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“The legend of the musk deer”

Letter 82

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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Why exhaust yourself searching for God, as if he were outside of you? He is within you. That's where he has made a rendezvous with you, and is waiting for you. And that's where he'll allow you to find him in his own good time.

Hindu mothers tell their children of the legend of the musk deer, to make them understand this great truth:

“One day many years ago, the musk deer of the mountains sniffed a breath of masked perfume. He leapt from jungle to jungle in pursuit of the musk. The poor animal no longer ate, or drank, or slept. He didn't know where the scent of the musk came from, but he was impelled to pursue it through ravines, forests and hills. Finally, starving, harassed, exhausted and wandering about at random, he slipped from the top of a rock and fell mortally wounded.

“The musk deer's last act before he died was to take pity on himself and lick his breast. And his musk pouch, torn when he fell on the rock, poured out its perfume. He gasped and tried to breathe in the perfume, but it was too late. Beloved son, don't seek the perfume of God outside yourself, and perish in the jungle of life. Search your soul and look within. He will be there.”

The God within you is not a silent God. And yet, if we want to hear him, we must be silent. “The Father speaks one Word, and this Word is his Son. He speaks his Word in eternal silence, and it is in silence that the soul hears him” (St. John of the Cross).

It's hard to create silence in our frightfully noisy world. I am speaking not only of perceptible sounds, but also of all the events, sensational news, and various messages, that the communications media shout out over the rooftops and hiss into our ears. All this commotion perturbs our senses, our imagination, our thinking, and our heart. It dances a wild saraband within us, disrupting our prayer life. Nonetheless, interior silence is still possible.

To achieve this silence, we must practice it patiently and gently. Violent means have never been a way to pacification. We are speaking of the pacification of all our faculties, so that they may become receptive to God, motionless and at attention. This last term evokes a certain quality of silence: recollection. It is an attention that is completely alert, listening eagerly for the interior voice. Claudel wrote:

Many wise men had already told us that in order to hear, it was perhaps enough for us to listen. How true! But now it is not with our auditory apparatus, it is not even with our straining intellect, that we keep watch. It is our whole being that listens to Being live."

You'll probably tell me once again, that you despair of attaining to interior silence, to sacred recollection. True, your own unaided efforts cannot suffice for this. Divine grace must intervene. But how can God refuse this grace? He is much too anxious to see silence established in your soul, so that dialogue can begin between the Father and his child.

Trust and persevere in mental prayer. Christ will pacify your vagrant faculties and bring them back to himself, like the shepherd St. Teresa of Avila tells about, who plays his reed pipe at dusk to gather his sheep scattered over the meadows.