discover who we are. Such remembrance gives rise to gratitude, responsibility and fidelity.

The way sin is expressed in my life

It is important also to discover the ways in which sin expresses itself in my life. Each of us is wounded in different ways by the hereditary and environmental factors that affect our different lives. We call the evil influences and consequent tendencies 'Original Sin'

for they come from our origins. In different ways we all experience a lack of harmony in our being. We experience desires that work against our ultimate longing and our ultimate good. We experience an urge to be independent and self-reliant, or we experience reluctance to let go unhealthy dependencies. Either way we fail to trust in God.

In Baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community which keeps before our eyes the memory of Jesus and which draws us into the ambit of his grace in a special way. The darkness is still there for each of us, but the light of the Gospel and the abundance of grace offered us in the community act as a light, continually dispelling the darkness so that it does not dominate our lives. We are taught that through baptism we are freed from Original Sin. This needs understanding. Baptism does not alter our forbears. It does not retrospectively change our childhood experiences. Our environment can be just as polluted as before. The sin of our origins still hangs around like the oil slick from a broken tanker. Yet we are offered freedom, for we are not locked into these negative factors. We are embraced in a special way by God in being embraced by the Christian community. Through baptism, through being welcomed within the community of Jesus' disciples, we are offered a light in a dark place. We are offered reconciliation and communion. We are invited into a community that shares a memory, a tradition, a word, a way. We are enabled to opt for communion with God rather than allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by distraction and sucked into the whirlpool of a meaningless life. Darkness is still there, but we are not trapped in it.

The problem posed by Original Sin is vastly complicated by our own personal sins. We each have a history of ways in which we have said Yes to sin and have chosen to add our own spiritual pollution to the world. Nothing does us or others more harm than personal sin. If we are to grow in prayer we will need to see our personal profile and name our sins and realise how little we can do about our sinfulness by our own power. We will need to cry out to God in our distress and we will need courage to believe in God's grace and to take steps to allow the Spirit of Christ to control our wayward passions and addictions, so that we can truly 'live in love as Christ loved us'(Ephesians 5:2).

Finally, we must recognise the limits of our capacity to probe and to gain understanding of ourselves or of others. God has chosen to express God's self in each of us in limited and participated ways. We must never lose sight of our own mystery or that of others, for we cannot fathom our own being because we cannot fathom God. We must respect the mystery of our own being. To disregard our deepest self is to disregard the sacred, for we are made in the image of God.

Prayer and self-knowledge

The door to the heart is prayer. If we commit ourselves to open this door we will enter into the communion with God that God is offering us, and we will come to see ourselves as God sees us. For reasons noted in the chapter on a loving heart, fear of self-knowledge can stop us daring to pray. We must act against this fear, trusting that God sees us with the eyes of a compassionate Mother, a loving Father. 'It is for you to look at him,' says Saint Teresa, 'He never takes his eyes off you' (Way of Perfection 26.3).

Humility

When Saint Paul reflected on the humility of Jesus, he could find no word in the Greek language which was able to express what he wanted to say, not even in the Greek version

of the Hebrew Bible. He had to coin a new word [*tapeinophrosunā*] built up from *tapeinophrone*□, a verb which is found in the Greek Old Testament only in the following two texts:

A person's pride will bring humiliation,
but one who *is humble* [the Hebrew has 'the humble of spirit']
will obtain honour (Proverbs 29:23).

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me.
But I *am humble* [this expression is not found in the Hebrew text]
and have quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 131).

Paul invites his fellow Christians to be humble:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, *humility*, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:12).

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility* and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

The humility of which he speaks is the humility shown by Jesus:

In *humility* regard others as better than yourselves ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:3,5).

The fact that Paul had to invent a word to speak of this virtue is itself an indication of how special it is. It was not a virtue espoused by Paul's Stoic contemporaries, for whom the self was of central importance. After Paul we find *tapeinophrosunā* used by the Jewish historian, Josephus, the Stoic philosopher and teacher, Epictetus and the neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus, but always as a vice – the equivalent of our 'having low self-esteem', or 'being small-minded'. To grasp the special quality of Christian humility there is need, more than for any other virtue, to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

The humility of being a child loved by God

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, Whoever lowers himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'(Matthew 18:1-4).

Jesus takes a little child as a symbol of the smallest and least significant of human beings, and placing the child 'among them' instructs his disciples that they must change and become like a child if they want to 'enter the kingdom of heaven'. That Jesus himself identifies with the child becomes clear when he goes on to say: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'(Matthew 18:5), and when he speaks of himself being (like the child) 'among them'(Matthew 18:20). One thinks of Jesus when, as God's beloved Son, he prays with that special intimacy that is associated with the term Abba (dear Father). Disciples are to share this absolute and total trust, for being in the kingdom of heaven means accepting God as a loving Father/Mother.

The humility of recognising our complete dependence on God

Humility includes being in the lowly position of a child before God, and in looking up to other people, admiring the goodness and the reflection of God's beauty that we see. It involves also the realisation that all we are and have is a gift; that we are dependent upon God for everything; that of ourselves we can do nothing. It includes a response to this awareness that is characterised by joy, because we are confident, like a child, that we are

not alone, but are embraced by a God who loves us unconditionally and in whom we can have absolute trust. Jesus, who addressed God as Abba, knew the secret of the kingdom of God. Only when we accept with delight that God delights in us can we begin to understand the gospel which Jesus is preaching and share his communion with God.

As adults many of us have had to learn a form of self-reliance that we discover to be a barrier to receiving what Jesus is offering. As disciples of Jesus there is much to unlearn, for we cannot earn grace; we cannot make a success of life by our own efforts; we are not meant to achieve by our own effort. Jesus looked to God as a child looks to a parent, with total trust and a simple expectation of receiving love. To be his disciple, we must learn to do the same. If you have tried to do this you will know that it is not at all easy, for it cuts at the very core of our pride. We like to be independent and self-reliant. We see it as being adult. Jesus says we have to change all this and become like a child. For an adult this requires learning to be 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3).

We are humble to the extent that we know that of ourselves we are nothing and rejoice in it, recognising that our life and everything in it is a grace of the living God. It is not enough to know this, we should want others to know it and to treat us accordingly, neither valuing us falsely nor honouring us for what is the fruit of grace. Humility is best learned by contemplating the heart of Jesus who said:

Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart (Matthew 11:29).

Learning humility

We can reach a certain level of humility by growing in self-knowledge and by being honest about who we really are. Life teaches us how small we are in the scheme of things. We see the limitations of our good qualities, and we see our faults. We also see how little control we have over things that really matter. The humiliation of sinning has a role here as well. It is important to note, however, that this kind of self-knowledge does not necessarily lead to humility. If we focus only on ourselves we are just as likely to end in discouragement, or even despair. As noted earlier, purer and deeper humility comes from looking not at ourselves but at God.

In the light of God's gracious love, and as we keep our eyes on Jesus, our least imperfection shows up. However, we experience joy at the truth of who we really are, for, with all our limitations and sins, we are loved by God. Here we learn that of ourselves we are nothing, but we learn this while knowing with a knowledge born of faith that we are not 'of ourselves', but are truly held in existence and constantly graced by God. Teresa writes:

Any good thing we do has its source, not in ourselves, but rather in that spring where this tree, which is the soul, is planted, and in that sun which sheds its radiance on our works (*Interior Castle* I.2.5).

Let us listen to Saint Therese of Lisieux:

O my only Love, I am happy to feel myself so small, so frail in your sunshine, and I am at peace (*Story of a soul* 11).

I prefer to own in all simplicity that He that is mighty has done great things for me - including showing me my littleness and how incapable I am of anything good (*Story of a soul* 9)

In her act of oblation to divine love, Therese writes:

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands.

John of the Cross used to say:

To be humble is to hide in your own nothingness and to know how to abandon yourself to God (*Other Counsels* 5).

Genuine humility flows from a consistent commitment to the truth, especially the truth of God seen in the light of the revelation in Jesus, and the truth of oneself seen in the light

of faith. God will always offer us love, but can do so only to the level of our humility, otherwise we would be in danger of the worst evil – distorting grace.

If in our journey in prayer we wish to prepare our souls to receive God's gift of contemplation, nothing is of more importance than that we respond to God's grace as God enlightens us concerning our own weakness, so long as we do this in the spirit of a child who is confident in being loved. There is no grace God cannot give to a person who has learned humility. Without humility, no grace is safe.