

19. Filial Assurance

Why have I treated you like a man of the Old Testament? Because you seem to be unaware of a virtue that is the hallmark of every true disciple of Christ, in his relations with God: filial assurance.

Devout Jews did not dare approach their God and speak to him freely. They adored him, but at a distance, as it were. They thought that they would be risking death if they heard Yahweh speak, and above all if they saw him. They addressed him as a dreaded and revered Master: *“O Lord, may your ear be attentive to my prayer and that of all willing servants who revere your name!”* (Ne 1:11).

Only the high priest has the right to pronounce the sacred tetragram, the four consonants of the divine Name. That was the utmost familiarity permitted. When those who stood around the high priest heard it, they prostrated themselves to the ground. The others said, *“Praised be forever the Name of his glorious Reign.”* No one moved until the divine Name had, so to speak, vanished.

But the prophets had announced the coming of new times, the Messianic times when every man would be allowed to approach God and pray to him confidently. *“For then I will change and purify the lips of the peoples, that they all may call upon the name of the Lord”* (Zp 3:9).

And indeed Jesus Christ said to his disciples, *“This is how you are to pray: ‘Our Father in heaven.....’*” (Mt 6:9). St. Paul comments:

“You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’)” (Rm 8:15). *“The proof that you are sons is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the spirit of his Son which cries out ‘Abba!’ (‘Father!’) You are no longer a slave but a son!”* (Gal 4:6-7).

Henceforth Christians, without abandoning the reverential attitude which is at the heart of all religion, can “come close” to their God with affectionate trust, for they have learned that he is their Father. Let us listen to St. John: *“Beloved, if our consciences have nothing to charge us with, we can be sure...that we will receive at his hands whatever we ask”* (1Jn 3:21-22). And once more, St. Paul: *“In Christ and through faith in him we can speak freely to God, drawing near to him with confidence”* (Ep 3:12).

Scripture refers to this bold filial assurance as the “(right to) say everything.” The liturgy of every Mass invites us to it before the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer: *“Jesus taught us to call God our Father, and so we have the courage to say:....”*

To win you over to the practice of this virtue, do I need to supplement these reflections with a contagious example? I shall cite St. Teresa of Avila. Burdened with difficult tasks, overcome with worry, she was moreover deprived of the sense of the presence of her God during mental prayer. Unable to stand it any more, she complained to the Lord one day, with as much filial boldness as respect:

“O my God, is it not enough that you hold me fast in this miserable life? That for love of You I accept this trial, and consent to remain in this exile in which everything conspires to keep me from possessing you, in which I must concern myself about eating and sleeping, about responsibilities, about my relations with a multitude of people?

“Nevertheless, I am resigned to everything for love of you! For you know very well, O my God, that it is an unspeakable torment for me! And now during the few moments left to me to enjoy your presence, you hide your self from me! How can that be compatible with your mercy? How can your love for me tolerate it?

“Lord, if it were possible for me to hide from you the way you hide from me, I believe, indeed I am convinced, that your love for me would not tolerate it! But you see me always. Such inequality is too harsh, O my God. I beseech you, understand that it wrongs the one who loves you so much.”