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“As for me, I know my sin” (cf. Ps 51:5)”

Letter 23

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

1983

I have taken advantage of the vacation season to come to a town in the provinces, to visit a very elderly priest whom I venerate. He is paralyzed and no longer leaves his room. From his armchair he looks out on the apse of his former cathedral, and he prays unceasingly.

It is hard for me to define the feeling I experience in his presence. It is as if an extraordinary purity emanated from him, and imbued those around him. It is a purity that emanates from him, but does not originate in him: the shining forth of the Purity of God, through a person who has become diaphanous. As I listened to him, I wondered how he had attained this transparenence. One word forced itself on me: humility. As a matter of fact, he often alluded to his “misery” with a very noticeable accent of peaceful, trusting, and joyful suffering.

Your letter had just reached me, in which you say, “I prefer not to think too much about my sins.” Your words came to my mind during our conversation, contrasting curiously with the attitude of my interlocutor. I cited them to him, without naming you, of course. As a result, I was favored with the following very precious remarks.

“Look at the publican in the parable. There he is before God, not daring to raise his eyes. He beats his breast, he does not stop repeating: ‘God, forgive the sinner that I am.’ He is wonderfully humble. But in his case humility is not, as it is in many people, just one more virtue of which to be quite proud. In a simple way, he is expressing to God what he realizes about himself all through the day: that he is a sinner.

'In a sense, that is all the Lord expects from us in order to lavish his gifts on us: knowledge, avowal, rejection of sin, and sorrow for it. Like St. Paul, I speak of sin in the singular, of the evil within us from which our many sins flow. It is impossible to get rid of sin. It sticks to the soul.

"But we can do better than to grieve and despair. We can do better than to simply hide from God, the way Adam did after his sin, or than to ask God to leave us, the way Peter did after the miraculous drought of fish. We can present ourselves to the Lord in our naked truth, and show him our wounds. Sin that is discerned, avowed, and repudiated, is no longer sin but only 'misery,' and calls down God's most gentle mercy upon us.

"Because we acknowledge our sin, call it by its right name, dissociate ourselves from it, and expose it to God's purifying gaze, suddenly it is no longer pernicious, and we are miraculously purified. The man who, during prayer and through the day, lives in this attitude of confessing his sin to God, is a limpid pool in which the purity of heaven is reflected."

During our conversation, I let the following explanation slip out: "Ah! I really know this old self of mine, swarming with sin!" The reply came so quickly that I thought for an instant that my friend was delivered from his paralysis.

"Do not calumniate *the depths of your being*. In a child of God, it is not the innermost being that is contaminated by sin, but only certain obscure regions that have not yet been evangelized. Never forget that the innermost being of a Christian, after his baptism, is luminous, radiant, and infinitely pure, thanks to the presence within it of the Blessed Trinity. If Christians only understood that heaven is not somewhere else, but right there within them, in the heart of their heart. Their innermost self is already completely immersed in the infinite love of God. If they realized it, they would need to do only one thing: allow this love to destroy the last pockets of resistance, and conquer all the cantons of their interior world!"

Are you going to say that I am not really answering your requests for advice on the way to proceed with your mental prayer? But this attitude of avowing our sin is the warp and woof of all true prayer, as indeed it is of the Christian life.