

The Call to a Life of Virtue - Humility, Detachment, Obedience

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My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

A recent survey showed that most peoples' number one fear is fear of public speaking, ranking even above fear of death, the second most popular fear. That means that if you are at a funeral, you'd rather be the one in the casket than the one giving the eulogy.

Now you are wondering what this has to do with my topic? Well, it is related to my topic in a number of ways. For instance, I asked Teresa Martinez how she composes and delivers the great talks that she does. I asked her on a number of different occasions, and her answer was always the same - "Margaret, it is death." So there you have it - death if you're the one in the casket and death if you're the one behind the podium. Only in this spot it is a long slow martyrdom. Not that death is a bad thing.....after all, isn't that what we are here for?

Listen to what our Holy Mother St. Teresa says.... "Don't you know yet, sisters, that the life of a good religious, one who desires to be one of God's close friends, is one long martyrdom?" The topic I have been asked to address is "The Call to a Life of Virtue - Humility, Detachment, Obedience. A life of virtue is a life of martyrdom. It is death to self.

Why is a life of virtue a life of martyrdom? It is because we are not what God created us to be. Before the fall of man, intimacy with God was a given and the soul had dominion over the body. Now life is a constant struggle against our fallen nature ---death to self. It is work requiring constant vigilance and determination. Only the practice of virtue will bring us back to anywhere near where we should be.

I'm going to share with you some points to consider regarding virtue in general before zeroing in on the three I'm to focus on.

Teresa of Jesus again and again urges the practice of virtue. For example, the quote, "You must not build upon the foundation of prayer and contemplation alone, for unless you strive after the virtues and practice them, you will never grow to be more than dwarfs."

Prayer is important (it is the Carmelite charism), but it is impossible, in fact inconceivable to have a life of prayer without a life of virtue.

Obstacles to virtue? The greatest obstacle to virtue, other than one's own laziness, is thinking that one already possesses one or more of the virtues. For example, if you think you are humble, it is guaranteed you are not. St. Teresa says, "The way the Devil can do a great deal of harm without our realizing it, is to make us believe we have virtues when we do not. In regard to thinking we are virtuous, it seems we are serving and giving and that our Lord is obliged to pay. Little by little this does great harm. 1) It weakens humility and 2) we grow careless about the virtues we think we have. The remedy? - supplication to the Father to not let us enter into temptation."

Our Holy Mother warns us to be very careful about thinking we possess certain virtues – “you should fear lest you be mistaken. The truly humble always walk in doubt about their own virtues and those they see in others seem more certain.” Also, even if you do have one or more virtues, you can lose them at any time! She gives examples from her own life.

From Father Gabriel, O.C.D., “It is not essential that God lead us by the path of high contemplation in order to make us saints. This does not depend upon our will anyway. What does depend upon our will and is essential is that we maintain the practice of virtues. Whether God wills for us a professional or family life, an active or contemplative life, we shall become saints only in the measure that we practice virtues.”

The virtues I've been asked to address are: obedience, humility, and detachment. I'm going to begin with obedience because for a long time I thought obedience was easy. I guess I'm what you would call a “slow learner”. I'm one of those indecisive souls who has great difficulty making decisions, even the simplest. So with obedience you simply do what you are told. Easy - right?

I thought obedience was easy right up 'til I was asked to give this talk! Even then I didn't really think of it as a matter of obedience. I just thought there has to be some mistake. Maybe my name got confused with some other person?

I prayed about it for a long time. However, I soon realized that I was doing most of the talking. When I stopped and listened, our Lord said to me, "Margaret, every day in your prayers you ask Me what you can do to help fulfill My will. Well, here it is."

Still uncertain, I went to Father Gabriel, O.C.D., the Carmelite Friar who has helped me so many times in the past. I opened up his book, Divine Intimacy, and there was my answer as clear as could be.....

“When in particular circumstances and after sufficient examination, we see clearly that our Lord wishes of us some special work or certain acts of virtue, we should not refuse, however difficult it may seem to be. Can God not give us the strength to do what He asks? Why do we doubt Him?

A person who withdraws on such an occasion under the pretext that he does not feel capable of doing so much, may believe that he is humble; but in reality he is a coward, proud, and lacking trust in God. He is proud because he relies more on his own erroneous judgement than on God and His grace.” (p866, D.I.)

So you see obedience is easy when we agree with what we are told to do. When it goes against our nature, against what we feel capable of, it is not easy. A life of virtue is a lifelong struggle because it requires going against ourselves. The self always wants the easy way, which is seldom (if ever) the best way or the most meritorious for us. Remember even a dead log can float downstream with the current.

Who is it that we obey?

Before going any further, let us clarify who it is that we obey. I asked that question of our little group before we had formed a community. A hand shot up at once, "It's you we obey!" Thank God that is not the correct answer. After a few tries they very quickly came up with the fact that ultimately it is God whom we obey --God's will as expressed in Scripture, the Ten Commandments, the Precepts of the Church, the duties of our state of life and in the order of our superiors.

In Carmel, it includes obedience to the superiors of the Discalced Carmelite Order beginning with the Superior General in Rome right down to our constitutions, local statutes and the locally elected council of our O.C.D.S. community.

Why do we obey?

1. We obey because it makes sense. We live in a universe of order, not chaos. The sun rises and the sun sets; the seasons come and go; the stars have their fixed place. Each animal and plant was created with a purpose -- and they fulfill that purpose without choice. The exception is man who can choose to fulfill the purpose for which he was created or he can ignore it.

There are physical laws which govern the universe and there are moral laws. Man can choose to ignore either one, but he is not free to choose the consequences of doing so. It is a physical law that fire burns. You can choose to put your hand in the fire, but there will be physical damage as a result. It is the same with moral laws. You can choose to bear false witness or to commit adultery, but there will be spiritual damage.

This is true because of who we are, how we are made, and what we are made for. If we were asbestos, fire would not hurt us. If we were deer, adultery wouldn't be an issue either.

Therefore, obedience makes sense even on the most elementary level because it helps us fulfill the purpose for which we were made --to know, love, and serve God. Obedience may not be easy, but is reasonable. God made us and knows what is best for us and for our happiness.

2. The second reason for obedience is that obedience is a sure way. We obey because there is a certainty in obeying. St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, says, "Having nothing for a compass but the will of our Superior, we are always sure of following the right path and need not fear being misled, even when it appears that our superiors are mistaken. Obedience is the compass you have given me to direct me safely to the eternal shores".

3. A third reason for obedience is love our love of God. "This is not the forced or mechanical obedience of the slave to his master because he cannot do otherwise. It is the free and conscious renunciation of our own will in order to adhere to God's Will as manifested in the orders of our superiors." If we truly love God as we say we do, we will want to obey. From John 15:14, "You are my friends if you do what I command."

Let love be the motive for obedience and the rest is easy. St. Teresa of Jesus says that "once a soul is resolved to love God and has resigned itself into His hands, it follows that the soul will obey. It has no need to look for other paths, for its will is God's Will. God will guide it in the way which is the greatest benefit for it."

In summary, we obey because:

1. It is reasonable. God made us and knows what we need to bring us to Him, our true end.
2. We obey because it is a sure path; we cannot be misled.
3. We obey out of love for Our Lord, our life and dearest friend.

Besides Teresa tells us “the strength given by obedience lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible.” (L.C.) T.J.)

Why then is obedience so difficult? When there is an issue with obedience, it is almost always due to a lack of humility. It is not so much the demands of the order or the rule itself, as to the fact that we pay too much attention to the creature and too little to God whose authority they represent. It's like speaking on a phone. We're not talking to the instrument in our hand, but to the person on the other end of the line.

The Council. Of all the different levels of authority, perhaps the one we have the most difficulty with regarding obedience is the local Council of our Community.

We know these people, often younger than ourselves, maybe less experienced, less qualified. We know their defects and weaknesses and one could be tempted to have insufficient respect for their authority.

Superiors can make mistakes -- they are human like us. However, Father Gabriel, O.C.D. tell us, "We must not consider that. Only that he or she is superior to us because God has made him so. If the Superior abuses his power, that is his problem. Personal qualities or defects do not affect the office conferred on him."

Even if the Superior is dead wrong, God can bring good from it. Think of the three young men in the Old Testament. They were thrown into the fiery furnace and God saved them. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions, but he was not harmed. Our Superior may lead us to the fire, but if we are listening to God (hearing God in our Superior), we will not be harmed. God will deliver us!

Obedience is difficult because it means allowing our will to be governed by another. There is nothing, and I repeat NOTHING we are more strongly attached to than our own will - our own desires, our own inclinations, our own way of thinking.

Obedience can be difficult, but it is necessary, and it is important. St. John of the Cross says, “God wants from us the least degree of obedience and submission, rather than all the works we desire to offer Him.” (Sp. Manims)

St. Teresa of Jesus doesn't say much about obedience because she rightly assumes that you wouldn't be in a monastery if you refuse to practice obedience. “I say I don't know why a nun under obedience by vow is in the monastery is she doesn't make every effort to practice obedience with greater perfection. I can assure her that as long as she fails in obedience, she will never attain to being a contemplative, nor will she even be a good active sister. I hold this to very certain.”

Our Holy Mother tells us “more progress is made in this way in one year, than without it in many years.” We only need to heed her 'often repeated' advice: “Imitate Jesus Christ; keep your eyes fixed on Him.”

Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph through all those hidden years in Nazareth. He was always obedient to His Father's Will, even to death on the cross!

Humility

I had said earlier that if there was difficulty in obedience, it was almost always due to a lack of humility. So let us examine the virtue of HUMILITY.

What is Teresa's definition of HUMILITY? She defines humility as “truth”; “to walk in truth.”

If you want to know the truth, ask a child.

An older woman said to the five year old,
“Where did you get those beautiful blue eyes?”
The little one quipped, “Oh, they just came with my head.”

That is truth; but what does St. Teresa mean when she says, “Humility is truth”? She explains that “the truth is that by ourselves we can do nothing. We are simply creatures made by God and held in existence by Him.”

Father Rodriguez, O.C.D., in the Teresian Gospel, says that “pride is not so much about attributing good qualities to ourselves, as thinking that we have acquired them by our own efforts. True humility is to acknowledge that all our good qualities come from God and all our deficiencies, from ourselves.”

This same Father Rodriguez, O.C.D. lists fifteen characteristics of a humble person as found in Teresa's writings. I won't repeat them here because you can read them there yourself. Just a sampling: “the humble person never looks at the faults of others, only his own; he always flees from praise; when falsely accused or persecuted, he is ready to believe others are right; he is always at peace and calm in the face of his own misdeeds and miseries.”

I took my Carmelite formation by correspondence, as we did not yet have a Community. At the top of one of the letters I received was a quote from St. Francis which I hope never to forget. It says the same thing St. Teresa teaches. “You are what you are in the sight of God, no more, and no less.”

Why is humility important? It is important because it is an essential component of prayer. In fact, it is indispensable!

Humility should be the bedrock of our spiritual lives. Teresa tells her nuns, “If you wish to lay good foundations, each of you must strive to be the least of all.”

One more point on the importance of humility, directly from St. Teresa – “Humility drew the King from heaven to the womb of the Virgin Mary; and with it, by one hair, we will draw Him to our souls.”

Therefore, it is a measure of spiritual progress. “The one who has humility will be the one who possesses our Lord more. The one who has less humility will possess Him less.”

How does humility work? Humility empties the soul of pride, arrogance, love of self, love of one's own excellence. Humility replaces these with love of God and love of neighbour. The more humility empties the soul, the more room there is for God. St. John of the Cross says, “when at last we are reduced to nothing, which will be the greatest extreme of humility, spiritual union will be wrought between the soul and God.” Luke 18: 14 – “*He that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*”

How to practice humility

1. “Ask the prioress to give you orders to do some lowly task (or do it on your own).”
2. “Go about studying how to double your willingness to do things contrary to your nature.”
3. “Take careful note of interior stirrings, especially if they have to do with privilege or rank.” – “God deliver us from dwelling on such thoughts as: I have seniority; I am older; I have done more work; the other is treated better than I.” Sound familiar? She says “Such thoughts must be quickly cut off!”
4. The virtue of humility is especially important in the spiritual life. It consists of accepting and being content with the path on which Our Lord leads us. That means not always wanting consolations. “We don't know what we are asking for - leave it to the Lord; He know what is best for us.”
5. Another way to practice humility is to allow ourselves to be blamed unjustly. Teresa: “Rejoice when being blamed unjustly, and time will be witness to the benefit you will see in your soul. For you begin to gain freedom and don't care if they say good or evil of you, but rather think what is being said as though it were another's affair.”
6. Still another way to practice humility is to accept humiliations. Father Gabriel, O.C.D. says, “Many souls would like to be humble, and fervently pray for this, but few want to be humiliated. Yet humiliations in themselves do not make us humble. It is the acceptance of them that creates humility.” Father Gabriel says the following:

“What profit do we draw from humiliations, if instead of accepting them we oppose and resist with resentment and become angry with the person who gave them to us.”

St. Teresa herself was a good example of a person with a humble attitude – “I never heard anything bad said of me which I did not clearly realize fell short of the truth. If I had not offended God in the ways they referred to, I had done so in many others, and I felt they had treated me far too indulgently in not saying anything about these.”

St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, says, “the remembrance of my weakness is so constantly present to me, that there is no room for vanity.”

7. Therefore, another way to practice humility is to form the habit of never losing sight of our faults and weaknesses.

We need not go far to find opportunities to practice humility or to accept humiliations. There are plenty that come to us as part of life. Pride could be a factor in those we choose. It is better to accept those that come to us without our choosing. Old age brings with it ample opportunities for humility - can't hear, can't see, can't remember peoples' names, etc.

Again, as in obedience, let us look to Jesus: “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls.”

The “rest for your souls” is peace - peace because you are undisturbed by the desire to be better than others and undisturbed by humiliations.

Jesus' death and passion was a huge act of humility ... as we said in the discussion on obedience, Jesus was always obedient to His Father's Will, even when it meant going against His human nature as in the Garden of Gethsemane. That took humility.

Even now when He chooses to come to us in a little piece of bread, thus exposing Himself to possible abuse, neglect, and indifference. What humility! Still He chooses to come to us and become a part of us in that way, just as He chose to begin His life with us being born in a stable.

Detachment

As with obedience, I also thought detachment was easy. I guess it's because I thought we were talking about things. When you get to be my age (I'm talking about seculars), you discover that things have become a burden. You spend the first half of life collecting “stuff” whether intentionally or not, and the second half of your life trying to get rid of it all.

However, detachment is huge! It is about much more than detachment from material things. St. Teresa of Jesus speaks a lot about detachment from relatives.

Again, and early on in my formation, I didn't understand what she meant. It seemed like a non-issue to me in this day and age when families are spread across the entire country, in some cases, even the whole continent or globe. You're lucky to see your relatives every five or ten years!

We have to remember that in Teresa's day, relatives usually lived nearby. In fact, they were living in each other's pockets (so to speak). They supported monasteries financially and were involved with administration. They would visit the nuns to discuss business and other matters of the world, distracting them from spiritual pursuits and taking time from prayer, etc.

She did not mean that we should not care for our families. “By relatives, I do not mean parents, for parents seldom fail to help their children and it is right for us to console them in their need. Let us not remain aloof if communicating with them does no harm to our religious life.”

What I conclude is: we must love our family and relatives-

- as God loves them and loving God in them
- not for selfish reasons (consolations)
- not love them more than we love God

“When it is clear that a nun considers these visits a cross, it will be all right because then it will benefit them and not harm herself.” St. Teresa.

What then is detachment? At the risk of oversimplifying, I would say “detachment” is emptying oneself of all that is not God, so that God can fill us with Himself.

It is said that Our Lord comes to all equally. He stands at the door of our heart and soul. He doesn't force Himself - the latch is on the inside. However, if He finds it filled with other guests, He will not enter.

Let us remember that when speaking of detachment, we are not just speaking of material things. That would be fairly easy, and for some of us, a great relief! Detachment from things and creatures is a big help; however, it is Detachment of the heart that is most important. In other words, it's our attitude that is key – “where one's heart is, there is one's treasure.”

St. John of the Cross defines detachment this way: “the soul must go forth from all things according to the affection and the will and enter within itself in deepest recollection, so that all things are to it as though they were not.” Doesn't that remind you of St. Paul's words in Cor. 7:29-31: “*Let those who have wives be as though they had none, those who buy as though they possessed not*”.

Also from St. John of the Cross, “whether it be a strong cable or a delicate thread that holds the bird, it matters not if it really detains it; for until the cord be broken, the bird cannot fly. So also the soul, held by bonds of human attachments, however slight they may be, cannot while they last, fly upward to God.”

He says – “to go forth from all things.” What kinds of things are meant? One thing that comes to my mind at once is detachment from noise, both exterior and interior. Exterior noise is noise in the street, the office, the home. Even these you can recollect yourself momentarily and be at prayer.

Interior silence is what is most important. The imagination, the emotions, the memory, the desires can also speak. Unless they are silenced, there can be no real recollection.

St. Gregory says, “a person given to much talk will never make any great progress in virtue.” This applies as much outside the monastery as within.

We need to ask ourselves what things keep us from flying to God.

I like this advice from St. Teresa of Jesus, “once we have detached ourselves from relatives and the world, we think there is nothing more we have to do and don't need to struggle. Do not feel secure like someone who locks the door and goes to sleep, not realizing that the worst thief is inside, that is ourselves!”

Detachment from self? What does that mean? It means detachment from our plans, our projects, our point of view, and our own spiritual agenda. In our meeting sharing circles, one member suggested that we sometimes need to detach ourselves from how we think things should be and accept things as they are.

St. Teresa speaks of “Detachment from our bodies”, that means preoccupation (sometimes even obsession) with our health: what we should eat or not eat, how much and what kind of exercise we need, what we should weigh, how we should look, what we should wear and on and on, all concerning the physical body.

I sometimes think Teresa should drive by our sports complexes and gymnasiums or hockey arenas - on a Sunday morning no less! She tells us, “one fault the body has is that the more comfort we give it, the more needs it discovers.”

Also from Teresa, “Be determined that you came to die for Christ, not to live comfortably for Christ,” and “prayer and comfortable living are incompatible.”

Conclusion

Since virtue is important, and as I said, indispensable for a life of prayer, how do we train ourselves in the practice of virtue?

Father Gabriel, O.C.D. says, “God uses every circumstance of life to invite us to practice virtue”:

- in the orders of our superiors
- in the duties of our state of life
- in all circumstances, great or small, which cause - anxiety, boredom, change of plans, humiliations, also suffering that comes with illness or fatigue, hard work or old age (can't see, can't hear, can't remember people's names.)

We never need to look far for those opportunities to practice virtue. They simply come with daily life. We need to learn to see them as means God gives us to practice virtue.

However, we must note that throughout her writings, Teresa (never the minimalist) always encourages us to try harder and to aim for the most perfect. “The first stone of our spiritual edifice must be to strive after the greatest possible perfection.” (W.O.P. Ch. 5) This quote says it in another way: “why reduce ourselves to walking at a hen's pace when God has made us capable of flying like eagles?”

St. John of the Cross gives us this advice for acquiring the virtues quickly:

Always be inclined to

- the difficult more than the easy
- the ragged more than the soft

- the hard and distasteful in a work more than to its pleasant aspects
- what is more of a cross, not less

He lists even more, but you get the idea from these few.

Now if this sounds extremely rigorous, this going against our will in everything, it's because it is! Even Teresa's nuns complained and Teresa responded, "God deliver us from saying, 'we're not angels, we're not saints.' Consider that even though we're not, what a great good it is that if we try, and with God's help, we can become saints. Have no fear that He will fail if we don't fail."

Besides, she tells us that once we begin to work, God does so much in the soul and grants it so many favours, that all one can do in this life seems little.

However, and this is very important - that there is another aspect to the practice of virtue. It is not necessarily all pain and hard work. St. Teresa's words, "would be remiss if I didn't also mention the joy and delight this 'going against our will' carries in its wake and what is gained by it even in this life."

It is said of St. Margaret of the Heart of Jesus that she not only obeyed orders promptly, but experienced intense pleasure and delight in doing so, her whole being radiating the joy she found in obedience.

Why this joy when virtue is so difficult? It seems to me that it is because the soul, at least to some degree, has gained mastery over the self and regained some of the beauty and harmony that it had before the fall. Man then experiences the fullness of being intended for him. Jesus, said, "*I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly.*"

Father Gabriel, O.C.D. says it this way, "through these efforts (that is, the practice of virtue) repeated with humility and constancy, we unfurl the sails of our souls to the breeze of the Holy Spirit." I might add --thus we sail into the port of salvation and fly into the arms of God!

I leave you with these words from our Holy Mother, Teresa of Jesus:

"May your desire be to see God;
Your fear lest you lose Him;
Your joy be all that will take you to Him
-and thus you shall live in great peace."

Thank you and God Bless you!

Sources:

1. The Way of Perfection by St. Teresa of Avila
translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.
2. Divine Intimacy by Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D.
3. The Teresian Gospel by Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D.
4. Words of Wisdom for Our World by Susan Muto
5. The Precautions and Counsels of St. John of the Cross Translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.
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