

Purity of heart

“Cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 31:2)

“And everyone who thus hopes in him, purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:3)

THE SOUL THAT HAS BEEN AWAKENED to the reality of divine things for the first time always makes a deep, unreserved response to the truth, prompted by a boundless love for the Savior and a great delight in the world of the spirit and spiritual things. When the soul enters into the divine reality, it is raised to a level where it can experience that other life with Christ, and acquires the ability to see the way stretching out ahead, together with all its demands. It also acquires the steadfastness needed to travel the spiritual way, and the ability to meet all the conditions, no matter what sacrifice they may require. This sense of readiness is the basis for the stage of purification.

At first purification appears to be a purely negative process, for when man perceives the nature of the world of deception, sin, evil and sensual pleasure in which he was living, he begins to act against it in every way he can—in his thoughts, his feelings and his actions. His life therefore appears to be a prescribed series of actions and reactions against the life of sin, the life of a man departing completely from his old self and everything connected with it.

What helps man take this stand against his self in the beginning of the process of purification is knowledge in both its aspects; that is, the knowledge of the truth in the Person of Jesus Christ, the ideal image of pure and holy conduct, and knowledge of the self, deceitful, false, enslaved to errors, faults and false ideals. Then man no longer blames the world or other people, for he has ascertained that the source of imperfection and corruption exists also in his own self. The soul cannot escape from acknowledging the darkness of its own reality when it stands before the light of truth shining from the face of Jesus Christ and focussing on the soul inwardly. “Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

As soon as the soul becomes aware of how false and corrupt it really is and accepts full responsibility for its errors and faults, the positive stage in the process of purification begins. The soul begins to be enlightened by the knowledge of Christ, and moves towards the light with a new spontaneity. This is a work of grace. When the soul begins to move towards the light it feels more and more weighed down by the bonds and chains that tie it to the material world. It becomes severely oppressed by the narrow prison in which it is enclosed through its own will. Then it longs for freedom and to stretch out into eternity, and finds in the Person of the Lord the only refuge where it can be saved from its plight and its narrow dead limitation.

Every movement towards Christ establishes the control of truth, light and life and can only take place if two conditions prevail: the first is faith in the source of truth, light and life, and the second is the struggle against sin and vanity. Each of these two strengthens the other and gives it momentum, and that from the first moment when the truth of God dawns on the soul.

The soul's perception of its true condition in the light of the face of Christ, and its placing upon itself all the blame for its corruption, weakness and sin, and its acceptance of all contrary circumstances as part of God's providential care for its liberation and purification--all this stamps the soul with true humility and meekness. The permeation of the soul by unfeigned humbleness is a constant characteristic of the process of purification and is true, living evidence that the soul is obtaining its purification from a constant vision of and submission to the source of truth. For the light of truth constantly reveals the soul's weaknesses and so always renders it humble. This is why looking constantly to the Person of the Lord Jesus, and exposing the soul to the light of his word, are a guarantee that the soul will be cleansed from pride.

Every time an honest encounter occurs between the truth of Christ and the gospel and the soul, the soul is filled with distress and pain over its condition and also acquires determination actively and forcefully to repent, not only in mind and heart, but with its whole body and spirit, till the whole man be aflame with the fire of longing to be holy and pleasing to God. When these sentiments dominate man and make him acutely aware of his need for holiness to please Christ's holiness, he is prompted to practise the most difficult and severe forms of spiritual striving, vows, renunciations, poverty and all the hard works of asceticism.

This sense of avid desire for holiness, which springs from a burning love for the Person of the Lord, makes all worldly and fleshly desires, and all the pleasures of the earthly life, dead to the heart and eyes and senses of man. All of them together cannot divert him from his eager quest to follow in the way of holiness by the practise of the severest forms of fasting, solitude and prayer, and by undertaking the meanest duties and services. So man reverses his former habits and severs the bonds that bound him to them, and sets off along the path of God, making no plans for the journey.

This unquenchable fervour within the soul during the period of purification produces works which appear, to those who have not yet passed through the same fire, incredible or superhuman, and so they do not believe they actually take place. Others think such works are unessential or excessive, or irresponsible or immature, or signs of arrogance and pride. In fact, those who practise these things do so not as a pretence at holiness, nor out of some plan, nor as a form of spiritual training, nor for outward show. They are rather the soul's inevitable expression of irresistible inner promptings and an overwhelming fervour which it cannot suppress or reject. Such men as these must therefore be excused if they perform works which seem to lack intelligence or maturity, for whose mind can restrain the fire that burns in the heart aflame with the love of God?

The indication that works of purification are following in a correct spiritual course is the ease, eagerness and gladness which come upon man when he undertakes works of asceticism, such as fasting, prayer, solitude, service and self-sacrifice. Any heaviness or sloth should be seen as a warning that the soul has lost its sacred vision and can no longer see its Beloved, the source of its light, love, strength, self-sacrifice and inspiration. Likewise carelessness or laziness, except in the case of illness, in practising works of purification are a sign that the soul has begun to make itself the focus of its affections.

When man enters into a true love relationship with Christ, he finds in works of asceticism and purification, even though they be hard, costly, painful and despised by the world, a source of joy, gladness and blessedness which is hardly different from his sense of the Kingdom of God itself. They are to him gifts and blessings. This joy and love going hand in hand with works of purification, means that in this stage a comprehensive spiritual life is established such that man may wish will never come to an end. Many of the saints longed to spend all the days of their life in this stage of purification, and they obtained their desire, so that their life was all works of purification, asceticism and repentance. Is this not holiness itself?

This is not to say that the life of purification is all joy, light and vision. There are bound to be setbacks, when the soul reverts to itself and suffers separation from God and darkness. There will be days of aridity and choking anxiety, when the soul encounters itself and perceives that it is dust and nothingness and worthless. Then it is oppressed by bitter suffering, especially when God is long absent; but love finds sweetness even in the beloved's absence.

Similarly, there are souls which, even at the peak of their fervor and energy and asceticism, tend to a spirit of sadness and depression because of their constantly gazing upon their own shortcomings. Such a man then appears morose, always sighing and groaning. This is not the spirit of despair nor the loss of assurance of salvation. It is rather that the flood of divine love sweeps away even good feelings, and the soul is powerless to do anything but contemplate continuously its own shortcomings and great inadequacies. Such a soul is burning with love and it is as if it were possessed by an inner vision that constantly reveals its true inability. Holy souls such as this should not be reproached or thought ill of. They are able to attain the highest degrees of divine love and the deepest levels of repentance and inner purity, and for them the perfect way is through constant self-reproach and condemnation of their own sins and corruption, and through continuous contrition and brokenness. These lead them to the healing of the self from all pain, as well as continual growth in holiness and the divine love. "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given" (Eph 3:8)

In Greek the word implies a compounding of humbleness and weakness.

But if man works out for himself a method such as this to follow, being unconvinced and unprepared inwardly, his soul may be exposed to the most severe despair and sickness, becoming unable to grow and completely lacking in energy.

In all cases, in the stage of purification, man must often make a great effort to overcome his will and enter into the depths of his soul to face its shortcomings and inadequacies. He must taste sorrow and groan over the opportunities in life he has wasted through sin and listlessness, laziness and weakness. And as long as this sense remains with him, he should always follow it up by looking to the face of Jesus as to a mirror, and receiving inspiration from him.

When man travels in the way, he must be very sensitive and spiritually discerning to perceive the inspirations that come from grace and the reproaches of the divine truth, which give the soul conviction and prompt it to continue in works of asceticism. This call, when it comes through grace, is always accompanied by extraordinary support and fervor and enlightenment and guidance till the end of the way. It is a great loss that man should miss all this through his lack of

inner sensitivity and discernment of the call of God, for the work that man may call upon himself to do puts him in need of that support and power. Therefore if he begins in his own strength, he must be constantly coercing himself and has a bitter struggle to persevere. Indeed man may set out on a path he has chosen for himself and then find he is not strong enough to go on. But the prompting of grace and the call of Christ to the way of holiness bring with them power.

If we look with human eyes at the works of asceticism accomplished by the saints as they underwent purification, we are seized with fear and uneasiness and the sense that we are not prepared to do any of them. But when we perceive that they were led in the way of asceticism and acts of severity not by their own minds or desires or counsels, but by the hidden Spirit and the promptings of truth and the divine love which lit up the way before them and gave them courage and strength to continue to the end and attain their glorious victory over all the powers of the enemy and the temptations of the world, then we find the boldness to take our place in the line and await the same support, the same strength, the same light, to follow in their steps, bearing the standard of their warfare and the mystery of their victory.

In order to overcome the desires of our hearts and the promptings of our instincts we need a higher and deeper power than that which supplies our desires and instincts. That is, throughout the whole of our spiritual battle through the process of purification, we need a supernatural power. Of this there is no doubt, for it is impossible to overcome ourselves by ourselves. This supernatural power is the burning power of the divine love which blazes in the heart of man and makes him work miracles. Our love for the heavenly bridegroom gives us faith, determination and power beyond the power of the natural mind and able to lay low every desire and instinct.

The burning of love with a true flame, like a fire within the heart is the only way by which pain can be raised to delight, even death to gain and humiliation to a gift. This is why this fire is the special food of the soul during the period of purification. Through it the soul finds the mystical strength it needs to overcome its inadequacy and resist the world in confidence of victory.

Christ himself is the absolute necessity for those who go the way of holiness. The soul senses this when it draws near to him and speaks with him. Then it finds in him its delight and the fire by which it lives and is fed. To the extent to which it finds boldness to gaze upon him and become intimate with him, thus far will it persevere and attain its goal.

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