

43. “And Christ will give you light” (Ep 5:14)

Your letter is on my desk. I was uncertain how to answer it. A visit from a friend has saved the day. As it happens, it seems that his experience can throw light on your own.

I had not seen him for a year, as he lives in southern France and rarely comes to Paris. During his last visit he confided to me that he practiced mental prayer, but with difficulty. He has remained faithful to it. He devotes a half hour to it each day, in spite of his very busy life as a doctor and father of a family. He said to me, “It is my strength and my balance wheel.” I responded, “And yet I remember that last year it was an austere effort devoid of benefit, according to your own words. What caused the change?” “St. Paul. I have been constantly reading the Epistles of the Captivity: Ephesians and Colossians.”

I was intrigued, and got him to talk about it at length. I shall try to convey to you his eager accent of conviction, to show you how the thought of the great Apostle (having attained admirable maturity in the evening of his life in a Roman prison) can illumine and guide your mental prayer.

Once again it was the threat of heresy that goaded Paul’s thinking, and made it leap to new heights. At Colossae, some of the faithful were tempted to rash speculations inspired by the Hellenistic philosophies that attributed to certain heavenly beings, intermediate between God and men, great powers over the progress of the world. These theories threatened to put Christ’s role in eclipse. Now, to question the absolute supremacy of Christ was to attack St. Paul at his most sensitive point. Immediately, his thought quivered, and was galvanized into action. He delved into the mystery of the mission of his Lord as he had never done before, and he constructed a vigorous synthesis. His contemplation now reached heights never before attained, and he paused in awe before new, vastly expanded horizons.

At the heart of Paul’s synthesis: the humanity of Christ, triumphant and glorified, in whom “*the fullness of deity resides*” (Col 2:9). This humanity shines out over our universe. It is our world’s spiritual sun, and no human being escapes its radiation.

The entire sanctifying power of God is concentrated, but not imprisoned, in this risen Christ. Concentrated in order to be infinitely diffused, in order to take hold of all the men and women who offer themselves to its action, and make of them new, divinized beings. Diffused in order to form out of them a vast Body quivering with the Spirit of the Son, and with the prayer that this Spirit breathes into it: “Father, Father!”

I say, “all men and women,” but it is truly the whole universe that St. Paul sees as subject to Christ’s influence, and placed under his dominion. This divine power, concentrated in the glorious humanity of Christ, wills to extend to the farthest limits of the cosmos, to take possession of everything and gather it up toward the Father.

These are the perspectives that transformed my friend’s mental prayer. When the vast Pauline synthesis passes before our eyes (that is, when we know that we are in the presence of the glorious Christ everywhere and always), prayer consists essentially in surrendering ourselves, with open minds and hearts, to his unceasing action and control.

Through the process of photosynthesis, a tree nourishes itself with light. The soul, through mental prayer, draws its nourishment from Christ, as well as its cohesion and unity “to achieve its growth in God.” And little by little, all the areas of its interior universe are penetrated and conquered by the vital influx of the One who wants to be “*all in all*” (cf. Ep. 4:6).

I do hope these views may be of great help to you, too. I leave you with this verse from the Epistle to the Ephesians, which is generally thought to be a fragment of a hymn sung in the early Church:

*“Awake, O sleeper,
arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.”*

(Ep 5:14)