

73. *Prayer must become a fast before it becomes a feast*

Patience and impatience are two of the many virtues that mental prayer requires. I use the word “impatience” advisedly. Granted, it is not included in the official catalogue of the virtues. And yet isn’t impatience the daughter of love? How could the lover bear separation from the beloved, and not burn with the impatient desire to rejoin, possess and be united with the beloved? But you certainly don’t need any invitation to impatience. You are well acquainted with it. On the other hand, it seems that you are less accustomed to the practice of patience. I would like to discuss patience with you, because it is absolutely necessary for anyone who wants to attain great heights in the practice of mental prayer.

You’ve been in the seminary scarcely six months, and already you are disheartened not to have reached the summits of prayer! I beg of you, be patient, or—if you prefer—be patiently impatient. It is a good thing to eagerly desire union with God, but the road is long, and the path is steep. One must set out with a calm step, and the regular breathing of the man who wants to reach great heights.

Patience, patience, my dear Francis, and don’t forget what the etymology of the word can teach us. It comes from the Latin *pati*: to suffer, to endure. If you are resolved to endure, to hold out, to confront the desert and the night, then be confident. But you must reaffirm your resolve often. It will be threatened many times, especially at the hour of mental prayer.

Certain spiritual authors of an earlier time, speaking of the trials of prayer, used a very strong expression. They said that we must *suffer God*. In other words, we must consent to the implacable, ingenious and persevering work of the Holy Spirit within us. Very gradually, he causes the “old man” to die, so that the “new man” can come forth freed from his dross, like glistening metal coming out of the furnace.

You must have a courageous patience, like that of Jacob wrestling with the angel through the long night. Although injured, he refused to let go. That is why, at dawn, he obtained the blessing of his terrifying adversary (cf. Gn 32:25-30).

A distant memory comes to mind as I write you: an old monk’s invitation to patience addressed to a novice. It is in *Miguel Mañara*, the “mystery” of the great Polish poet Miłosz. Before bidding you adieu, I shall copy a few lines from this book for your reflection:

“Love and haste do not get along well, Mañara. Love is measured by patience. A smooth, even step: that is the air of love, whether it is sauntering between two jasmine hedges with a young girl on its arm, or walking alone between two rows of tombstones. Patience...

“An over-passionate hunger is also a temptation. Weeds and roots must be pulverized by bovine jaws in a beautiful meadow during the long, long hours of summer....

“For prayer must be a fast before it becomes a feast. It must be nakedness of heart before becoming a heavenly cloak rustling with the sounds of the world. A day may come when God will allow you to enter abruptly like an axe into the flesh of the tree, to fall dizzily like a stone into the darkness of the water, and to slip with a song into the heart of metal, like fire.”