

16. *Because I'm Agnes*

Only those who know God pray well. If we want to pray more effectively, we must seek to know God better. He has taken care to direct our search, by revealing to us that he is Love. But what is this Love? Its reflection, in those who love us, enables us to glimpse it. By contrast, its caricature, in those who love us badly, also helps us to understand it better. Such has been the experience of a woman, abandoned by her husband, who has recently written to me. I am copying her letter for you. The possessive love of this husband for his wife, strangely enough, brings out the personal character and generosity of God's love.

H.C.

"...He did not love me. He loved the woman in me, or more precisely, my femaleness. I was a specimen of femininity that was congenial to him. But when he discovered that I was 'somebody,' when he encountered my 'me,' he was annoyed, not knowing what to do with a 'me,' with a living person. From that moment, there was something in his life that was superfluous, cumbersome. Something, or rather somebody, who denied him the right to be alone, alone with a thing of his very own; somebody who affirmed rights, and first of all the right to be recognized as a unique, one-of-a-kind person. That was just too much. He backed away. It was as if he felt threatened in his own territory. He came to think of me as an intruder. I had taken the liberty to be a person, when he was asking me to be an inanimate object, a pleasant, comfortable specimen of femininity. He strayed. He looked elsewhere. And one day he found another woman who, at least so he thinks, is willing to be his 'thing.'

"After cruelly dark months, during which I alternated between rage and depression, when every possible temptation assailed me, I can no longer blame him. Today I am at peace, or rather I am possessed by peace.

"And I owe it all to him. Through my suffering as a badly loved wife, I was led to discover God's love for me. Now I know that God, for his part, does not love me as a little specimen of humanity because he loves 'humanity,' but because I'm Agnes. God is not like the sun, which gives forth its heat indiscriminately and impassibly to all creatures. God gives me his love, he gives me himself, *because I'm me*. God is not like a certain social worker who loves the poor, but never takes the time to look at each one of them in the eye, or to know the name of each person she is helping. What would be the use of it? What she loves is 'the poor.' God is not like that at all. He loves me, Agnes, and he loves me because I'm Agnes. He knows me by my eternal name. He calls me by my name. He is impatient for my answer. He is not jealous of my autonomy or of my personhood. They are dear to him. Of what value would my response be without them? For God, I am not a 'thing' which he preempts to be used, but a freedom that surrenders itself, and for which he has infinite respect.

"Thanks to God's love, I am reconciled with myself and with others. God has released the wellspring of tenderness within my heart. Now at last I am living. And the hour of prayer is also the hour of most intense living for me...."