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**“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD”**

**First Sermon, Lent 2019**

Last Advent we started meditating on the verse from the psalm: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:2). In this first Lenten sermon I would like to reflect with you on the essential condition for “seeing” God. According to Jesus, it is purity of heart: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

We know that in the Bible the words “pure” and “purity,” like in everyday language, have a very broad range of meanings. The gospel stresses two areas in particular: the righteousness of intentions and purity in morals. The opposite of purity of intentions is hypocrisy, and the opposite of purity in morals is the abuse of sexuality.

In the moral sphere, the word “purity” commonly designates a certain behavior in the area of sex, in accordance with the will of the Creator and the intrinsic purpose of sexuality. We cannot enter into contact with God, who is spirit, other than by means of our own spirit. But disorder or, worse, aberrations in this area have the effect observed by everyone of darkening the mind. It is like feet stirring up a pond: the sludge at the bottom is churned up and muddies all the water. God is light and a person who chooses this “hates the light.”

The sin of impurity blocks us from seeing the face of God or, if it is seen, it is seen as completely deformed. He becomes not a friend, an ally, and a father but the antagonist, the enemy. The carnal person is full of concupiscence and desires the goods and spouses of others. In this situation God appears to such a person as the one who is blocking the path to wicked desires with his peremptory commands, “You shall!” and “You shall not!” Sin arouses a secret bitterness against God in people’s hearts to the point that if it depended on them, they would wish that God did not in fact exist at all.

On this occasion, however, rather than the purity of morals I would like to focus more on the other meaning of “pure of heart,” that is, on the purity or righteousness of intentions, which in practice is the opposite of hypocrisy. The liturgical season we are in right now also orients us in this direction. We began Lent on the Ash Wednesday listening again to the insistently repeated admonitions of Jesus:

When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do. . . . When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. . . . And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites. (Mt 6:1-18)

It is surprising how much the sin of hypocrisy—the sin most denounced by Jesus in the Gospels—enters so little into our ordinary formulations of examinations of conscience. Not having found in any of them the question, “Have I been a hypocrite?” I had to add it in there myself, and rarely have I been able to go past it to the next question without being convicted. The greatest act of hypocrisy would be to hide one’s own hypocrisy—hiding it from ourselves and from others, since it is not possible to hide it from God. Hypocrisy is in large part overcome the moment it is recognized. And this is what I propose to do in this meditation: to recognize the hypocritical part, which can be more or less conscious, of our actions.

A person, wrote Blaise Pascal, has two lives: One is his true life and the other is the imaginary one he lives in his own mind and in the minds of other people. We work hard to embellish and conserve our imaginary being and we neglect our true being. If we have some virtue or merit, we are careful to make it known somehow so as to attach it to that imaginary existence. We would rather separate a virtue from our true life and join it to the imaginary one: we would willingly be cowards in order to acquire the reputation of being brave, even to the point of giving up our life as long as people would talk about it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us try to discover the origin and the meaning of the word “hypocrisy.” It comes from the language of the theater. At first it simply meant “recitation, acting on stage.” The intrinsic element of falsehood that occurs in every stage production did not go unnoticed by the ancients in spite of its acknowledged high moral and artistic value. This was the source of the negative judgment on the acting profession, which was restricted during certain periods to slaves and even directly prohibited by Christian apologists. The sorrow and joy represented and emphasized are not real sorrow and joy but appearance, a fiction. The exterior words and attitudes do not correspond to the inner reality of the heart. What appears on one’s face is not what is in one’s heart.

We use the word “fiction” in a neutral or even positive sense. (It refers to a literary and entertainment genre that is very popular today!) The ancients gave it the meaning that it really has: pretense. What was negative in stage fiction was transferred to the word “hypocrisy.” After originally being a neutral term, it became one of the few words whose meanings are exclusively negative. There are people who brag about being proud or dissolute, but no one brags about being a hypocrite.

The origin of the word puts us on track to discover the nature of hypocrisy. It turns life into a stage where we perform for the public; it means putting on a mask and ceasing to be a person in order to become a character. A fictive character is nothing but a corruption of an authentic person. A person has a face; a character wears a mask. A person is completely bare; a character is completely wrapped in clothes. A person loves authenticity and reality; a character lives a life of fiction and artifice. A person follows his or her own convictions; a character follows a script. A person is humble and gentle; a character is cumbersome and unwieldly.

This innate tendency in human beings has been increased dramatically by the current culture dominated by images. Films, television, and Internet—they are now all based predominantly on images. René Descartes said, “*Cogito, ergo sum*,” “I think, therefore I am,” but today that tends to be substituted by “I appear, therefore I am.” A famous moralist defined hypocrisy as “a homage vice pays to virtue.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It sets traps for pious and religious people in particular. A rabbi during the time of Christ said that 90 percent of the hypocrisy in the world could be found in Jerusalem.[[3]](#footnote-3) The reason is simple: wherever spiritual values, piety, and virtues are most highly esteemed, the strongest temptation is to pretend to have them so as not to seem to be without them.

Another danger comes from the multitude of rituals that pious people are supposed to perform and the rules they are supposed to observe. If these rituals are not accompanied by a continuous effort to establish them within one’s soul out of love for God and neighbor, they become empty shells. St. Paul, speaking of external rites and precepts, says, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23). In this case, says the apostle, people are “holding the form of religion but denying the power of it” (2 Tim 3:5).

When hypocrisy becomes chronic it creates, both in marriage in and in consecrated life, a “double life”: one that is public and well known while the other is hidden—often one during the day and another at night. It is the most dangerous spiritual state for a soul, and it becomes extremely difficult to exit from it unless something from outside intervenes and shatters the wall behind which a person is sealed off. It is the condition that Jesus describes with the image of whitewashed tombs:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Mt 23:27-28)

If we ask why hypocrisy is such an abomination to God, the answer is clear. Hypocrisy is a lie. It obscures the truth. In addition, hypocrisy deposes God and puts him in second place while putting creatures—the public—in first place. It is as though someone in the presence of a king turns his back on him in order to focus only on the servants. “Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7): to cultivate outward appearance more than the heart automatically means giving more importance to human beings than to God.

Hypocrisy, then, is essentially a lack of faith, a form of idolatry in which creatures are assigned the place of the Creator. Jesus attributes his enemies’ lack of ability to believe in him to this: “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn 5:44). Hypocrisy is also a lack of charity toward one’s neighbor because it tends to reduce others to being admirers. It does not recognize the dignity that is properly theirs, because it sees others only in connection to one’s own image. What is important is the size of the *audience* and nothing else.

One type of hypocrisy is duplicity or insincerity. In being hypocritical one aims to lie to God, but with duplicity in thinking and speaking, a person aims to lie to other people. Duplicity is saying one thing and thinking another, saying something good about a person in his or her presence and then speaking ill of that person as soon as his or her back is turned.

The judgment of Christ on hypocrisy is like a flaming sword: “*Receperunt mercedem suam*,” “they have their reward” (Mt 6:2). They already have a signed receipt, so they cannot expect anything more. It is a reward, however, that is illusory and counterproductive even on the human level because the saying is very true that “glory flees the one who pursues it and pursues the one who flees it.”

It is clear that our victory over hypocrisy will never be a victory at the outset. Unless we have reached a very high level of perfection, we cannot instinctively avoid feeling the desire to appear in a good light, to make a good impression, and to please others. Our weapon is the correction of our intentions. Righteous intention is attained through constant, daily correction of our intentions. The intention of the will, not an inner feeling, is what makes the difference in God’s eyes.

If hypocrisy consists in making a show of the good that one does not really do, an effective remedy to counter this tendency is to conceal the good that one does, to favor the hidden gestures that will not be spoiled by any earthly gaze and will keep all their fragrance for God. St. John of the Cross says, “God is more pleased by one work, however small, done secretly, without desire that it be known, than a thousand done with desire that men know of them.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He goes on to say, “He who does a pure and whole work for God merits a whole kingdom for its owner.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Jesus persistently recommends this practice: “Pray in secret, fast in secret, give alms in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you” (see Mt 6:4-18). These are subtle acts before God that invigorate the soul. However, it is not a question of making this a rigid rule because Jesus also says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16). The issue is discerning when it is good for others to see and when it is better that they do not.

The worst thing one can do after hearing or reading a description of hypocrisy is to use it to judge others and to denounce the hypocrisy around us. It is precisely these people to whom Jesus applies the name of hypocrites: “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:5). This is truly a case for saying, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone” (Jn 8:7). Who can say that they are completely immune from this form of hypocrisy? Of being not a bit like a whitewashed tomb, different on the inside from what appears on the outside? Possibly only Jesus and our Blessed Mother are exempt, in a permanent and absolute way, from every form of hypocrisy. The comforting fact is that as soon as one says, “I have been a hypocrite,” one’s hypocrisy is overcome.

**“If your eye is single”**

The word of God does not limit itself to condemning the vice of hypocrisy: it also urges people to cultivate the opposite virtue, which is simplicity. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is single, your whole body will be full of light” (see Mt 6:22). The word “simplicity” can have—and still has today—a negative meaning of gullibility, naiveté, superficiality, and foolishness. Jesus was careful to exclude this meaning: when he recommends that his disciples be “simple or innocent as doves,” he also adds the call to be “wise as serpents” (see Mt 10:16).

St. Paul takes up and applies the gospel teaching on simplicity to the life of the Christian community. In his Letter to the Romans, he writes, “If one contributes, one should do so in simplicity and generosity” (see Rom 12:8). He is referring, first of all, to those in the community who are responsible for works of charity, but the recommendation applies to all, not just to those who give money but also to those who give of their time and work. This means not to emphasize the good one does for others or through one’s office. Alessandro Manzoni in his novel *The Betrothed* has embodied the spirit of the gospel very well and has a very touching scene in this regard tht involves the good tailor of the village:

He interrupted himself, as if checked by some thought. He hesitated a moment; then filling a platter from the several dishes on the table, and adding a loaf of bread, he put it into a cloth, and taking it by the four corners, said to his eldest girl: “Here, take this.” He then put into her other hand a little flask of wine, and added: “Go down to the widow Maria, leave her these things, and tell her it is to make a little feast with her children. But do it kindly and nicely, you know; that it may not seem as if you were doing her a charity.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

The apostle Paul also speaks of simplicity in another context that is of interest to us particularly because it is relevant to the Passover. Writing to the Corinthians, he says,

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but *with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (1 Cor 5:7-8)

The feast that the apostle invites people to celebrate is not just any feast but the feast par excellence, the unique feast that Christianity was familiar with and celebrated in the first three centuries of its history, the Passover. On the eve of the Passover, the 13th day of Nisan, the Jewish ritual required the housewife to scour the whole house by candlelight, cleaning every corner to remove even the smallest vestige of leavened bread so as to celebrate the Passover the next day with only unleavened bread. Leaven was actually synonymous for the Jews with corruption, and the unleavened bread was a symbol of purity, newness, and integrity. It is in this sense that Jesus calls hypocrisy “leaven” when referring to “the leaven of the Pharisees” (Lk 12:1).

St. Paul sees this Jewish ritual practice as a significant metaphor for Christian life. Christ has been sacrificed; he is the true Passover, which the ancient Passover foreshadowed. We need, then, to scour our interior homes—our hearts—and remove everything that is old and corrupt in order to become “a new lump,” to do a major spring cleaning within ourselves. The Greek word *heilikrineia* that is translated as “sincerity” contains the idea of the radiance of the sun (*helios*) and of testing and judgment (*krino*), so it therefore means radiant transparency, something that has been tested in the light and has been found pure.

The virtue of simplicity has the most sublime model that anyone can think of: God himself. St. Augustine wrote, “God is triune, but he is not triple.”[[7]](#footnote-7) He is simplicity itself. The Trinity does not destroy the simplicity of God, because simplicity concerns nature, and the nature of God is one and simple. St. Thomas faithfully retains this legacy in making simplicity the first of God’s attributes. [[8]](#footnote-8)

The Bible expresses this very truth in a concrete way through images: “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). The absence of any kind of mixture is also one of the multiple meanings of the divine title *Qadosh*, Holy. Pure fullness, pure simplicity. The great mystic St. Catherine of Genoa pointed to this aspect of the divine nature, which she was enamored of, with the words “whole,” and “wholeness,” words that together indicate purity and completeness, absolute fullness and homogeneity. God is “all of one piece.” The simplicity of God is “sheer fullness.” Scripture says of him, “Nothing can be added or taken away” (Sir 42:21). Insofar as he is supreme *fullness,* nothing *can* be added to him; insofar as he is supreme *purity*, nothing *should* be taken away. The two are never united in us; one contradicts the other. Our purity is always obtained by removing something, by purifying ourselves, by “removing the evil of our deeds” (see Is 1:16).

Any kind of act, even if it is small, if done with a pure and simple intention, makes us be “in the image and likeness of God.” A pure and simple intention concentrates the energy dispersed in the soul, prepares the spirit, and unites it to God. This is the beginning, end, and adornment of all the virtues. Inclining only toward God and judging things in relation to him, simplicity pushes away and rejects pretense, hypocrisy, and every duplicity. This pure and righteous intention is the “single eye” that Jesus speaks about in the Gospel that gives light to the whole body, that is, to all the life and actions of a person, and keeps him or her immune to sin.

Simplicity is one of the most arduous and most wonderful achievements of the spiritual journey. Simplicity belongs to the person who has been purified by a true repentance, because it is the fruit of a total detachment from oneself and of disinterested love for Christ. One reaches it little by little, without being discouraged by slip-ups, but with a firm determination to seek God for his own sake and not for our sake.

If I may be permitted to make a suggestion at the end of this meditation, it would be to look for Psalm 139 in the Psalter or in the Liturgy of the Hours and to recite it slowly and repeatedly as if we were reading it for the first time, even as if we were composing it ourselves and were the first to speak it out. If hypocrisy and duplicity consist in seeking the gaze of men more than that of God, here we find the most effective remedy. Reciting this psalm is like undergoing a kind of radiography, like exposing ourselves to X-rays. One senses the gaze of God criss-crossing over every part of us. I always remember the impression I had when I first recited it the way I am describing it. It begins this way:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely. . . .

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night’,
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

The wonderful things is that this awareness of being under God’s gaze does not create a feeling of shame and discomfort that a person can feel at being observed and having his or her most secret thoughts exposed. On the contrary, it creates a feeling of joy because we understand that it is the gaze of a father who loves us and who wants us to be perfect as he is perfect. The psalmist in fact ends his prayer with an exclamation of joy:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Yes, Lord, search us to see if we are following a path of lies, and guide us, during this Lent, on the path of simplicity and transparency. Amen.

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**“RETURN WITHIN YOURSELVES!”**

**Second Sermon, Lent 2019**

St. Augustine made an appeal that despite the distance of so many centuries still maintains its relevance: “*In teipsum redi. In interiore homine habitat veritas*,” “Return within yourselves. In the inward man dwells truth.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In a discourse to the people, he exhorted this even more insistently:

Return to your heart. Why go away from yourselves? Going away from yourselves you perish. Why go the ways of deserted roads? Come back from your wandering that has taken you so far away and return to the Lord. It can happen quickly. First return to your own heart; you have wandered and become a stranger to yourself: you do not know yourself, and yet you are seeking the one who made you! Return, return to your heart, detach yourself from your body. . . . Return to your heart; see there what you can perhaps perceive of God, for that is where you will find the image of God. Christ dwells in the inner man, and it is in your inner man that you are renewed after the image of God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Continuing the comments started last Advent on the verse from the psalm—“My soul thirst for God, for the living God”—let us reflect on the “place” in which each of us can enter into contact with the living God. In a universal and sacramental sense this “place” is the Church, but in a personal and existential sense it is our hearts, what Scripture calls “the inner self,” “the hidden man of the heart.” [[11]](#footnote-11) The liturgical season we are in also prompts us in this direction. During these forty days Jesus is in the desert, and that is where we need to meet him. Not all of us can go into an external desert, but all of us can take refuge in the interior desert of our heart. “Christ dwells in the inner man,” St. Augustine said.

If we want a model or symbol that can help us to implement this return within ourselves, the Gospel offers it in the episode of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is the man who wants to know Jesus, and to do so he leaves his house, walks through the crowd, and climbs a tree. He is looking for him outside. But then Jesus passing by sees him and says to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5). Jesus brings Zacchaeus back to his house and there, out of the public eye, without witnesses, a miracle happens; he recognizes who Jesus truly is and finds salvation. We are often like Zacchaeus. We seek Jesus and we seek him outside in the streets, among the crowd, yet it is Jesus himself who invites us to return to the house of our hearts, where he desires to meet with us.

**Interiority, a Value in Crisis**

Interiority is a value in crisis. The “interior life” which at one time was almost synonymous with spiritual life, now tends instead to be looked at with suspicion. There are dictionaries of spirituality that completely omit the words “interiority” and “recollection,” and others that do carry them express reservations. For example, they note that there are no biblical words, after all, that correspond exactly to these words, or that they could have been decisively influenced by platonic philosophy, or that they could lean to subjectivism, and so on. A revealing symptom of this loss of taste and esteem for the interiority is the fate suffered by the *Imitation of Christ*, which is kind of introductory manual to the interior life. From being the most beloved book by Christians after the Bible, it has, in a few decades, become a forgotten book.

Some causes of this crisis are ancient and inherent in our very nature. Our “composition,” since we are constituted by flesh and spirit, means that we are like an inclined plane, but one that is slanted toward the external, the visible, and the multiple. Like the universe after the initial explosion (the famous Big Bang), we too are in the phase of expansion and of moving away from the center. “The eye is not satisfied by seeing, nor has the ear enough of hearing” (Eccles 1:8). We are continuously “outbound” through the five doors or windows of our senses.

Other causes are instead more specific and topical. One is the relevance acquired by “social issues,” which is certainly a positive value in our times, but if it is not rebalanced, it can emphasize an outward orientation and the depersonalization of human beings. In the secular culture of our time, the role that Christian interior life used to fulfill has been assumed by psychology and psychoanalysis, which goes no further, however, than the unconscious and its subjectivity, disregarding the interior life’s intimate connection to God.

In the ecclesial sphere, the affirmation by the Vatican Council of the idea of the “Church in the Modern World” at times replaced the ancient ideal of flight *from* the world with the ideal of the flight *toward* the world. The abandonment of the interior life and an external orientation constitute one aspect—which is among the most dangerous—of the phenomenon of secularism. There was even an attempt to justify this new orientation theologically that took on the name “Death of God theology” or the “Secular City.” God himself, they say, set up that example for us. By incarnating himself, he emptied himself, he went out of himself and the interior life of the Trinity; he became “secularized,” that is, he became merged into the secular. He became a God “outside of himself.”

**Interiority in the Bible**

As always, when there is a crisis about a traditional value, Christianity must respond by carrying out a recapitulation, that is, a return to the beginning of things to carry them forward to new fruitfuness. In other words, we need to start again from the word of God and rediscover, in its light and in the same Tradition, the vital and perennial element, freeing it from obsolete elements that it accumulated over the centuries. This is the methodology the Second Vatican Council followed in all its work. Just as in springtime in nature, we prune a tree of its branches from the preceding season to make possible new growth from its trunk, so too we need to do the same in the life of the Church.

The prophets of Israel had already endeavored to shift the people’s interest from the external practices of worship and rituals to the interiority of relationship with God. We read in Isaiah, “These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote” (Is 29:13). The reason is that “they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (see 1 Sam 16:7). And we read in another prophet, “Rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:13).

It is the type of reform that Jesus took up and brought to fulfillment. Anyone who examines the work of Jesus and his words, outside of dogmatic concerns and from the point of view of the history of religion, would notice one thing above all: he wanted to renew Jewish religiosity, which had often ended up in the shallows of ritualism and legalism, and to replace at its center an intimate and lived relationship with God. He never tires of referring to the “secret” place, the “heart,” where real contact takes place with God and his living will and on which the value of every action depends (see Mk 15:10ff). The call to an interior life finds its most profound and objective biblical rationale in the doctrine of the indwelling of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the baptized soul.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As time went on, something became clouded in the biblical vision of Christian interior life and contributed to the crisis I spoke of above. In certain spiritual currents, as in some of the Rhine mystics, the objective character of this interior life became obscured. They insisted on a return to “the bottom of the soul” through what they call “introversion.” But it is not always clear if this “bottom of the soul” belongs to the reality of God or to the reality of the self—or worse, if it means both things together in a pantheistic fusion.

In recent centuries the *method* ended up prevailing over the *content* of Christian interiority, reducing it at times to a kind of technique for concentration and meditation more than for the encounter with the living Christ in a person’s heart—even if in every era there are wonderful examples of Christian interior life. Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity is aligned with the purest objective interiority when she writes, “I have found Heaven on earth, since Heaven is God, and God is in my soul.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

**The Return to Interiority**

But let us turn to the present. Why is it urgent to speak about the inner life and rediscover the inclination toward it? We are living in a civilization that is completely outward-facing. What we observe in the physical sphere is happening in the spiritual sphere. We send probes to the periphery of the solar system and take photographs of what there is on distant planets; in contrast, we do not know what is stirring a few thousand meters under the earth’s crust and we do not succeed, therefore, in foreseeing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. We also know, now in real time, what is happening on the other side of the world, but we still do not know the restlessness in the depth of our hearts. We live as though we are inside a centrifuge moving at high speed.

To escape, that is, to go outside of self, is a kind of watchword. There even exists “escape literature,” and “escape entertainment.” Escape has become, so to speak, institutionalized. Silence causes fear. We do not succeed at living, working, and studying without some kind of talking or music around us. It is a kind of *horror vacui*, the fear of a vacuum, that impels us to numb ourselves this way.

I once had the experience of going inside a discotheque, having been invited to speak to the young people gathered there. It was enough to give me an idea of what prevails there: raucous noise and a deafening din like a drug. I made some inquiries among the young people on their way out of the discotheque, and when I asked, “Why do you get together in this place?” some responded, “So that we don’t have to think!” It is easy to imagine what kinds of manipulations young people are exposed to when they have now given up thinking.

The command of Egypt’s Pharaoh for the Jews was “Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to [Moses’] deceptive words” (see Ex 5:9). The tacit, but no less authoritative, command of the modern pharaohs is “Let deafening noise be put on these young people to daze them so that they do not think and cannot make free choices; then they will follow the trends that suit us, they will buy what we tell them, and they will think the way we want them to!” For the very important sector of entertainment and advertising in our society, individuals count only as “viewers,” as statistics that make the “audience” numbers go up.

It is necessary to oppose this devaluation with a firm “no!” Young people are also those who are the most big-hearted and ready to rebel against slavery; in fact there are groups of young people who are reacting to this assault and, instead of escaping, seek out places and times of silence and contemplation to find themselves, and in themselves, God. There are many of them, even if no one speaks about them. Some of them have founded houses of prayer and continuous Eucharist adoration, and networks give many of them the opportunity to gather together.

Interiority is the path to an authentic life. People speak a lot today about authenticity and make it the criterion for success or failure in life. The philosopher who is perhaps the most famous in the last century, Martin Heidegger, placed this concept at the center of his system. For a Christian, genuine authenticity is not attained unless one lives “*coram Deo*,” in the presence of God. Søren Kierkegaard writes,

The cattleman who (if this were possible) is a self directly before his cattle is a very low self, and, similarly, a master who is a self directly before his slaves is actually no self—for in both cases a criterion is lacking. . . . What infinite reality . . . the self gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God!”[[14]](#footnote-14)

He also makes the point that “There is so much talk about human distress and wretchedness, but only that person’s life was wasted who . . . never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that “he,” he himself, his self, exists before this God.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Gospel narrates the story of one of these “herdsmen.” He had left his father’s home and had squandered his goods and his youth in living a dissolute life. But one day, “he came to himself.” He reviewed his life, prepared the words he would say, and went back to his father’s house (see Lk 15:17). His conversion happened at that moment, even before he started going home, while he was alone in the middle of a pigsty. It happened the moment that “he came to himself.” Afterward he merely followed through on what he had already decided. His external conversion was preceded by his inner conversion and received its validity from that. How fertile is the statement that “he came to himself”!

It is not only young people who are swept up by the wave of an exterior focus. It is also true of the most committed and active people in the Church. Including religious! Distraction is the name of the mortal sickness that lays traps for all of us. We end up being like an inside-out garment with our soul exposed to the four winds. In an address to the superiors of a contemplative religious, St. Paul VI said,

We are living in a world today that seems to be gripped by a fever that has infiltrated even the sanctuary and our solitude. Noise and a loud racket have invaded nearly everything. People are no longer able to recollect themselves. In the throes of a thousand distractions, they usually squander their energy in step with various forms of modern culture. Newspapers, magazines, and books have invaded the intimacy of our homes and our hearts. It is more difficult than before to find an opportunity for that recollection in which the soul succeeds in being fully engaged with God.

St. Teresa of Avila wrote a work called *The Interior Castle* that is certainly one of the most mature fruits of the Christian teaching about the interior life. But there also exists, unfortunately, an “exterior castle,” and today we observe that we can be enclosed in that castle as well—shut out of the house and unable to reenter. Prisoners of the exterior world! St. Augustine describes his life that way before his conversion:

You were within me, while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you. They kept me far from you, those fair things which, if they were not in you, would not exist at all. [[16]](#footnote-16)

How many of us need to repeat this bitter confession: “You were within me, while I was outside.” There are some who dream of solitude but they just dream about it. They love it as long as it stays in their dream and does not ever result in being real. They actually shun it and are afraid of it. The disappearance of silence is a serious symptom. Almost everywhere the typical signs in every hallway of religious houses that commanded “*Silentium*!” have been removed. I believe the following dilemma hangs over many religious environments: either silence or death! Either we find an environment and times of silence and interiority or there will progressively be total spiritual emptiness. Jesus calls hell “the *outer* darkness” (Mt 8:12), and that designation is highly significant.

We do not need to let ourselves be fooled by the usual objections: we find God outside ourselves, in our brothers and sisters, in the poor, in our fight for justice; we find him in the Eucharist that is outside of us, in the word of God. . . . All of that is true. But where is it that you actually “encounter” the brother or the poor person if not in your heart? If you encounter them only on the outside it is not a person that you encounter, but a thing. You are bumping into them more than encountering them. Where is it that you encounter the Jesus of the Eucharist if not in faith, which is inside of you? A genuine encounter between persons cannot happen except between the consciousness of two persons, two free wills, that is, between two interior lives.

It is a mistake to think, that an emphasis on the interior life can be harmful, after all, to an active commitment for the kingdom and for justice; in other words, it is a mistake to think that affirming the primacy of intention can be harmful to action. Interiority is not in opposition to action but to a certain way of performing the action. Far from diminishing the importance of working for God, interiority establishes it and preserves it.

**The Hermit and His Hermitage**

If we want to imitate what God did by becoming incarnated, let us imitate him all the way. It is true that he emptied himself and went out of himself and from the inner life of the Trinity to come into the world. We know, however, the manner in which that happened: “He remained what he was and assumed what he was not,” says an ancient adage about the Incarnation. Without abandoning the bosom of his Father, the Word came down among us. We too now go toward the world but without ever leaving ourselves totally. *The Imitation of Christ* says, “A spiritual man quickly recollects himself because he has never wasted his attention upon externals. No outside work, no business that cannot wait stands in his way. He adjusts himself to things as they happen.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

But let us also seek to see concretely how to rediscover and preserve the habit of an interior life. Moses was a very active man. But we read that he had a portable tent constructed for himself, and at every stage of the exodus he would set up the tent outside the encampment and regularly entered there to consult the Lord. There, the Lord spoke with Moses “face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex 33:11).

We are not always able to do that. We cannot always withdraw to a chapel or a solitary place to establish contact with God. St. Francis of Assisi suggests another tactic that is at our fingertips. Sending his brothers into the streets of the world, he would say, we always have a hermitage with us wherever we go, and any time we wish we can, like hermits, enter that hermitage: “Our brother body is our cell and our soul is the hermit living in that cell in order to pray to God and meditate.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

This is the same recommendation that St. Catherine of Siena expressed with the image of an “interior cell” that we each carry within us; it is always possible to withdraw there with our thoughts to restore a living contact with the Truth that dwells in us. To this interior cell not limited by walls, says St. Ambrose, Jesus invites us when he says, “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.” (Mt 6:6).[[19]](#footnote-19)

We heard at the beginning the heartfelt appeal by St. Augustine to return to our hearts. Let us conclude by listening to another appeal with the same objective that is also heartfelt, the appeal that St. Anselm of Canterbury addresses to the reader at the beginning of his *Proslogion*:

Come now, insignificant man, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and having locked the door seek Him out [Mt. 6:6]. Speak now, my whole heart, speak now to God: “I seek Your countenance, O Lord, Your countenance I seek” [Ps 27:8].[[20]](#footnote-20)

With these desires and intentions, let us begin our workday in the service of the Church.

English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

**Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap**

**IDOLATRY: THE ANTITHESIS OF THE LIVING GOD**

**Third Lent Sermon, 2019**

Every morning, when we wake up we have a particular experience that we almost never notice. During the night, the things that exist around us are the way we left them the night before: the bed, the window, the room. Perhaps the sun is already shining outside, but we do not see it because our eyes are closed and the curtains are drawn. Only when we awake do things begin or revert to existing for me because I become aware of them, I recognize them. Prior to that, it was as though these things did not exist.

The same thing is true with God. He is always there: “In him we live and move and have our being,” says Paul to the Athenians (Acts 17:28). But generally this occurs like our sleep, without our being aware of it. There is also an awakening of the spirit, a sudden burst of consciousness. This is why Scripture exhorts us so often to wake from our sleep: “Sleeper, awake! / Rise from the dead, /and Christ will shine on you” (Eph 5:14); “It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” (Rom 13:11).

**Idolatry, Ancient and New**

The God of the Bible is defined as “living” to distinguish him from idols that are dead things. This is the struggle that appears in all the books of the Old and New Testaments. We only have to open a random page from the prophets and the psalms to find the signs of this epic battle in defense of the one and only God of Israel. Idolatry is the exact antithesis of the living God. One psalm says of idols,

Their idols are silver and gold,

the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak

eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear;

noses, but do not smell.

They have hands, but do not feel;

feet, but do not walk;

they make no sound in their throats. (Ps 115:4-7)

In contrast to idols, the living God appears as a God who “does what he pleases,” who speaks, who sees, who hears, a God “who breathes!” The breath of God has a name in Scripture, the *Ruah Yahweh*, the Spirit of God.

The struggle against idolatry did not conclude, unfortunately, with the end of historical paganism; it is always on-going. The idols have changed their names, but they are present more than ever. Inside each one of us, as we will see, there exists one that is the most formidable of all. It is, therefore, worth pausing for a time on this issue as a contemporary issue, and not just as an issue in the past.

The person who made the most lucid and in-depth analysis of idolatry is the apostle Paul. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by him to the discovery of the “golden calf” that lies hidden in each of us. At the beginning of the Letter to the Romans, we read this:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom 1:18-21)

In the minds of those who have studied theology, these words are linked almost exclusively to the thesis of the natural knowability of the existence of God from the things he has created. Therefore, once this problem is resolved, or after it has stopped being a pressing concern as in the past, these words are very rarely mentioned and appreciated. But the question of the natural knowability of God is, in this context, an issue that is quite marginal. The words of the apostle have much more to say to us; they contain one of those “thunders of God” capable of breaking even the cedars of Lebanon.

The apostle is intent on demonstrating what humanity’s situation was before Christ and outside of him, in other words, the point at which the process of redemption begins. It does not start at zero from nature, but at minus zero because of sin. All have sinned; no one is excluded. The apostle divides the world into two categories—Greeks and Jews, that is, pagans and believers—and he begins his indictment precisely against the sin of pagans. He identifies the fundamental sin of the pagan world as ungodliness and unrighteousness. He says that it is an attack on truth—not on this or that truth but on the original truth of all existence.

The fundamental sin, the primary object of divine wrath, is identified as *asebeia*, ungodliness. What this precisely means is what the apostle immediately explains, saying that it consists in refusing to “honor” and to “give thanks” to God. In other words, it is the refusal to recognize God as God, not rendering to him the consideration that is due to him. It consists, we could say, in “ignoring God” where “ignoring” here does not mean “not knowing he exists,” but “acting as though he did not exist.”

In the Old Testament we hear Moses crying out to the people, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God” (Deut 7:9), and a psalmist takes up that cry, saying, “Know that the Lord is God. / It is he that made us, and we are his” (Ps 100:3). Reduced to its central core, sin is a denial of that “recognition”; it is the attempt on the part of a creature to annul the infinite qualitative distance that exists between himself or herself and the Creator and to refuse to depend on him. That refusal becomes embodied concretely in idolatry, in which one worships the creature in place of the Creator (see Rom 1:25). The pagans, the apostle goes on to say,

became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (Rom 1:21-23)

The apostle does not mean that all pagans without exception have personally lived in this kind of sin. (He speaks further on, in Romans 2:14ff., about pagans who are acceptable to God because they follow the law of God written on their hearts.) He means the objective situation in general of humanity before God after sin. Human beings, created “upright” (in the physical sense of *erect* and in the moral sense of *righteous*), became “bent” through sin, that is, bent over toward themselves, and became “perverse,” that is, oriented toward themselves instead of toward God.

In idolatry, a human being does not “accept” God but makes himself or herself a god. The roles are reversed: the human being becomes the potter and God becomes the pot that is shaped to his or her pleasure (see Rom 9:20ff). There is in all this an allusion, at least implicit, to the account of creation (see Gen 1:26-27). There it says that God created man in his image and likeness; here it says that people have substituted the image and figure of the corruptible human being for God. In other words, God made man in his image, and now man makes God in his image. Since man is violent, he will make violence a deity, Mars; since he is lustful, he will make lust a deity, Venus, and so on. He is now making God a projection of himself.

**“You are the man!”**

It would be easy to demonstrate that, in some ways, this is still the situation in which we find ourselves in the West from the religious point of view; it is the situation from which modern atheism got its start with Ludwig Feuerbach’s famous saying, “God did not make man in His image; on the contrary man made God in his image.” [[21]](#footnote-21) In a certain sense we have to admit that this assertion is true! Yes, God is actually a product of the human mind. The issue, however, is knowing which God is being referred to. It is certainly not the living God of the Bible but only a surrogate.

Let us imagine a deranged person today taking a hammer to Michelangelo’s statue of David out in front of the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence and then starting to cry out with an air of triumph, “I have destroyed Michelangelo’s David! His David does not exist anymore! His David does not exist anymore!” The poor deluded fellow does not realize that it was only a cast, a copy for tourists in a hurry, since Michelangelo’s real statue of David, because of such an attempt in the past, has been taken out of circulation and is stored safely in the Galleria dell’Accademia. This parallels what happened to Friedrich Nietzsche when, through one of his characters’ words, he proclaimed, “We have killed God!”[[22]](#footnote-22) He did not realize that he had not killed the real God but only a “plaster” copy of him.

We need just a simple observation to be convinced that modern atheism has nothing to do with the God of Christian faith but with a deformed idea of him. If the idea of the one and triune God had been kept alive in theology (instead of talk about a vague “supreme being”), it would not have been so easy for Feuerbach’s theory to prevail, that God is a projection of human beings themselves and of their essence. What need would human beings have had to split themselves into three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It is a vague deism that is demolished by modern atheism, not faith in the one and triune God.

But let us move onto something else. We are not here to refute modern atheism or to take a class in pastoral theology; we are here to undertake a journey of personal conversion. What part do we have—I mean “we” in the sense of us believers here—in the tremendous indictment of the Bible against idolatry? According to what has been said up until now, it would seem in fact that more than anything else, we have taken on the role of accusers. Let us hear what follows in the Paul’s Letter to the Romans. After having ripped off the mask from the world’s face, the apostle next rips off the masks from our faces as well and we will see how.

You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom 2:1-3)

The Bible tells us the following story. King David had committed adultery; to cover it up he had the woman’s husband killed in battle, so at that point taking on the wife for himself could have even seemed like an act of generosity on the king’s part toward the soldier who died fighting on his behalf. This was a real chain of sins here. Then the prophet Nathan, sent by God, came to him and told him a parable (but the king did not know it was a parable.) There was, Nathan said, a very rich man in the city who had flocks of sheep, and there was a poor man who had only one sheep that was very dear to him from which he drew his livelihood and that slept in his house. A guest arrived at the rich man’s house so, sparing his own sheep, he took the sheep from the poor man and had it killed to prepare the table for the guest. When David heard this story, his wrath was unleashed against that man and he said, “The man who has done this deserves to die!” Then Nathan, immediately dropping the parable, pointed his finger at David, said to him, “You are the man!” (see 2 Sam 12:1ff).

That is what the apostle Paul does to us. After having pulled us along behind him in righteous indignation and horror at the ungodliness of the world, when we go from chapter one to chapter two of his letter, it is as though he suddenly turns toward us and repeats, “you are the man!” The reappearance at this point of the phrase “without excuse” (*anapologetos),* used earlier for the pagans, leaves no doubt about Paul’s intentions. While you were judging others—he concludes—you were condemning yourself. The horror you conceived for idolatry is now turned against you.

The “judge” throughout the second chapter turns out to be a Jew, who is to be understood here more as a type. The “Jew” is the non-Greek, the non-pagan (see Rom 2:9-10). He is the pious man who is a believer, who has strong principles and is in possession of revealed morality, who judges the rest of the world and, in judging it, feels himself secure. “Jew” in this sense is each of us. Origen actually said that in the Church, those who were targeted by these words of the apostle are the priests, presbyters, and deacons, that is, the guides, the leaders.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Paul himself experienced this shock when he went from being a Pharisee to being a Christian, so he can now speak with great conviction and point to the path for believers to come out of Phariseeism. He exposes the peculiar recurring illusion that pious and religious people have of being sheltered from the wrath of God just because they have a clear idea of good and evil, they know the law, and at the occasion they know how to apply it to others. However, when it comes to them, they think that the privilege of being on God’s side—or in any case the “goodness” and “patience” of God they know well—will make an exception for them.

Let us imagine this scene. A father is reprimanding one of his sons for some kind of transgression; another son, who has committed the same offense, believing to win over his father’s sympathy and escape the reprimand, also begins to rebuke his brother loudly, while the father is expecting something else entirely. The father expects that hearing him scold his brother and seeing his goodness and patience toward him, the second son would run to throw himself at his father’s feet, confessing that he too was guilty of the same offense and promising to correct himself.

Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom 2:4-5)

What a shock it is the day you realize that the word of God is speaking in this way precisely to you, that the “you” is yourself! This is what happens when a jurist is completely focused on analyzing a famous verdict issued in the past that is authoritative, when suddenly, observing it more closely, he becomes aware that the verdict applies to him as well and is still in full force. Suddenly it alters that person’s situation, and he stops being sure of himself. The word of God is engaged here in a genuine *tour de force*; it turns upside down the situation of the one who is dealing with it. Here there is no escape: either we need to “break down” and say like David, “I have sinned against the Lord!” (2 Sam 12:13), or there is a further hardening of the heart and impenitence is reinforced. In hearing this word from Paul one ends up either converted or hardened.

But what is the specific accusation that the apostle levels against the “pious”? That of doing “the very same things” that they judge in others, he says. In what sense does he mean “the very same things”? In the sense of *materially* the same? He means this as well (see Rom 2: 21-24), but above all he means “the very same things” in terms of substance, which is ungodliness and idolatry. The apostle highlights this better in the rest of the letter when he denounces the claim of saving oneself through works and thus making oneself a creditor and God a debtor. If you, he says, observe the law and do all kinds of good works, but only to affirm your righteousness, you are putting yourself in God’s place. Paul is only repeating with other words what Jesus had tried to say in the Gospel through the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple and through numerous other ways.

Let us apply all of this to us Christians, considering, as we said, that Paul’s target is not so much the Jewish people as it is religious people in general and in his specific case the so-called “Jewish Christians.” There is a hidden idolatry that lays traps for the religious person. If idolatry is “worshiping the works of one’s own hands” (see Is 2:8; Hos 14:4), if idolatry is “putting the creature in God’s place,” then I am idolatrous when I put the creature—*my* creature, the work of *my* hands—in place of the Creator. My “creature” could be the house or the church that I am building, the family that I am establishing, the son I have brought into the world (how many mothers, even Christian mothers, unconsciously make their son, especially if he is an only child, their God!). It can be the religious institute that I founded, the office that I hold, the work I perform, the school I direct. In my case, this very sermon I am preaching to you!

At the core of every idolatry is self-worship, the cult of self, self-love, putting oneself at the center and in first place in the universe, sacrificing everything else to that. We just need to learn to listen to ourselves when we speak to discover the name of our idol, since, as Jesus says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). We will discover how many of our sentences begin with the word “I.”

The result is always ungodliness, not glorifying God but always and only oneself, making even the good, including the service we render to God—and God himself!—serve one’s own success and personal affirmation. Many trees with tall trunks have a taproot, a mother root that descends perpendicularly below the trunk and makes the plant sturdy and unmovable. As long as we do not lay an axe to that root, we can chop off all the lateral roots but the tree will not fall. But that space is very narrow, and there is no room for two: either it is my self or it is Christ.

Perhaps returning within myself, I am ready at this point to recognize the truth that until now I have lived in some measure “for myself,” that I too am involved in the mystery of ungodliness. The Holy Spirit has “convicted me of sin.” Now the ever-new miracle of conversion can begin for me. If sin, as Augustine explained to us, consists in bending toward oneself, the most radical conversion consists in “straightening oneself up” and turning ourselves to God again. We cannot do it during the course of a sermon or during one Lent; we can, however, at least make the firm decision to do it, and that is already, in some way for God, as if we had done it.

If I align all of myself on God’s side against my “I,” then I become his ally; there are now two of us together to fight against the same enemy, and victory is assured. My self, like a fish out of water, can still flop around and wriggle a bit, but it is fated to die. It is not, however, a death but a birth: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25). To the extent that the “old man” dies, what is reborn in us is “the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24)—the man or the woman that all human beings secretly wish to be.

May God help us always to realize again the true task of life, which is our conversion.

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

**Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap**

**“YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD”**

**Fourth Lent Sermon 2019**

This year is the eighth centenary of the meeting between Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt al-Kamil in 1219. I mention it in this setting because of a detail regarding the theme of our meditations on the living God. After returning from his trip to the East in 1219, St. Francis wrote a letter addressed to “The Rulers of the People.” In it he said, among other things,

See to it that God is held in great reverence among your subjects; every evening, at a signal given by a herald or in some other way, praise and thanks should be given to the Lord God almighty by all the people. If you refuse to see to this, you can be sure that you will be held to account for it at the day of judgement before Jesus Christ, your Lord and God.[[24]](#footnote-24)

It is widely held that the saint drew the idea for this exhortation from what he had observed during his journey in the East, where he had heard the evening call to prayer by the muezzins from the minarets. This is a good example not only of dialogue between various religions but also of mutual enrichment. Along these same lines, a missionary who worked for years in an African country wrote this: “We are called to respond to a fundamental need of human beings, to their profound need for God, to their thirst for the Absolute, and to teach them the ways of God, to teach them how to pray. This is why Muslims here make so many proselytes: they immediately teach them in a simple way to worship God.”

We Christians have a different picture of God—a God who is infinite love more than he is infinite power—but this should not make us forget the primary duty of worship. To the challenge of the Samaritan woman who says, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship” (Jn 4:20), Jesus answers with the words that are the *magna carta* of Christian worship:

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (Jn 4:21-24)

The New Testament was the first to elevate the word “worship” to a dignity that it did not have before. In the Old Testament, worship, other than of God, is sometimes directed to an angel (see Num 22:31) or to a king (see 1 Sam 24:8). In the New Testament, on the contrary, every time someone is tempted to worship someone besides God and the person of Christ, even if it is angel, the immediate reaction is “You must not do that! Worship God.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This is what Jesus in the desert peremptorily reminds the tempter who asked him to worship him: “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (Mt 4:10).

The Church has received this teaching and made worship the act par excellence of the cult of *latria*, distinct from that of *dulia*, which is reserved for the saints, and from *hyperdulia*, which is reserved for the Blessed Virgin. Worship is thus the unique religious act that cannot be offered to anyone else in the whole universe, not even to the Madonna but only to God. This is its dignity and its unique power.

At the beginning, worship (*proskunesis*) indicated the physical gesture of prostrating oneself face down before someone as a sign of reverence and submission. This physical expression is still referred to in the Gospels and in Revelation. In those accounts the person before whom one prostrates oneself on earth is Jesus Christ, and in the heavenly liturgy before the sacrificed Lamb or the Omnipotent One. Only in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman and in 1 Corinthians 14:25 does the word “worship” appear to be detached from its external significance, and it indicates an interior disposition of the soul to God. This is the sense in which we say of the Holy Spirit in the creed that he “is adored and glorified” equally with the Father and the Son.

To indicate the external posture that corresponds to worship, we prefer the gesture of bending the knee, the genuflection. This gesture is also reserved only for God and Christ. We can be on our knees before an image of the Blessed Virgin, but we do not genuflect before her as we do before the Blessed Sacrament or the Crucified One.

**What “to Worship” Means**

We are less interested, however, in the significance and the development of this word than we are in knowing in what worship consists and how we can practice it. Worship may be prepared for by lengthy reflection, but it culminates in a vivid impression, and like every impression, it does not last long. It is like a flash of light in the night, but it is a special light: not so much the light of truth as the light of reality. It is the perception of the greatness, the majesty, and the beauty of God together with his goodness and his presence that take our breath away. It is a kind of sinking into the bottomless and unbounded ocean of the majesty of God. To worship, according to the saying of St. Angela of Foligno, is “to recollect oneself in unity and [plunge] our whole soul in the divine infinity.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

An expression of worship that is more efficacious than any words is silence. By itself silence points to a reality that far surpasses any words. This message resounds forcefully in the Bible: “Let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Hab 2:20), and “Be silent before the Lord God!” (Zeph 1:7). According to one of the Desert Fathers, when “the senses are enveloped in endless silence and with the help of silence our memories fade,” then all that remains is to worship.

Job performs an act of worship when, finding himself face to face with the Omnipotent at the end of his trial, he exclaims, “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4). It is in this sense that the verse from a psalm later taken up by the liturgy says in the Hebrew text, “To you, silence is praise,” “*Tibi silentium laus*!” (see Ps 65:2, Masoretic text). To worship, according to the beautiful expression of St. Gregory Nazianzus, means to lift up to God “a hymn of silence.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Just as when one climbs a high mountain, little by little the air becomes more rarified, so too as one draws nearer to God, little by little speech must become briefer until in the end a person becomes completely mute and unites himself or herself in silence to the one who is ineffable.[[28]](#footnote-28)

If you really want to say something to “quiet” the mind and prevent it from wandering around on other topics, you should do it with the shortest expression that exists, “Amen, yes.” To worship is in fact to consent. It is letting God be God. It is saying yes to God as God and to oneself as a creature of God. This is how Jesus is defined in Revelation, as “the Amen,” the yes personified (see Rev 3:14), or one can repeat ceaselessly with the Seraphim, “*Qadosh*, *qadosh, qadosh*,” “Holy, holy, holy.”

Worship therefore requires people to bow down and be silent. But is such an act worthy of human beings? Doesn’t it humiliate them, derogating their dignity? In fact, is it truly worthy of God? Does God really need his creatures to prostrate themselves on the ground before him and keep silent? Is God possibly like one of those oriental sovereigns who contrived worship for themselves? We cannot deny it: worship also involves for a human being an aspect of radical self-abasement, making oneself small, a surrender and a submission of oneself. Worship always involves an aspect of sacrifice, an offering up of something. Precisely because of this it attests that God is God and that nothing and no one has the right to exist before him except by his grace. In worship we offer up and sacrifice our “I,” our own glory, our self-sufficiency. But ours is a false and inconsistent glory, so it is freeing for a person to be rid of it.

In worshiping, one “frees truth from being the prisoner of injustice” (see Rom 1:18). A person becomes “authentic” in the most profound sense of that word. In worship one already anticipates the return of all things to God. One abandons oneself to the meaning and flow of being. Just as water finds its peaceful course in flowing toward the sea and the bird finds its joy in being carried by the wind, so too the worshiper finds peace and joy in worshiping. Worship of God then is not so much a duty, an obligation, as it is a privilege and even a need. Human beings need something majestic to love and worship! We have been created for this.

It is, therefore, not God who has a need to be worshiped but people who have a need to worship. One preface of the Mass says, “Although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation through Christ our Lord.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Friedrich Nietzsche was completely off track when he defined the biblical God as “this honour-craving Oriental in heaven.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Of course worship must be freely given. What renders worship worthy of God and at the same time worthy of human beings is freedom, understood not only negatively as the absence of constraint but also positively as a joyful impulse, as a spontaneous gift of creatures that thereby expresses their joy in not being God and in being able to have a God above them to worship, admire, and celebrate.

**Eucharistic Adoration**

The Catholic Church has a special kind of worship called Eucharistic adoration. Every great spiritual branch of Christianity has had its own particular charism that constitutes its contribution to the richness of the whole Church. For Protestants it is the veneration of the Word of God; for the Orthodox, it is icons; for Catholics, it is the worship of the Eucharist. Each of these three ways achieves the same overall aim of contemplating Christ in his mystery.

The veneration and adoration of the Eucharist outside of Mass is a relatively recent fruit of Christian piety. It began to develop in the West starting in the eleventh century as a reaction to the heresy of Berengar of Tours who denied the “real” presence and recognized only a symbolic presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. From this date on, however, we could say there has not been a saint in whose life we do not notice the determinative influence of Eucharistic piety. It has been the source of immense spiritual energy, a kind of hearth that is always lit in the midst of the house of God, by which all the great sons and daughters of the Church have warmed themselves. Generations and generations of faithful Catholics have sensed a tremor at the presence of God as they sing the “*Adoro te devote”* before the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

What I say about the adoration and contemplation of the Eucharist could be applied almost entirely to the contemplation of icons. The difference is that in the first case we have the real presence of Christ and in the second only an intentional presence. Both are based on the certainty that the risen Christ is alive and makes himself present through sacramental signs and through faith.

Remaining calm and silent before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, for a long time if possible, we can perceive his desires for us. We lay down our projects to make room for those of Christ; the light of God penetrates the heart little by little and heals it. Something happens that reminds us of what happens to trees in the spring. Green leaves sprout from the branches; they absorb certain elements from the atmosphere that, due to the action of sunlight, become “attached” and transformed into nutrients for the plant. Without such green leaves, the plant could not grow and bear fruit and would not contribute to generating the oxygen that we ourselves breathe.

We need to be like those green leaves! They are a symbol of the Eucharistic souls who, in contemplating the “Sun of justice,” who is Christ, “attach” to themselves the nutrient who is the Holy Spirit himself to the benefit of the whole great tree, which is the Church. The apostle Paul says this in other words when he writes, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

The poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, contemplating the rising of the sun one morning after the darkness of the night, has written a poem of two very brief verses: “M’illumino / d’immenso”[[31]](#footnote-31): “I illuminate myself / with immensity.” These are words that could be repeated by someone in contemplation before the Eucharist. Only God knows how many hidden graces have come down upon the Church through these worshiping people.

Eucharistic adoration is also a form of evangelization, and among the most effective. Many parishes and communities that have added it to their daily or weekly programs have experienced that. Seeing a church in the center of a city at night that is open and lit up with people in silent adoration before the Host has prompted more than one passerby to stop in, look around, and leave exclaiming, “God is here!”—just like the non-believers did when they set foot inside one of the early Christian assemblies (see 1 Cor 14:25).

Christian contemplation is never a one-way street. It does not mean gazing at your navel, as they say, in search of your deepest self. It always involves two gazes that encounter each other. A peasant in the parish of Ars was engaged in the best kind of Eucharistic adoration as he spent hours and hours in the church with his gaze fixed on the tabernacle. When the holy Curé of Ars asked him what he was doing all this time in the church, he responded, “Nothing. I look at Him and He looks at me!”

If we sometimes lower or withdraw our gaze, God never lowers or withdraws his gaze. At times Eucharistic contemplation comes down simply to being in Jesus’ company, of sitting beneath his gaze, giving him the joy of contemplating us. Even if we are creatures of no account and sinners, we are nevertheless the fruit of his passion, those for whom he gave his life: “He looks at me!” It means accepting Jesus’ invitation to the apostles at Gethsemane to “remain here, and watch with me” (Mt 26:38).

Eucharistic adoration is thus not impeded per se by the dryness that we can sometimes experience, whether it is because of our self-indulgent ways or because God allows it for our purification. That dryness can actually have meaning if we renounce our own satisfaction in order to please him and say, as Charles de Foucauld used to say to Jesus, “Your happiness is enough for me,”[[32]](#footnote-32) that is, it is enough for me that you are happy. Jesus has all of eternity at his disposal to make us happy; we have only this brief space of time to make him happy, so how can we afford to lose this opportunity that will never again return in eternity?

Contemplating Jesus in the Sacrament on the altar we fulfill the prophecy which was proclaimed at the moment of Jesus’s death on the cross: “They shall look on him whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37). Such contemplation is itself also prophetic because it anticipates what we will do forever in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is the most eschatological and prophetic activity that we can accomplish in the Church. At the end of time the Lamb will no longer be sacrificed nor will his flesh continue to be eaten. Consecration and communion will cease, but the contemplation of the Lamb that was slain for us will never cease. This is in fact what the saints are now doing in heaven (see Rev 5:1ff). When we are before the tabernacle we already form a single choir with the Church up above: they are before the altar, and we are behind the altar, so to speak; they experience the vision of the Lamb while we perceive it by faith.

In 1967 began the Catholic Charismatic Renewal which in fifty years has touched and renewed millions of lives and given rise to numerous new things in the Church, both personal and communal. We do not emphasize enough that it is not an “ecclesial movement” in the normal sense of this word; it is a current of grace meant for the whole Church, an “injection of Holy Spirit” that is desperately needed. It is like an electric shock that is meant to be discharged into the mass that is the Church, and once this goal obtained, ready to disappear.

I mention it here because it started precisely with an extraordinary experience of adoration of the living God which has been the theme of this meditation. The group of students at the University of Duquesne in Pittsburg who were participating in a retreat found themselves one evening in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament when suddenly something unusual happened that one of them later described this way:

Fear of the Lord welled up within us; a fearful awe kept us from looking up. He was personally present and we feared being loved too much. We worshiped him, knowing for the first time the meaning of worship. We knew a burning experience of the terrible reality and presence of the Lord that has since caused us to understand at first hand the images of Yahweh on Mt. Sinai as it rumbles and explodes with the fire of his Being, and the experience of Isaiah 6:1-5, and the statement that our God is a consuming fire. This holy fear was somehow the same as love or evoked love as we really beheld him. He was altogether lovely and beautiful, yet we saw no visual image. It was as though the splendorous, brilliant, personal God had come into the room and filled both it and us.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The simultaneous presence of majesty and goodness in God and of fear and love in the creature: the “awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery,” as religious scholars describe it.[[34]](#footnote-34) The woman who has described that moment this way did not know that this was a perfect summary of the traits of the living God of the Bible.

Let us end with a verse of Psal 95 with which the Liturgy of the Hours, in the Invitatory, makes us begin every new day:

Come, let us bow down and worship,

Bending the knee before the Lord, our maker.

For he is our God and we are his people,

The flock he spepherds.

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

**Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap**

**“GOD CHOSE WHAT IS FOOLISH IN THE WORLD**

**TO SHAME THE WISE”**

**Fifth Lent Sermon 2019**

**John and Paul: Two Diverse Views on the Mystery of Christ**

In the New Testament and in the history of theology there are things that cannot be understood if we do not take into account one fundamental fact, that is, the two diverse but complementary approaches to the mystery of Christ: Paul’s approach and John’s.

John sees the mystery of Christ from the point of view of the Incarnation. Jesus, the Word made flesh, is for him the supreme revealer of the living God, the one outside of whom no one “comes to the Father.” Salvation consists in recognizing that Jesus “has come in the flesh” (cf. 2 Jn 7) and in believing that he “is the Son of God” (1 Jn 5:5). “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 Jn 5:12). The center of everything, as we can see, is the “person” of Jesus the man-God.

The distinctive feature of this Johannine vision jumps out at us when we compare it to that of Paul. For Paul, the central focus is not so much the *person* of Christ, understood as an ontological reality, but rather the *work* of Christ, the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. Salvation is not so much in believing that Jesus is the Son of God come in the flesh as it is believing in Jesus “who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). The central event is not the Incarnation but the paschal mystery.

It would be a fatal mistake to see in this a dichotomy in the origin itself of Christianity. Whoever reads the New Testament without prejudice understands that for John the Incarnation is considered in view of the paschal mystery when Jesus will finally pour out his Spirit on humanity (see Jn 7:39) and understands that for Paul the paschal mystery presupposes and is based on the Incarnation. The one who made himself obedient to death, even to death on a cross, is the one who “was in the form of God,” equal to God (see Phil 2:5ff). The trinitiarian formulas in which Jesus Christ is mentioned together with the Father and the Holy Spirit are a confirmation that for Paul the work of Christ takes it meaning from his person.

The different emphases in these poles of the mystery reflect the historical path that faith in Christ followed after Easter. John reflects the more advanced phase of faith in Christ that one has at the end, rather than at the beginning, of the editing of the New Testament writings. He is at the end of a process of a return to the sources of the mystery of Christ. We can note this in observing where the four Gospels begin. Mark begins his Gospel at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan; Matthew and Luke, who come afterward, take a step back and begin their narratives of Jesus with his birth from Mary; John, who writes last, makes a decisive leap even further back and sets the beginning of the Christ event no longer in time but in eternity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1).

The reason for this shift of interest is well known. Faith in the meantime had entered into contact with Greek culture, which was more interested in the ontological dimension than in the historical dimension. What mattered in Greek culture was not so much the *unfolding* of events as their *foundation* (*arche*). In addition to this cultural context came the first signs of the Docetic heresy that questioned the reality of the Incarnation. The christological dogma of the two natures and the unity of the person of Christ will be almost entirely based on the Johannine perspective of the Logos made flesh.

It is important to take this into account to understand the difference and the complementarity of Eastern and Western theology. The two perspectives, Pauline and Johannine, while merging together (as we see happen in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) preserve their different emphases like rivers flowing into one another that preserve the different colors of their waters for a long stretch. Orthodox theology and spirituality is primarily based on John; Western theology and spirituality (the Protestant even more than the Catholic) is based primarily on Paul. Within the Greek tradition itself the Alexandrian School is more Johannine and the Antiochene School is more Pauline. In the first school, salvation consists in divinization, and in the other, in the imitation of Christ.

**The Cross, the Wisdom and Power of God**

Now I would like to illustrate what all of this means in our quest for the face of the living God. At the end of the meditations in Advent, I spoke about John’s Christ who, at the very moment he was made flesh, introduced eternal life into the world. At the end of these meditations in Lent, I want to speak about Paul’s Christ who, on the cross, changed the destiny of humanity. Let us listen right now to the text that we will reflect on in which the Pauline perspective appears most clearly:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:21-25)

The apostle speaks of an innovation in God’s action, of a change in approach and method. The world did not understand how to recognize God in the splendor and wisdom of his creation, so he decided to reveal himself in an opposite way, through the impotence and the foolishness of the cross. We cannot read this assertion by Paul without remembering this saying of Jesus: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to infants”(Mt 11:25).

How do we interpret this reversal of values? Luther spoke of a revelation of God “*sub contraria* *specie*,” that is, through the opposite of what would be expected from him.[[35]](#footnote-35) He is power but he reveals himself in impotence, he is wisdom but he reveals himself in foolishness, he is glory but he reveals himself in ignominy, he is rich but he reveals himself in poverty.

Dialectical theology in the first half of the last century carried this perspective to its extreme conclusion. Between the first and second modes of God’s manifestation of himself there is not, according to Karl Barth, a continuity but a break. It is not a question of a succession that is only temporal, as between the Old and New Testaments, but of an ontological opposition. In other words, grace does not build on nature but against it; it touches the world “the way the tangent touches the circle,” that is, it brushes up against the world but without permeating it the way yeast does in a lump of dough. This is the only difference, according to Barth himself, that held him back from calling himself a Catholic; all the other differences seemed to be of little importance in comparison. He opposed the *analogia fidei -* that is, the opposition of the word of God against all that belongs to the world - to the *analogia entis*, that is to the collaboration between nature and grace

Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, describes the consequences of this different vision with respect to love. Barth wrote, “Where Christian love enters, there always begins at once the unceasing controversy between itself and every other love. . . . There can only be conflict and not compromise between Christian love and this other.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In contrast Benedict XVI writes,

*Eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. . . . Biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The radical opposition between nature and grace, between creation and redemption, was toned down in Barth’s later writings and now no longer has supporters. We can therefore approach this passage from the apostle with more peace of mind to understand what the innovation of the cross of Christ truly entails.

On the cross God manifested himself, yes, “under the contrary form,” but under the contrary of what human beings have always thought of God, and not under the contrary of who God truly is. God is love and on the cross we had the ultimate manifestation of God’s love for human beings. In a certain sense, only here, on the cross, does God reveal himself “in his own species,” as he truly is. The text of First Corinthians on the meaning of the cross of Christ needs to be read in the light of another text from Paul in the Letter to the Romans:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6-8)

The medieval Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas (1322-1392) furnishes us with the best key to understand what the innovation of the cross of Christ consists in. He writes,

Two things reveal him who loves and cause him to prevail—the one, that he in every possible way does good to the object of his love; the other, that he is willing, if need be, to endure terrible things for him and suffer pain. Of the two the latter would seem to be a far greater proof of friendship than the former. Yet it was not possible for God since He is incapable of suffering harm. . . . That the greatness of his love should not remain hidden, but that He should give the proof of the greatest love and by loving display the utmost love, . . . He devised this self-emptying and carried it out, and made the instrument [i.e., Christ’s human nature] by which he might be able to endure terrible things and to suffer pain. When He had thus proved by the things he endured that He indeed loves exceedingly, He turned man . . . towards Himself.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

In creation God filled us with gifts, but in redemption he suffered for us. The relationship between the two is that of a beneficent love that becomes suffering love.

But what occurred on the cross of Christ of such importance to make it the culminating moment of the revelation of the living God in the Bible? Human beings instinctively seek for God along the line of power. The title that accompanies the name of God is almost always “omnipotent.” But here, in opening the Gospel, we are invited to contemplate the absolute impotence of God on the cross. The Gospel reveals that God’s true omnipotence is the total impotence of Calvary. It requires little effort to draw attention to oneself, but it takes a lot of strength to step aside, to remove oneself. The Christian God is this unlimited power of concealing himself!

The ultimate explanation is therefore in the indissoluble link that exists between love and humility. “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8). He humbled himself, making himself dependent on the object of his love. Love is humble because, by its nature, it creates dependence. We see this, on a smaller scale, in what happens when two people fall in love. The young man who, according to the traditional ritual, kneels before a young girl to ask for her hand is performing the most radical act of humility in his life; he is making himself a beggar. It is as if he were saying, “I am not enough by myself; I need you to live.” The essential difference is that dependence on God by his creatures is born solely from the love that he has for them, while the dependence of creatures among themselves is born from the need they have for one another.

“The revelation of Love,” wrote Henri de Lubac, “overturns all that the world had conceived of the Divinity.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Theology and exegesis is still far, I believe, from having dealt with all the consequences of this. One such consequence is that if Jesus suffers in an atrocious manner on the cross, he does not do so principally to pay the unpayable debt owed by human beings. (In the parable of the two servants in Luke 7:41ff, he explained ahead of time that the debt of 10,000 talents was freely forgiven by the king!) No, Jesus dies crucified so that the love of God could reach humanity in the most distant point people have come to in their rebellion against him, namely, death. Even death is now inhabited by the love of God. In his book on Jesus of Nazareth, Benedict XVI wrote,

That which is wrong, the reality of evil, cannot simply be ignored; it cannot be left there to stand. It must be dealt with; it must be overcome. Only this counts as a true mercy. And the fact that God now confronts evil himself because men are incapable of doing so—therein lies the “unconditional” goodness of God.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The traditional motive of the expiation of sins retains all its validity, as we can see, but it is not the ultimate motive. The ultimate motive is “the unconditional goodness of God,” his love.

We can identify three steps on the Church’s journey of Easter faith. At the beginning there are only two bare facts: “he died; he is risen.” Peter cries out to the crowd on the day of Pentecost, “you crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up” (Acts 2:23-24). In the second phase the question was, “Why did he die and why was he raised?” and the answer is the kerygma: Jesus was “put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). There remains yet another question, “Why did he die for our sins? What made him do it?” The answer—and Paul and John are unanimous on this point—is “because he loved us.” Paul writes, the Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20), and John writes, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1).

**Our Response**

What will be our response to the mystery we have contemplated and that the liturgy will reenact for us during Holy Week? The first and fundamental response is that of faith. Not just any kind of faith but the faith by which we appropriate what Christ has gained for us, the faith that “takes the kingdom by force” (Mt 11:12). The apostle concludes the text that we began with in these words:

God made [Christ Jesus] our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:30-31)

What Christ has become “for us”—righteousness, holiness, redemption—belongs to us; it is more ours than if we had acquired it ourselves! I never tire or repeating what St. Bernard wrote in this regard:

I confidently take for myself (*usurp*!) what I lack from the bowels of the Lord because they overflow with mercy. . . . My merit, therefore, comes from the mercy of the Lord. I will surely not lack merit as long as the Lord does not lack mercy. If the mercies of the Lord are abundant, then I too have abundance with regard to merits. . . . Shall I perhaps sing about my righteousness? “Lord, I will remember only your righteousness” [see Ps 71:16]. It is also mine, for behold, you have become for me the righteousness that comes from God [see 1 Cor 1:30]. [[41]](#footnote-41)

We should not let Easter go by without having made, or renewed, the audacious stroke of Christian life suggested to us by St. Bernard. St. Paul often exhorts Christians to “put off the old nature” and “clothe yourselves with Christ.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The image of undressing and dressing does not indicate a process that is merely ascetic, consisting in abandoning certain “clothes” and substituting them with other clothes, that is, in abandoning vices and acquiring virtues. It is above all a process to be done through faith. Someone comes before a crucifix and, as an act of faith, hands over to Christ all his or her sins, all troubles past and present, just like someone who gets undressed and throws those dirty rags into the fire. Then he or she gets dressed again but with the righteousness that Christ acquired for us and says, like the tax collector in the temple, “‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ and that person goes home ‘justified’” (see Lk 18:13-14). That would really be “celebrating the Passover,” performing the holy “crossing over”!

Naturally not everything ends here. From *appropriation* we need to move on to *imitation*. Christ, as the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard pointed out to his Lutheran friends, is not only “the gift of God to accept through faith,” he is also “the model to imitate in life.”[[43]](#footnote-43) I would like to underscore a concrete point about seeking to imitate God’s action, the point Cabasilas highlighted with his distinction between a beneficent love and a suffering love.

In creation God demonstrated his love for us by filling us with gifts: outside of us, nature in its magnificence, and within us all the other gifts: intelligence, memory, freedom. But that was not enough for him. In Christ God wanted to suffer with us and for us. Something happened then also in relationships among creatures. When love blossoms, one immediately feels the need to manifest it by giving gifts to the beloved. This is what engaged couples do. We know, however, what happens next: after they are married, then limitations, difficulties, and different character traits emerge. Giving gifts is not enough anymore; to go forward and keep the marriage alive, the couple needs to learn to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2), to suffer for the other and with the other. This is how *eros*, without fading away, becomes *agape*, self-giving love and not just needy love. Benedict XVI, in the encyclical already cited, expresses it this way:

Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblative, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. (no. 7)

The imitation of God’s action does not apply only to marriage and spouses; in a different sense, it applies to all of us, especially us consecrated religious. Progress, in our case, consists in moving away from *doing* so many things for Christ and for the Church to *suffering* for Christ and for the Church. What happens in religious life is what happens in marriage, and we should not be amazed at this, since religious life also involves a marriage: a marriage with Christ.

Once Mother Teresa of Calcutta was speaking to a group of women and exhorted them to smile at their husbands. One of them objected, “Mother, you are saying that because you are not married and you don’t know my husband.” Mother Teresa answered her, “You are mistaken. I too am married, and I assure you that at times it is not easy for me to smile at my Spouse either.” After her death, people discovered what this saint was alluding to with these words. Following her call to serve the poorest of the poor, she had undertaken her work with enthusiasm for her divine Spouse, establishing works that astonished the whole world.

Quite soon, however, the joy and enthusiasm ebbed, and she sank into a dark night that accompanied her for the rest of her life. She ended up doubting if she even still had faith, so much so that when her private diaries were published after death, someone, who was completely unaware of spiritual matters, even spoke of the “atheism of Mother Teresa.” The extraordinary holiness of Mother Teresa lies in the fact that she lived this way in the most absolute silence with everyone, hiding her interior desolation under a constant smile. In her we see what it means to go from doing things for God to suffering for God and for the Church.

It is a rather difficult goal, but fortunately Jesus did not give us just the example of this new kind of love on the cross; he also merited the grace for us to make it our own, to appropriate it through faith and the sacraments. During Holy Week, therefore, the cry of the Church bursts forth from our hearts: “*Adoramus te, Christe, et benedicimus tibi, quia per sanctam crucem tuam redemisti mundum*.” We adore you and bless you, O Christ, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, have a happy and holy Easter!

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English Translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

1. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 147, intro. T. S. Eliot, trans. W. F. Trotter (Franklin, PA: Franklin Library, 1979), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, 208, trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stephane Douard (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), p. 43: “L’hypocrisie est un homage que le vice rend à la virtue.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* {The Gospel according to Matthew] (Munich: C. H. Beck’sche, 1926), vol. 1, p. 718. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. St. Augustine, *On the Trinit*y, 6, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1, 3, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. St. Augustine, *Of True Religion*, 39, 72 (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, 1959), p. 69; PL 34, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 18, 10; CCL 36, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Rom 7:22; 2 Cor 4:16; 1 Pet 3:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Jn 14:17, 23; Rom 5:5; Gal 4:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See “Letter 122,” *in The Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinit*y, vol. 2, ed. Conrad de Meester (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1995), p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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19. See St. Ambrose*, De Cain et Abel*, I, 9, 38 (CSEL 32,1, p. 372). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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26. See St. Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Blessed Angela* (*Instructions*), Part 3, in *Angela of Foligno: The Complete* *Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993), p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. St. Gregory Nazianzus, *Carmi*, 29 (PG 37, p. 507). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, “Mystical Theology,” 3, in *On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, ed. Clarence E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1920), pp. 197-198; see PG 3, 1033. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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43. Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary* X1, A, 154 (1849). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)