

# Self-knowledge

In the communion of love I will learn, first of all, that I am a creature held in existence by the love of God my 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.

(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 in Jesus' faith in God.

We live also because we share in 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.

'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 his 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 we might admire them  
and however close we might feel to them.

We each have to find our own unique way of loving. Not even identical twins are identical in their manner 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.

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.

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 himself in each of us in limited and participated ways. We must never lose sight of our own or other's mystery, for we cannot fathom our own being because we cannot fathom God. If we fail to respect the mystery of the sacred, we are, as Anthony Bloom observes, like a person digging 'to find the source of a spring, the point where the water begins, the point just before which there is no water. In this case it is possible only to destroy not to discover'.

## Self-knowledge : Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

‘As the soul comes to know herself she also knows God better, for she sees how good he has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by his creation she is the image of God. And in the mirror of God’s goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin.’(Dialogue, chapter 13).

For just as you can see better the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so that soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in him'(Dialogue, chapter 13).

## Ruth Burrows

‘Before the Living God: prayer and practice’

‘It seems to me that God has given me the grace  
to seek the truth and to stand in the truth,  
and essentially this means the truth about myself ...

Early in my spiritual life

I was given a deep self-knowledge.

This was to be the foundation

upon which God wished to build.

It forced me into the arms of his mercy ...

I understand that the principal work of God is to bring us to true humility and poverty of spirit, to make us deeply aware of our nothingness so that he can give himself to us.

Everything depends on our willingness to stand in the truth, to refuse to escape from this painful revelation of self, to accept to stand naked before the living God.'

# Self-knowledge : Paul de Jaegher

One with Jesus, page 53-54

‘One of the many snares to be met with in the spiritual life, one which is even encountered on the very threshold of sanctity, is too great a preoccupation with self. Many generous souls, already advanced in the way of perfection, do not arrive at the summit because they are too engrossed in themselves. They think too much about themselves, analyse their feelings too minutely, reproach themselves excessively for their failings and infidelities, are too anxious about their spiritual progress.

## One with Jesus, page 53-54

Without doubt this comes from their zeal for perfection,  
and also from their love for God,  
but this love is not sufficiently free from self-love.  
How much they would gain  
by thinking less of self and more of God! ...  
Do not look at yourself, fix your eyes on Christ!’

## Self-knowledge : Elizabeth of the Trinity

‘I believe that the secret of peace and happiness is to forget oneself, to cease to be concerned with oneself ... It seems to me that the weakest soul – even if it is the most guilty – is just the one that has the best grounds for hope, and this act by which it forgets itself, to throw itself into the arms of God, glorifies him more and gives him more joy than all the falling back upon self, and all the self-examination that makes it live in its wretchedness, while in its centre it possesses a Saviour who comes at every moment to cleanse it.’

## Self-knowledge : John of the Cross

‘All the soul’s infirmities are brought to light. They are set before its eyes to be felt and healed. Now, with the light and heat of the divine fire, it sees and feels those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided in it, hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire was applied to it and made it sweat and smoke and sputter. This is what the flame does to the imperfect soul.’

(The Living Flame of Love, Stanza I, 21-22)

‘God is carrying him. Although he is walking at God's pace, he does not feel this pace ... the senses do not attain to what God effects in the soul at this time ... A soul, then, should abandon itself into God's hands and not its own’(Living Flame n. 67).

## Love of Self : Julian of Norwich 1342-1413

‘Christ taught us to do good in return for evil. Here we may see that he is himself this love, and does to us as he teaches us to do; for he wishes us to be like him in undiminished, everlasting love towards ourselves and our fellow Christians. No more than his love towards us is withdrawn because of our sin does he wish our love to be withdrawn from ourselves or from our fellow Christians. But we must unreservedly hate sin and endlessly love the soul as God loves it. Then we should hate sin just as God hates it, and love the soul as God loves it’(‘Showings’, Chapter 40).

## Self-knowledge : Julian of Norwich

‘So does our good Lord want us willingly to accuse ourselves, and to see truly and know our falling, and all the harms which come from it, seeing and knowing that we can never repair it. He wants us also willingly and truly to see and know the everlasting love which he has for us, and his plentiful mercy. To see and know both together, by grace, is the meek self-accusation which our good Lord asks from us’(‘Showings’, Chapter 52).

‘I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know our own soul. For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united. But nevertheless I saw that we have, naturally from our fullness, to desire wisely and truly to know our own soul, through which we are taught to seek it where it is, and that is in God ... All this notwithstanding, we can never come to the full knowledge of God until we first clearly know our own soul’(‘Showings’, Chapter 56).

## Self-knowledge : Marie-Eugène OCD

‘When self-knowledge arouses in a soul sorrowful contrition at the same time as ardent love, profound adoration, and the most elevated aspirations, the feeling of its own powerlessness along with most generous resolutions, one can declare it authentic. It bears the divine mark of its origin, which is peace, spiritual balance, freedom and fecundity.’ (I want to see God" page 48).

# John Henry Newman: self-knowledge

## ‘Christian sympathy’ in Parochial & Plain Sermons V

- Many are content with such accidental information about themselves as the events of life force upon them. They neglect the duty of self-examination.
- To have only a slight acquaintance with one’s heart is to have a superficial faith.
- Motive? Do I do good for praise, to avoid shame, for the satisfaction of being occupied?
- Do I pray to God that he reveal my heart to me?

- I should be suspicious of untested virtue, while remembering that we can fail even in areas where we have been found faithful.
- There is a danger of living a life of self-deceit, thinking far more comfortably of our spiritual state than is warranted.
- Self-knowledge is the fruit of ascetical practice.

- self-love inclines us to hope for and presume the best. This is a danger especially when things are going smoothly and ‘successfully’. Then being content is mistaken for the peace of Christ; natural affection is mistaken for Christian love; natural energy is mistaken for zeal.
- habit can cause us to sin without noticing it.

## Self-knowledge : Teresa of Avila

‘Self-knowledge must never be neglected. No soul on this road is such a giant that it does not often need to become a child at the breast again ... For there is no state of prayer, however sublime, in which it is not necessary often to go back to the beginning. And self-knowledge with regard to sin is the bread which must be eaten with food of every kind ... but taken in moderate proportions’(Life 13).

‘How necessary self-knowledge is even to those whom the Lord keeps in the same mansion in which he himself is! However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this it will never be able to neglect even if it 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. So long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility.’(Interior Castle 1.2)

## Self-knowledge : Teresa of Avila

‘We shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God.

Let us think of his greatness

and then come back to our own baseness ...

If we turn from self towards God,

our understanding and our will become nobler

and more ready to embrace all that is good’

(Interior Castle I.2).

‘It is absurd to think that we can enter heaven without first entering our own souls - without getting to know ourselves and reflecting upon the wretchedness of our nature and what we owe to God, and continually imploring his mercy’ (Interior Castle).

## Self-knowledge : Thérèse of Lisieux

‘I have my weaknesses also, but I rejoice in them.

Neither do I success in rising above  
the insignificant things of the earth.

I am sometimes tormented by something foolish  
which I have said or done.

Then I enter into myself and say:

Alas here I am just where I was before.

But I tell myself this with great gentleness  
and without any sadness.

It is so good to feel that one is weak and little’(5.7.97).

‘When perfection was set before me,  
I understood that to become a saint  
one had to suffer much,  
seek out always the most perfect thing to do,  
and forget self’(Story of a Soul).