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“With outstretched arms”

Letter 67

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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I have just reread, in *Le Visage de mon frère* (My Brother's Face) by D.G. Mukerji, a page that brings out the great power of prayer. Here is a summary of its essential points.

Toward the end of his life, a holy man withdrew into a mountain cave in order to be better able to find God. The peasants of the vicinity never failed to have fruit and biscuits brought to him, and sometimes they would go up the mountain to him themselves. The youths protested against these prodigal gifts for a useless man. But the old men silenced the young rationalists: “We must send offerings to a holy man, whether or not he lives for the good of anyone. Isn't holiness the great jewel of existence?”

After twenty years, one day the holy man was found dead, lying at the entrance of the cave. Six weeks later, a terrible crime was committed in the village. Everyone was filled with disgust and fear. The elders went off to fast and pray. Suddenly one of them cried out, “I've discovered the secret.” Standing before the assembled peasants, he explained what he meant: “It's true that the holy man never lifted a finger to help us the whole time he lived in his cave, or brought succor to the destitute, or cared for even one sick person. But virtue begot virtue, life brought forth a better life. All was well with us. Not a single man took his brother's life as long as the saint lived. Isn't it all very clear? He never worked for us, but his lion's presence kept the wolf of misfortune away from our doors.”

This story reminds us irresistibly of a great page in the Bible in Chapter XVII of Exodus:

At Rephidim, Amalek came and waged war against Israel. Moses, therefore, said to Joshua, "Pick out certain men, and tomorrow go out and engage Amalek in battle. I will be standing on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand ." So Joshua did as Moses told him: he engaged Amalek in battle after Moses had climbed to the top of the hill with Aaron and Hur. As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight. Moses' hands, however, grew tired; so they put a rock in place for him to sit on. Meanwhile Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady till sunset. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Ex 17:8-13).

Amalek's soldiers could not understand what power was resisting their impetuous attacks. The Israelite army, badly trained and much smaller than theirs, could not account for the resistance. It never occurred to them that the man scarcely visible at the top of the hill, more poorly armed than his own troops, was the cause of their defeat. God was present in him, because he was praying. And the divine omnipotence that emanated from him strengthened his men for combat and protected them like an invisible and inviolable rampart.

We can fully understand the two stories I have just recounted, only in the light of the Gospel. On another hill a man also stretched out his arms. Two nails held them up. And from him, God's Power was poured out upon the world. There is nothing in space or time that escapes this Power, the Holy Spirit. It sustains in their combats all who welcome it and surrender to it. In them this Power works mightily, and through them it overwhelms the demons and their cohorts.

Moses' prayer and the prayer of the holy man of India were efficacious because the Power that manifested itself at Calvary came to them, without their knowing just what it was. The prayer of Christians is powerful because it is united to the inexhaustible well-spring of divine energy, the heart of the Crucified praying his great filial prayer.