

15. “*I will become a torrent* “

Your letter touched me deeply, especially this part: “Why don’t you ever write for poor miserable sinners? Please have a little pity on those who cannot pray to God with the prayer of the just, and tell them if it true that they are not excluded from the kingdom of prayer.” I must have expressed myself very badly in my earlier letters, if I gave you to believe that they were letters of a just man addressing other just men!

To begin with, I find it very difficult to accept your distinctions. Can anyone claim to be just? Is there anyone who is not a sinner? Who can attempt to pray without first confessing his sin, and avowing his repentance? And what wretchedness can discourage God?

I am reminded of a certain young woman who was extraordinarily beautiful and passionately loved. She was dismayed beyond words, when her surgeon gave her a most disturbing diagnosis of a tiny, harmless-looking pimple at the corner of her lip. If her beauty were impaired, would she still be loved?

The same sort of anxiety sometimes occurs in individuals aware of their moral ugliness. They can stop worrying. Even though it takes beauty or goodness to awaken love in the human heart, the same does not hold true for God. God’s love is of an entirely different nature. St. Paul was well aware of this, and designated it by a word not currently used before him: *agape*, which has been translated by the word, “charity.”

It is not the sight of a creature’s lovableness that arouses God’s love. It is his own love that creates the lovableness, the beauty, and the goodness of the being he loves. Because we are sinners, we are distraught at having lost the moral beauty that earned for us the esteem of others (and above all, our own self-esteem), and we imagine that God also turns away from us. As if our virtue had won us his love up to now! As if man could capture God’s esteem, or awaken his love!

God’s love for us does not have its origin in us. Neither our virtues nor our wretchedness can influence God’s love. His love is not motivated from outside himself. It is a spontaneous welling up, an overflowing of riches, a creative dynamism. God is not searching for human values to love. He is seeking out the poor man (in the Biblical sense of the term—the sinner, the fool, the weakling, the one in whom he finds a void to fill).

But the sinner is unaware of this quality of God's love, and thinks that God has made a mistake. Like St. Peter, he protests, "*Leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man*" (Lk 5:8). Well, God will not go away, and the sinner's wretchedness will become the monstrosity of his Love.

This is why the sinner's prayer consists, above all, in an unshakeable belief in this absolute gratuitousness of God's love, and in consenting to it without pusillanimity. It seems wonderfully simple, but often turns out to be very difficult. Our need to be loved by God for our own excellence is very deep-seated and tenacious. It is often unavowed, and unknown to ourselves. The proof of this is the bitter vexation that perturbs our interior life when we have succumbed to temptation.

In our relations with God, we must radically fight this tendency to see his love as the recognition of our own value. The reason God does not protect us from every failure is, no doubt, that he wants to oblige us to discover that his love for us is not based on our virtue, but springs spontaneously from his heart. He wants to make us realize that there is no danger that his love will undergo change, inasmuch as it does not depend on what he finds in us.

Our Lord used to say to St. Catherine of Sienna, "Become a capacity to receive, and I will become a torrent." That's the prayer of the beggar, of the sinner. He must become a capacity to receive.