

75. *Is it for nothing?*

Are you familiar with the very strange story at the beginning of the Book of Job?

One day, when the Sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came among them. And the Lord said to Satan, "Whence do you come?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "From roaming the earth and patrolling it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job, and that there is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil?" But Satan answered the Lord and said, "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing? Have you not surrounded him and his family and all that he has with your protection? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his livestock are spread over the land. But now put forth your hand and touch anything that he has, and surely he will blaspheme you to your face" (Jb 1:6-11).

"Is it *for nothing* that he loves you?" Satan sneers. Does he cherish you, or does he cherish the gifts that he has received from your hands in such abundance? It is a perfidious and gross insinuation. Is Job's love for God nothing but a vile self-love, cleverly camouflaged? Job is put to the test, and he proves that his love for God is indeed authentic.

A sentence in your last letter alerted me: "I can't fight off a certain sadness at having lost this intimacy with Christ in my mental prayer. It helped me so much these last few years amid the family difficulties, as you know so well." As I read this, I wondered whether you are sufficiently vigilant in ferreting out whatever self-concern there may be in your mental prayer. God forbid that I should discourage your desire for intimacy with Christ. I am thoroughly convinced that it is a grace. But is this desire sufficiently stripped of self-seeking? Is it "for nothing" that you love Christ?

Since that wonderful retreat of 1949, God has often granted you a keen sense of his presence and his love. This was to encourage you in the life of mental prayer. Have you perhaps come to take it for granted? Have you perhaps allowed yourself, without realizing it, to practice mental prayer more for the delight of the Lord's presence, than simply for his glory? At any rate, this is a question I invite you to ask yourself. When God grants us sensible graces, it is very difficult to keep a subtle self-love from mingling in with our love for him. It is hard to keep a selfish desire to possess him from insinuating itself into our will to glorify him.

That is why a purification is necessary. This probably explains the "spiritual dryness" you are experiencing at this time. Place your trust in the grace at work within you, but do not fail to cooperate with it.

This is what I would advise you to do. From the start of your mental prayer, affirm to God that you have come to it because it is his will. In order to please him, place yourself completely and unconditionally at his service. Accept in advance to receive no sensible grace, and even ask him not to grant you any, if that can contribute to the coming of his Kingdom. I know that we are instinctively reluctant to talk like this to the Lord. However, prayer of this sort has a miraculously purifying effect on the heart.

Prayerful souls would be purified much more quickly, if they surrendered themselves in this way into the hands of God. He is eager to prune his vine, so that it may bear more abundant and more succulent fruit. If these souls grow discouraged, or clamor like spoiled children for new sensible graces, how can they expect to make any spiritual progress?

Set out on this path courageously. I say "courageously" not as a manner of speaking, but because that is the right word to use. This phase of purification is a tough one. It takes great valor to persevere in it, to accept the apparent death of the feelings, the intellect and the heart. But that's what it's all about. Our sensibility, by dint of being weaned from all gratification, seems to die. Our intellect, deprived of all life, paralyzed in its meditation, also seems to die. Our heart becomes insensible and, as it were, incapable of loving. We can understand why a spiritual writer of earlier times spoke of the "sacrifice of mental prayer."

Great faith is also needed if we are not to be led to think that this time of mental prayer is wasted. We must be convinced that this death prepares a resurrection, that *"unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit"* (Jn 12:24).

Mental prayer, with the trials it holds for us, is really the crucible in which our love for God is purified, and attains sparkling radiance.