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“This hunger for the absolute”

Letter #70

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer 1983

Yesterday as I listened to you, I felt as if somewhere I had already heard what you were telling me. But try as I might to ransack the archives off my memory, I found nothing. Today the memory you awakened in me is emerging from the shadows, and in such detail that I am surprised. Perhaps it will offer you some light.

A young priest-friend of mine found it increasingly difficult to concentrate, and this made it impossible for him to pursue studies. He consulted a psychiatrist, and afterwards told me the advice he had received. Actually, the psychiatrist's various recommendations could be summed up in one counsel: *Age quod agis*. (Do what you are doing). The psychiatrist explained, “Put your mind on what you are doing. Perform conscious acts, and begin by simply recording the sensations that are offered to you. You wash your hands: experience the freshness of the water. You eat a peach: experience its delicious taste. Your trouble is that you are divided. Your consciousness, engrossed by other things, is only half-aware of what you are doing.”

I remember objecting strongly, for I had the feeling that the advice my friend had received could lead him completely astray. So I said to him, “I challenge you to succeed in putting your mind totally on sensations!” I questioned him to verify whether my reaction was well-founded. “You admit you cannot concentrate, but that is probably not the only symptom of what is going on within you. When you drive a car, don't you always go a little faster than you should? As if you were in a hurry to reach your destination, and were going to find there something you have long been pursuing? And isn't it true that you don't know how to relax? That you are always disappointed in things and in people, and first of all in yourself?” He agreed.

“Well then,” I added, “here is my diagnosis. You are inhabited by a hunger for the absolute which, since it is never satisfied, makes it impossible for you to stop seeking. This is nothing else than the need for God, which has grown in you through your industrious

and fervent years in the seminary. And today you are, to use the words of the Psalmist, ‘*like the hind that longs for the running waters*’ (Ps 42:2). You are like ‘*parched land*’ (Psalm 143:6).

“The difficulty you experience in concentrating, and the symptoms to which I have just drawn your attention, and which you acknowledge, are simply manifestations of a profound need of which you have not been aware until now. It is not by begging for meager contentments from creatures that you will be cured, but by understanding that your hunger can be satisfied only by God.”

The next morning, I was expecting my friend for breakfast as usual. When he did not come, I decided to breakfast alone. An hour and a half later, he came into my office and explained why he was late. “After my Mass, as I was beginning my thanksgiving, I became aware of the presence within me of a hunger for the absolute that I have never yet identified. And so I directed this hunger toward God. It was as if I were emancipating a prayer that had long been held captive. Time passed without being aware of it. Although I am usually tormented by distractions and—I am not proud to admit it—in a hurry to finish, today I spent two hours in mental prayer.”

To make me understand what had happened to him, my friend used an amusing image. “During these two hours when a great peace had settled in my soul, I had only to place my adorations, petitions, praises, intentions on an escalator that carried them straight up to God.”

Am I mistaken in thinking that there is in you, as in my friend, an as yet unidentified need for the absolute, that communicates impatience and anxiety to your whole life? Learn to recognize this need, stop focusing it on creatures that can only disappoint and exasperate it, and turn it deliberately toward God, its one real object. I don’t know if you will have the same experience as my friend, who was prepared for it by a very generous life. At any rate, I am sure that you will get rid of this indefinable anxiety that harasses you, this ever-renewed sense of disappointment.

Hunger for the absolute is not just one aspiration among many others. It is the fundamental aspiration of every human person. It may be denied or repressed, but it cannot be eliminated. It is part and parcel of us, the substance of our spiritual being. On earth, in heaven, in hell, nobody can rid himself of it the way one throws off a coat. In hell it is, as it were, in the pure state. The demand are condemned to their need for the absolute, but are permanently deprived of their object. Theirs is a ravenous hunger that has nothing to devour, an inextinguishable fire that has nothing to consume except the one in whom it burns.

In heaven, this aspiration is fulfilled at the very instant that one attains the beatific vision of the living God. “*I shall be content in your presence*” (Ps 17:15).

During our sojourn on earth, mental prayer is the privileged hour to liberate this hunger from the desires that parasitize it, and from the diversions that distract us from it, by enabling it to rediscover its object: God. It goes without saying that this hunger will never be fully appeased here below. In a sense, mental prayer even intensifies it. But once it has been identified, it is no longer a cause for anxiety. Those in whom it lives and develops, remember with joy the saying that Pascal placed on Christ’s lips: “Be consoled. You would not be seeking me, if you had not already found me.”

