

24. *To someone who believes he is unworthy of praying*

I was questioning a widow on the development of her spiritual life, so as to counsel her in a more knowledgeable way. She told me:

“I owe my interior life to Sergius [her husband]. More precisely, to his attitude toward me during a shameful phase of my conjugal life. Married for five years and the mother of two children, I was being unfaithful to him. But I still loved him. Not wanting to destroy his happiness, I made sure that he had no reason to suspect me.

“His love for me, of exceptional quality, deepened day after day. One evening—I remember it as if it were yesterday—he expressed his tenderness, his esteem, and his admiration for me in terms that touched my heart. It was too much. The words escaped me: ‘If you only knew!’

He answered, ‘I do know.’ These words triggered violent indignation on my part, unjustified as it was.

“ ‘Well then, why are you playing this shocking game with me? Either you are not hurt by what you know—and that is proof that you do not love me—or else you are greatly disturbed and your serenity is only a lie!’

“I was beside myself—aggressive, scoffing, insulting. He waited until the storm was over. Then he replied calmly, gravely, tenderly: ‘Please understand! For six months I have been suffering cruelly. My own suffering was bearable, because it didn’t degrade me. But your evil did degrade you, and this was intolerable for my love. I saw clearly what I had to do, the only thing I could do. I had to love you still more than before, so that you might be resurrected to love, that this brand-new love might not only burn away your evil in its flames, but create a new heart for you, a new purity, a more radiant beauty than ever.’ And in fact Sergius’ love made me into this new being right then and there.”

This woman’s disclosure enabled me to grasp more clearly what true forgiveness is. When forgiveness is condescending, it begets revolt. When it is reticent, it is burdensome. Forgiveness without love can neither deliver nor save. Only true forgiveness, the fruit of a very pure love, can call forth a living wellspring in the heart of the unfaithful one. Only that can regenerate the one who betrayed love, by enabling him or her to be reborn to love.

Can I hope that recounting this distant memory will help you to understand what God is expecting of you? You wrote: “I feel I am unworthy of praying.” Well then, when will you pray? When you have succeeded in extricating yourself from sin, in stripping yourself of every stain and imperfection? Are you going to forget that only the love of Christ can purify you, transform you, and sanctify you?

Instead of fleeing from Christ, why don't you pray mentally and expose your sinner's soul to his gaze? You will discover, that for God, to forgive is to love. It is so intense, that a brand-new love springs up within the darkness and impurity of the soul, a love that not only purifies and regenerates it, but makes it accede to a totally new perfection.

Think of the look that Christ gave Peter, who had just denied him. Do you believe that is was a look of reproach or anger? Far more terrible, it was a look of more intense love, expressing a more solicitous, burning, and encompassing tenderness than ever. Peter could not resist it. His heart was broken, pouring itself out in tears that were at once bitter and sweet.

At the same time, under the conjoined action of Christ's gaze and of his Spirit at work in Peter, a new love took possession of his whole being. As a result, just a few days after his denial, he dared to affirm to Christ without hesitation: "You know well that I *love you*" (Jn 21:17). He could have added, "I have loved you in very truth since the other night." Peter was not lying. This new love that his Master's gaze had caused to well up in him, would impel him onward until he gave his own life on a cross, after a life consumed in preaching to the multitudes about the way that God loves us.