

8. A Heart open to Holiness

Communion with God is the most satisfying communion we can experience, and it is the communion for which we most long. In the celebrated words of Saint Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You’ (Confessions I.1). At the last supper the disciples sensed that they were about to lose Jesus. He reassured them:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ... You know the Spirit, for the Spirit abides with you. The Spirit will be in you ... I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... You will see me. You will know that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you ... I will love you and reveal myself to you ... My Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home in you (John 14:15-23).

God wishes to be at home in the tabernacle of our soul. Addressing the soul, John of the Cross writes:

O most beautiful of creatures, so anxious to know the whereabouts of the One you love so that you may seek him and be united to him, know that you yourself are his dwelling place, his secret chamber, the place where he lies hidden. Rejoice and be glad, for all you ever wanted, all you ever hoped for, is so close as to be within you. You cannot be without Him (*Spiritual Canticle* 1.7).

Come then O beautiful soul! Since you know that the Beloved whom you desire lives hidden within your heart, strive to be yourself truly hidden with him, and you will embrace him within and experience him with loving affection (*Spiritual Canticle* 1.10).

God says to the soul ‘I am yours and for you. I am delighted to be what I am, so as to be yours and to give myself to you (*Living Flame* 3.6).

We find the same teaching in Saint Teresa:

There is nothing to hinder you and your Spouse from remaining alone together, when you desire to enter within yourself, to shut the door behind you and to dwell in that Paradise with your God ... Remember this is not a supernatural state. It is something you can do if you resolve to do it ... Even if we take a whole hour to say the ‘Our Father’ once, if we can realise that we are with Him, and what it is we are asking Him, and how willing He is, like any father, to grant it to us, and how He loves to be with us and comfort us, He has no wish for us to tire our brains by a great deal of talking (*Way of Perfection* 29).

In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Saint Augustine calls us to undertake this journey to the heart, for it is there that we are at home with God:

Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord!
It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart!
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.
Come back! Return to the heart ... See there what you can learn about God,
for the image of God is there. In your inner self dwells Christ.
In your inner self you are being renewed after God’s image (Tract 18.10.1)

Holiness – the Presence of God in the soul

To be holy is to be in love-communion with God. The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness:

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love (LG 43).

God is love. We are made in the image of God who is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts that we might experience the intimacy for which we are created. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of communion.

Since prayer is an essential dimension of living a holy life we need to begin by making sure that we do not misunderstand the nature of holiness. In the Book of Revelation, the martyrs join with the crucified and risen Christ in singing 'the song of the Lamb'. Their song of praise includes the words: 'You alone are holy'(Revelation 15:4). Only God is holy (see Isaiah 6:1-5), and 'the fountain of all holiness'(Second Eucharistic Prayer). If we are not convinced of this truth, all our efforts at prayer will be heading in the wrong direction.

It is true that we sometimes speak of a person as being holy, and we call certain places holy ('sanctuaries'). However, when we do so we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place. We are saying that God, who alone is holy, dwells in that person or that place. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. People are holy because God is dwelling in them, and has transformed them to some degree into God's self. Opening ourselves to God's transforming us in this way is the meaning of becoming holy. Jesus says:

If you drink of the water that I will give you, you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for this divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which consists in union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds, our hearts, our wills, and our bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Jesus warned us that the road of holiness, and so the road of prayer, can be narrow and hard, for it is the way Jesus walked, the way of the cross. We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood. We do not hold the shears or do the pruning. We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water. We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear. We need to allow the water of life to

penetrate the soil of our lives. But we do not create the water or initiate its flow. The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone. A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed him/herself to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by ourselves can produce or achieve holiness. Growing in holiness is growing in our willingness to follow the initiative of God's grace. We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'If you lose your life for my sake you will find it'(Matthew 10:39). We have much to learn if we are truly to welcome grace. One basic lesson is that we have to let go control. We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of God's love: 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'(Mark 10:15). This self-denial is a denial or negating *of* the self (the ego): 'If you want to become my follower, you must deny yourself'(Mark 8:34). It is a denial *of* the self. It is not a denial or negating *by* the self. It is allowing God to initiate rather than the self. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We did not organize our own conception and birth. Life was given us as a gift. It is the same here. Only God can draw us into divine communion. We must welcome grace, and so holiness, but we cannot 'possess' or 'achieve' it.

Just before her death, Saint Therese of Lisieux spoke these words:

Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness.

This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit'(Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be obedient, to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out 'Abba!' – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts.

Saying Yes to God's gracious offer to transform us through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God's life. Prayer is making space for God's transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into God's hands. God will lead us along the path of holiness, for God will take us ever more closely to God's heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love which he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus till we can say with Saint Paul:

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