

28. Dependence

First of all, here is the principle passage of a letter I have just received:

“I am forty years old and I’ve never been sick until now. This is an entirely new experience for me, and I assure you, not a pleasant one. During the first days, revolt rumbled within me. There I was, passing from hand to hand like a lost-and-found object being wantonly handled, and without anyone’s even deigning to give a serious answer to my demands for explanations.

“And to think that in my daily life I cannot tolerate to have my secretary move even my paper-cutter on my desk! What a horrible feeling of being nothing more than a *thing*. Certainly, a thing that is being taken care of, examined, repaired, and whose proper functioning is being checked out, but nevertheless a thing, that is to say, a passive, inanimate being. I thought with envy of the most miserable hobo. Anyone who disposes of himself freely is a great lord by comparison with this middle-class businessman in a comfortable hospital who has become a thing controlled by others.”

I want to tell you what went through my mind when I read these lines. This will be a continuation of our last conversation.

My correspondent is right. There is nothing more intolerable for a free man, legitimately proud of his self-determination, than to become dependent on others. That means losing his dignity as a human person. But the truth is that independence is of the spiritual order. In a hospital, in a concentration camp, amid tortures, men and women can remain free. Their bodies are the prey of others, but their souls can escape capture. It is only when man abdicates that he becomes a thing. I acknowledge, nonetheless, that physical dependence is a restriction to man’s independence. That is the first reason why it appears intolerable to him.

Well now, this independence is what a lover feels, an irrepressible need to sacrifice to the one he loves, precisely because it is his most precious possession. To sacrifice this possession is the irrefutable proof that he loves the other more than himself.

To pray is to transpose these sentiments into our relations with God. It is to be happy and proud to be God’s property. It is to repose in a dependence that is accepted, willed, and loved. The man of prayer cherishes this dependence the more that he discovers it to be radical and innate. He has the power to revolt against it, but he cannot change the fact that he is indebted to God for his very existence—not just once and for all, but at every moment of his life.

Mental prayer is the time when, driving off the illusion of autonomy, man becomes aware again of his fundamental dependence. It is the time when he consents to this dependence, and places himself once more into the Father’s hands to be disposed of as God wills. “*In manus tuas, Domine....*” “Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit.”

There was an old priest who understood this very well. His entire spiritual life gravitated around the idea of his dependence vis-a-vis God. One day he confided to me, "I need only think of the word 'dependence' to be deep in mental prayer."