

87. *Finding consists in seeking*

This letter was addressed to a young priest who, after several years of parish ministry, obtained permission from his Bishop to retire in solitude to lead a life of prayer and penance.

I wonder if your desire, to know God and be united to him, does not involve excessive tension that threatens to destroy you. The path to holiness is long and hard. It will require all the resources that you can muster. The spiritual combat is implacable, and you'll need every ounce of your strength to succeed.

This desire for God, that has led you into solitude, is certainly a great grace. You must value this desire and nurture it. But it is just as important to channel and purify it. God will respond not so much to its vehemence, as to its purity.

Such a desire is often mixed with an alloy of fantasy and spiritual greed. There is a tendency to yearn for the day when, this desire at last satisfied, we can rest in the possession of God right here on earth. That is a delusion.

With God, it is not the same as with temporal riches. The possession of the latter extinguishes desire *ipso facto*. In contrast, the more we possess God the more we desire him, and the more actively we seek him.

Earthly things are limited, and can be wholly possessed: a table or a house, for example. They satisfy our desire. But God, the Infinite One, exceeds us in every way. The more we know, love, and possess God, the more evident it is that he can be known, loved and possessed far more more completely. Our desire for him is always welling up anew.

We should be delighted to have this desire. At the root of our being, it is God's thought penetrating our intellect. He is forcing it to enlarge its capacity, so that he can communicate himself to it more fully. It is God pressing on our heart, so that he can give his love to us more perfectly. God is thus within us, knowing and loving himself. He wants to make us share in his living knowledge and love of himself. That is the reason for this desire to know and love God, that permeates the souls of his friends.

You are impatient for more perfect union with God. How could it be otherwise? But be patiently impatient. Realize that your desire (although it cannot be satisfied on earth) will be progressively more fully satisfied and more intense, in the measure that you come closer to God.

St. Gregory of Nyssa based his whole spirituality on the following affirmation: "Finding God consists in seeking him incessantly." And he explains what he means:

"Indeed, seeking and finding are not two distinct acts. For success in seeking consists in the search itself. The soul's desire is satisfied by the very fact that it remains insatiable. For truly seeing God consists in never being satiated with desiring him."

Are you going to object, "But then, when shall we ever find rest?" You will find less and less, as you approach God. Just as the speed of a falling stone accelerates as it plunges downward, so, too, the soul's upward flight intensifies the closer it comes to God.

There is no worse mistake than to consider perfection, in our earthly condition, as a repose of desire in the stable possession of God. To the contrary, it is an active search, movement, and aspiration toward him. Quoting again from St. Gregory of Nyssa:

"Because of the transcendence of the riches the soul discovers, in the measure it progresses, it always seems to be only at the start of its ascent. That is why the Word repeats "Arise!" to the soul that is already awake, and "Come!" to the one that is already come. In truth, the one who is really arising must always continue to arise, and the one who runs toward the Lord will never lack much space in which to run. And so the one who is ascending never stops, proceeding from beginning to beginning through beginnings that never end." *

* For more information on the mystical teachings of St. Gregory of Nyssa, consult the following:

From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings

Selected and with introduction by Jean Danielou, SJ

Translated and edited by Herbert Musurillo, SJ

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979.

The Life of Moses, by Gregory of Nyssa.

Translation, Introduction and Notes by Abraham J. Mahlerbe and Everett Ferguson.

Paulist Press, 1978.