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“Happiness”

Letter 69

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

1983

Your attitude toward happiness reminds me of the response of an audience of students before whom I developed the following theme: the great benefit of mental prayer is that it awakens our appetite for happiness if it is dormant, and intensifies it if it already alive and well. During the discussion and exchange of views that followed, their reactions surprised me.

One of the students asked, “Should we not rather expect mental prayer to satisfy this need in us?” Another student suggested that the goal of all spiritual seekers is to arrive at holy indifference, and that both Buddhists and Christians aspire to this as the supreme wisdom. For isn’t it only when we bring our appetite for happiness under control, that we finally achieve the inner calm required for spiritual progress?

The debate was lively and prolonged. The students were on the defensive, as if I were threatening a hard-earned tranquility of theirs, that consisted precisely in the suppression of their hunger for happiness. However, I think I succeeded in convincing them that this very yearning could be the best stimulus to their spiritual progress. Shall I succeed in convincing you as well?

Those who lose their desire for happiness soon die of inanition. Conversely, those who fearlessly nurture this desire derive their greatest joys from it—and their bitterest disappointments as well. In any event, they are intensely alive. They do, of course, run the risk of despairing of creatures. But isn’t this risk the greatest opportunity, or rather the greatest grace, if it makes them understand that their appetite for happiness can be sated by nothing less than God himself?

The fact remains that prayer can act as a kind of filter for this appetite, and thus prevent it from being corrupted. The great men and women of prayer begin early to have an intense craving for happiness. That is why God detaches them from everything. Incidentally, detachment is not indifference. Rather, it enables them to reach out to all crea-

tures in their secret hunger for happiness. It impels them to draw others to the God whom they themselves are seeking in hope with their whole being.

They do not only look to God to fill their human capacity for happiness. He, for his part, hollows out within them totally new capacities. This enlarging of their spiritual potential causes them suffering, but it also increases their hope. They realize that God excavates only in order to give more lavishly.

I cannot advise you too insistently, as you begin your mental prayer, to concentrate on your fundamental desire for happiness, rather than on the various appetites on the periphery of your being. Free this desire from everything that obstructs or overlays it. Direct it toward the One for whom it yearns perhaps without realizing it. It will soon come alive, and become a permanent guest within you, perhaps a very disturbing one. You will no longer be able to satisfy it with mere reflections of happiness. It will constantly importune you to attain to a greater knowledge and possession of the God who gives joy.