

The Wilderness, IV

Each morning, before we set off on another trek in the wilderness, there was a meeting to assess the hazards of the day and plan out the hike. And in the evening, there was a recap of how the day went, both good and bad. This is a wise way to live. Imagine if you had the habit of recollecting in the morning, and foreseeing what will be the difficulties of the day and how you will face them. And more importantly, what will be the most dangerous times of the day spiritually, and how shall you meet them? And then at the end of the day make a brief assessment of how things went. The soul that takes some time to look at what spiritual or moral hazards might be in his path; and who makes an examination of conscience at the end of the day, is on the path to heaven. But to do the assessment well, one must be able to remember, and to forget.

Both are demanding. You have to remember the mistakes made earlier in order to learn from them. We were all learning on that trip. I made some beginners mistakes even, and was gently corrected. For example, you don't jump off a fallen tree when you are backpacking in the wilderness. It's too easy to twist an ankle. And an evacuation out there is not easily accomplished. So you need to remember. But you also need to forget the mistakes in a way, especially the mistakes that others make, so that you can boldly attempt the new day. This too, is a skill most necessary for progress in the interior life.

Consider the importance of forgetting for a moment. A young, French, Jesuit priest was assigned to a parish in 1673. It didn't go well; too many complaints from parishioners. In fact at first, none of his assignments went well at all. He was assigned finally to a small convent in a little town where his superiors thought he couldn't do too much damage. When he arrived the mother superior greeted him and said she was glad he came, but they were having problems with a young novice who kept insisting that our Lord was speaking to her in locutions, and this was disturbing the whole convent. The novice said that Christ opened up His chest and showed her His Sacred Heart.

The priest told Mother superior not to worry about it and to have the young novice identify herself to him in the confessional. The novice told him simply, "Father, I am the one to whom Jesus is appearing." The priest asked her a few questions such as "How often does He appear to you?" The answers seemed good enough.

But then he devised a test. He said, "Would you ask Him a question for me?" She said she would. "Ask him what I confessed in my last confession." The next day she returned and the priest asked her, "What did he say?" Sister was very uncomfortable, but responded, "When I asked Him your question, He answered, I don't remember." This is full of mirth in one sense, but in another, the priest instantly knew that this was indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The priest knew his bible, and recalled St. Isaias the Prophet, (43:25) "I am he that blot out thy iniquities for my own sake, and I will not remember thy sins."

The young priest began immediately to believe in the locutions, and it completely changed this life. Through his complete devotion to the Sacred Heart, The failed parish priest became St. Claude de la Columbiere, one of the greatest spiritual directors who ever lived. And the young novice became St. Margaret Mary Alacoque.

So we need to forget. And yes, this sets the bar high doesn't it? Is it enough just to forgive those whom we are convinced have offended us? Or should we imitate our Lord and forget what they have done? The old Roman saying *erarre humanum est*, "To err is human," was completed I think by the English writer Alexander Pope, who wrote, "To err is human and to forgive is divine." I think it would be divine to forget what offenses people have committed against us, something way beyond human power.

We would do well then, to be able to forget sins, when we retire from the world from time to time. Our Lord did so, and often. This He did specially before He began His missions, but the time in the desert is not the only instance recorded. Before He chose His Apostles, He observed the same preparation. "It came to pass in those days that He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." (Luke vi. 12)

On another occasion, after sending away the multitudes, "He went up into a mountain apart to pray;" (Matt. 14: 22) and on this occasion also, He seems to have remained there through great part of the night. Again, amid the excitement caused by His miracles; "In the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." (Mark 1:35). Considering that our Lord is the pattern of human nature in its perfection, surely we cannot doubt that such instances of strict devotion are intended for our imitation, if we would follow Him.

But the duty is placed beyond doubt by finding similar instances in the case of the most eminent of His servants. St. Paul, mentions among other sufferings, that he and his brethren were "in watchings, in fastings," and in a later chapter, that he was "in fastings often." St. Peter retired to Joppa, to the house of one Simon, a tanner, on the sea-shore, and there fasted and prayed. Moses, Elias, Daniel...the list is long of the great men and women of old and new covenants who went into the wilderness.

And none of them, not even one went out to look for or conceive novelties. Rather they went out with the attitude of St. Jeremias, "Thus saith the Lord: Stand ye on the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, which is the good way, and walk ye in it: and you shall find refreshment for your souls." (6:16) Or again, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father and he will show thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee." (Deut. 22:7)

But the enemy will seek to spoil such thoughts. He will suggest you remember in a different way. He will tempt by getting you to think of the past, only with regret. "You should have done this, you should have done that. Shame on you." And of the future he tempts by endless "what ifs?" "Yes, you can enter a convent, but what if the superior is bad?" Or to the young couple, "Yes, you can get married. But what if it goes bad – shouldn't you prepare for the divorce? Wouldn't that be more prudent?"

Instead of falling for all the "you could have done this or that" and instead of falling for the endless "what if something goes wrong," we need simplicity to go into the wilderness. We need to believe God when He says He loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, and that He loves us. That is the cornerstone of the edifice of the interior life, that He loves us.

It is in a wilderness that God shows us that we are thirsty and dry. As our thirst increases, we begin to search for Him, even search desperately. And this is exactly what God hopes will happen. St. Jeremias the Prophet wrote, "You shall seek me, and shall find me: when you shall seek me with all your heart."