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Letter

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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Madam, I should like to comply with your request that I retrace the spiritual development of your late husband, but that is not easy. How and by what stages, did he achieve the resplendent spiritual life that so impressed those around him? It's true that I was the witness to, and the confident of, his spiritual efforts over many years. But the most important things happened within him, at a depth to which I had no access. Even so, I shall try to retrace the principle stages in his life of prayer, as I thought I discerned them.

When I met your husband almost twelve years ago, he was a man of profound faith, as you know better than I. He almost always reacted to the events of life as a believer. When one of his children was sick; when he had to make an important business decision; when you had your serious accident—his first reaction was to turn to God. You remember his great faith in the Fatherhood of God, which he expressed in Christ's own words: *Ask and you shall receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will opened to you*" (Mt 7:7).

One day, I sensed that he had entered a new spiritual phase. During a conversation with him, it became clear to me that for several months his prayer had been undergoing a transformation. He was no longer petitioning God for temporal goods. He was seeking the riches of the Kingdom, and he was doing it with great insistence! When I pointed out to him that it was perfectly legitimate to pray to God for our temporal needs, he did not argue with me. But, in a tone that touched me deeply, he reminded me of Christ's words:

“It is not for you to be in search of what you are to eat or drink. Stop worrying. The unbelievers of this world are always running after these things. Your Father knows that you need such things. Seek out instead his kingship over you, and the rest will follow in turn” (Lk 12:29-31).

Your husband was filled with a very keen desire for the grace which he was experiencing more and more. It was a grace that led him to correct his faults, and inspired him to a more profound prayer. It was a grace of peace and joy which, through him, touched the souls of those who came to him for counsel. It was at this time, as you must certainly remember, that he devoted himself with so much love to helping a young delinquent boy.

A few years later, I came to realize that this stage had also been exceeded. One day, when we were speaking of mental prayer, he quoted the following words of a mystic: “What a great difference there is between the person who goes to the feast for the feast’s sake, and the one who goes to encounter the Beloved!” Very often during the following months, in his conversations and letters, certain verses from the Psalms would recur, that revealed his state of soul:

*“O God, you are my God whom I seek;
for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts
like the earth, parched, lifeless and
without water” (Ps 63:2)*

*“Athirst is my soul for God, the living God.
When shall I go and behold the face of God?” (Ps 42:3)
“I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like parched land” (Ps 143:6).*

When I talked with him, it was clear that he no longer aspired to the riches of this world or even, in a certain sense, to those of the Kingdom. He now yearned not for God’s gifts, but for the gift of God himself.

Years passed, and this yearning continued to consume him. He was eager to read the great spiritual authors, and to meet persons who would speak to him of his God. It was as if he kept hoping to discover a secret: the means of encountering this God who had captivated him, so as to never again be separated from him.

There was something extraordinarily poignant in this need for God, at once impatient and peaceful, the welled up from the depths of his being. It manifested itself in his conversations with me, and certainly must have found expression in his mental prayer

through heartrending cries. I believe I can safely say that your husband had attained to authentic evangelical detachment, not through scorn for the good things of the earth, but thanks to the fascination he had for an incomparably more desirable Good.

Then there was a time when I was baffled. I kept wondering whether his fervor was declining. I no longer perceived the throbbing of his heart consumed by a fever for God. Even so, I was not worried, because peace and joy—I was about to say, the Holy Spirit—poured from him. I had proof of this in his growing influence on others. It was at this period of his life that he prepared the Jewish professor for baptism, the one whom you welcomed so graciously into your home.

I continued to misidentify the work of grace within your husband, until the day he unknowingly gave me the key to it by speaking about a state “beyond desire.” I questioned him about it. Here is his answer almost word-for-word:

“It’s true that for years of my spiritual life consisted in an insatiable desire for God. Then one day, it was as if all desire was dead. I was very frightened. I was convinced that I had lost God. The sentiment of intense life, fed by the desire to encounter the Lord and lose myself in him, was superseded by a void, a spiritual languor. I didn’t know if I still had faith. I was certain that I no longer loved God, since I could not discern the slightest desire for him within me. You were not there to help me understand God’s will. I felt as though I had emerged from a long-lived illusion. I was both calm and desolated—the way one speaks of a desolate land.

“I saw the light when I remembered, with a certain nostalgia, the prayer which had so often escaped my lips during the preceding years: ‘Lord, I hunger and thirst for you.’ For the first time, I understood that this prayer was not poor enough: ‘I hunger....I thirst....’ The ‘I’ was still too much in the foreground. It was far too much alive, when it should have been crucified.

“One after the other, I had renounced the good of this world, and then the goods of the Kingdom. Now I had to renounce even the desire for God. I mean, that I must no longer desire union for God for my sake, but for God’s. This union must no longer be a desire emanating from me, but a desire emanating from God within me.”

That day, we talked for a long time about this new stage in his life of mental prayer. Several months later, when you informed me of his accidental death, I was reminded of a passage from Emile Dermenghem’s *Vie des saints musulmans* (Lives of the Muslim Saints), that he had quoted to me with intense joy during our last conversation:

“A voice cried out to me, ‘O, Abou Yazid, what do you desire?’ I answered, ‘I desire to desire nothing because I am the desired and You are the one who desires.’ “

