

MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY - CONTEMPLATIVE

" To do ordinary things with
extraordinary love for the
greater glory of God "



Via S. Agapito 8
00177 Roma - Italy
TeL 06/21707702
Fax 06/21707703

L S F (Laudetur Sacra Familia)

25 January 2007, *Conversion of St Paul*

Yearning for God, Yearning for Holiness

On a Friday morning in a small Chapel in Sao Paolo, Brazil, I was in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. The word "holy" began to flash my mind for a long time and I did not know why and what to do with it, although the Lord had put into me the desire to become holy ever since I can remember through my beloved mother, who also wanted to be holy. I still have miles to go; like someone who wants to reach the top of Mount Everest and is still at its bottom.

However, I could not ignore the inspiration and so I began to see what the letters of the word "holy" could stand for.

H - Humility.

The word "holy" has four letters. The first letter is "**H**". I began to reflect on this letter and realized that if I want to be holy I must start with humility. In the lives of the saints I could not find any that were proud. They firmly believed and were convinced that without God they could not become holy, live a life of holiness, nor do God's work.

What is humility?

The word "humus" in Latin means ground, earth. Here St. Thomas Aquinas' explanation on humility is important. He says humility means to believe that whatever is good in me comes from God. This includes my birthplace and my parents, as I have not chosen them but the Good God did and they are his gift to me. I should therefore thank God for them and pray for my parents, especially if I did not have a good relationship with them. Little by little I come to realize that everything and everyone is God's gift and I must become ever more grateful to Him.

In addition to the many gifts and talents that one may have, the education one has received, all are to be recognized as God's gifts and used and shared with others. Humility does not deny the truth, but emphasizes the holiness of God through our gifts.

Blessed Mother Teresa used to say that to understand the greatness of God is easy, but it is more difficult to understand his humility. How could a God, who is so inscrutable, become man, born of a woman, born under the law of nature and accept all the vicissitudes of this earthly life and existence? He even went so far as to tell us to learn humility from him, as he is meek and humble of heart. (cf. Mt. 11: 30)

St. Thomas of Aquinas says that humility is built on two pillars: truth and justice. The truth, he says, is that whatever is good in us comes from God; and justice, therefore, means to give all honour and glory to God.

Bl. Teresa is an example for us. She received about 700 awards and honorary doctorates, but nothing made her feel that they were due to her cleverness, intelligence, capacity or power. She received them. She was very aware that it was God and not she; they were his and not hers. All honour and glory went directly to God, including the prestigious 1979 Nobel Peace Prize.

Humility is very vital in the life of anyone who aspires to holiness, which, of course, is not a luxury of the few but everyone's the simple duty. "*Be holy, for the Lord, your God, is holy.*" (Lv 19: 2)

St. Augustine masterly explains the virtue of humility thus: "*There is no coming to unity without humility; there is no love without the openness of humble patience. Where humility reigns, there is love.*"

For St. Augustine humility is not just one virtue among others; it is the basic virtue. In this way humility is the fertile soil for Charity.

St. Augustine writes: "*I would wish that you place yourself with all your love under Christ, and that you pave no other way in order to reach and to attain the truth that has already been paved by him who, as God, knows the weakness of our steps. This way is, in the first place, humility; in the second place, humility; in the third place humility...As often as you ask me about the Christian religion's norms of conduct, I choose to give no other answer than: humility.*" (Letter 118, 3, 22)

It is very clear that pride is the great enemy of humility. All the positive qualities of humility are mirrored negatively in pride. St. Augustine even dares to assert that "*God's hatred for pride is so strong that he would rather see humility in evil deeds than pride in good deeds.*" (Sermon on Psalm 93, 15)

In Religious life, love and humility are decisive, and without them Religious life is worthless. St. Augustine declared that it is better to possess a fortune outside the religious community than to go through life as a proud Religious! Speaking of the celibate state of life, he says: "*It is much better to be married and humble than celibate and proud.*" (On Holy Virginity, 51, 52)

When I joined the seminary, for 60 continual days we had to meditate on the necessity and importance of the virtue of humility. At the end of two long months of meditation on humility, I then knew how to be humble; and paradoxically, I became proud of my humility. We can never be humble enough to think or say: "I am really a humble person". The humbler we are, the holier we become, and without it none of us will ever become holy.

O – Obedience.

The second letter in the word "holy" is "**O**". This letter stands for obedience.

Like for the word humility, I went through the lives of many of the canonized saints I knew and could not find one disobedient saint among them.

An example is St. Pio of Pietrelcina, who was forbidden to celebrate Holy Mass in public for two years, and he was not allowed to hear confessions for four years. He did not open his mouth against his Superiors, but simply obeyed. He knew that his Superiors could make a mistake in commanding, but he could not make a mistake in obeying, even though Jesus granted him the gift of his five sacred wounds, which were a privilege and a burden for him. The devil tried to use them against doing God's will and thus they could have become stumbling blocks; but instead, he became all the more humble and obedient and saw in his Superiors the designs of God, just as Jesus did who saw his Father's will in Pilate condemning him to death.

In the autobiography of St. Margaret Mary, we see Jesus telling her to obey her Superiors when her Superior did not easily accept what Jesus had been telling St. Margaret. He told her: *"Listen, my child, Satan is furiously trying to destroy you, but as long as you obey your Superior he is powerless over you."*

Imagine if our Lady refused to listen to the Angel Gabriel; what would have happened to the Incarnation? But she, without knowing what could happen to her, said in sheer faith: *"Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me as you say."* (Lk 1: 38)

See how disturbed St. Joseph was and how he wanted to divorce Mary in secret when he found out that she was with child. He could have exposed Mary to public shame, and our Lady could have been stoned to death. But Joseph, a just and upright man unwilling to put her to shame, accepted God's will revealed to him through a dream. (cf. Mt 1: 19) In both cases, it was the Angel who came to Joseph and also to Mary. The Gospel says: *"Joseph awoke from sleep and did as the Angel of the Lord had told him. He took Mary as his wife."* (Mt 1: 24)

Jesus' own words and example are very clear as well. For he says: *"My food is to do the will of my Father who sent me."* (Jn 4: 34) *"In the days when he was in the flesh, Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learnt obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him in and through his obedience."* (Heb 5: 7-9) Without obedience to God's will and his plan no one is going to be saved.

Jesus told Bl. Mother Teresa: *"Fear not, ...only obey, obey Me very cheerfully and promptly and without any questions – just only obey. I shall never leave you – if you obey."* (MFG, 18)

What then is obedience?

"Obedience is the wholehearted free submission of our will to God's will and plan through a serious of intermediaries, persons, events, institutions, human authorities, written rules, customs and practices. To obey is to say "yes" to the sacred order of existence established by God in this world." (MCC Brothers' Constitutions, R. 76)

Based on this motive there can be two ways of obeying our legitimate Superiors:

- Servile obedience which is based on fear; or
- Docile obedience which is based on love and respect for the persons we obey, the obedience of Jesus.

“I want obedient nuns, covered with the obedience of the Cross”, Jesus said to Bl. Teresa. (MFG, 10)

L – Love.

The third letter of the word “holy” is “L”. This letter has two lines: the vertical and the horizontal. Reflecting on this letter I realized that with its two lines it stands for the twofold commandments of love of God and love of neighbour. We are commanded to love God undeservedly and unconditionally and our neighbour as we love ourselves.

“Listen Israel...you must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength...” (Dt 6: 4-5). Jesus adds the equally important commandment of loving one’s neighbour as one loves oneself, which is a verse from the book of Leviticus that says: *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* (Lv 19: 18b) This twofold love is not only central to human beings but also natural for them.

What makes us different from other creatures is our capacity to love and to be loved. There is no substitute for this twofold love. And this capacity is common to all humans, whether healthy or sick, rich or poor, Christians or non Christians, white, black or brown. Irrespective of colour, culture, religion or nationality; even for those who still lead a very primitive life or a very highly cultured one, the essential element in all is this twofold love. A person is measured by his or her capacity to love and to be loved. The highest form of culture and the greatest degree of civilization are the culture of love and the civilization of love.

Our life on earth from the time of our conception and birth to our rebirth into Heaven and our life thereafter depends upon this one reality: this twofold love of God and neighbour. They are like two sides of the same coin, inseparable from each other

No bird can fly with one wing, no matter how strong the wing is. Every bird must have two wings strong and balancing to fly. The wing of the commandment of the love of God with all one’s heart, mind, soul and strength and the equally important commandment of loving one’s neighbour as one loves oneself should balance harmoniously in our everyday life, no matter how busy we may be.

Bl. Teresa prayed at various hours of the day, participated in the celebration of the Eucharist and received Holy Communion daily, and then with Jesus went in haste to serve the Lord in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor, the sick and the dying. *“The saints – consider the example of Bl. Teresa of Kolkata”*, writes the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical “Deus Caritas Est”, *“constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form one single commandment. But both live from the love of God who loved us first...Love grows through love. Love is ‘divine’,*

because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a 'we', which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is 'all in all'. (1 Cor 15: 18)"
(n. 18)

Love never gets old; love is eternal. Love never gives up loving; love is never tired of loving, humanly speaking, even the unlovable, the ones I do not like and even do not know. Love reaches out to all, embraces all, trusts all, and forgives all. Love does not brood over past injuries, but remembers the past with gratitude and with purified memories.

Love is a school where we learn to love through love. Love travels across the oceans, climbs mountains without lamentation, without prejudices, barriers and boundaries. Love does not wait. In the school of love we learn to transcend superficial emotions; love breaks man-made walls of separation like the Berlin wall and removes the division, uniting one another. In the school of love one learns to transcend from affective love to effective love; from human love to Jesus' love.

This happens in and through prayer, sacrifice and works of mercy. Love enters into our being through prayer and proceeds from us as charity.

Love necessarily leads us to suffering. The twofold love with its vertical and horizontal lines makes the cross. God's love for me and my love for him is the vertical beam, and my love for my neighbour is the horizontal beam. If there is no cross, there is no love, and vice versa. It is impossible to love God and one's neighbour without suffering some pain, some sacrifice of time, personal interest and emotions.

Suffering then is the natural, necessary and spontaneous expression of love. Take the example of a good mother. How much she has to suffer from conception to birth and until the child becomes more or less independent; but the mother does not count the cost nor goes on telling everybody of her inconveniences and hardships in bringing a child into the world, educating him to stand on his feet. If we genuinely love a person, then we do not calculate the difficulties and hardships.

"God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." (Jn 3: 16) Jesus in turn loved us to the very end. (cf. Jn 13: 1) *"Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends."* (Jn 15: 13) This is love without limits and without counting the cost.

This is what the saints did. They became God's love for the poor, the sick, the lepers, the dying. The invisible God becomes visible today through works of love and charity. *"Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found."* (St. Augustine)

Y – Yearning.

Now we come to the fourth and last letter in the word "holy". After I prayed hard and begged the Holy Spirit to enlighten me, I was shown that the right word in this context is yearning.

This word can be equivalent to "thirst" or "longing" or "desire". It matters little which word is used to express the same reality, as long as it signifies the real yearning for God and thirsting for holiness. *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for holiness..."* (Mt 5: 6)

The word “yearning” can be used to express two essential elements on the path of holiness:

- Prayer as the human heart’s yearning for God.
- Yearning for holiness.

Prayer as yearning. There are various Psalms that express the heart’s yearning for God.

Psalms 42 and 43 are examples of how the Psalmist expressed his deep desire for God in prayer: “*Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God.*” (v. 1)

Psalms 63 and 64 are another example. Who can really quench the insatiable thirst for God? Not only our soul but our whole being pines for God: “*O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting; my body pines for you, like a dry, weary land without water.*” (v. 1)

Psalms 63 and 64 are the first psalms for Morning Prayer on every solemnity and feast. Every saint longed for God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength, even when his soul went through thick darkness, experienced terrible loneliness and rejection.

Bl. Teresa writes: “*I have been on the verge of saying “No”. It has been so very hard – that terrible longing keeps growing and I feel as if something will break in me one day – and then that darkness, that loneliness, that feeling of terrible aloneness. Heaven from every side is closed...gone is the love for anything and anybody; and yet, I long for God. I long to love him with every drop of life in me...My mind and heart is habitually with God.*” (Letter to Cardinal Picachy, S.J., 20 October 1960)

The saints live always with God; they walk with him, travel with him, work with him and for him; they speak with him. The prophet Isaiah writes: “*My soul yearns for you in the night, yes, my spirit within me keeps vigil for you.*” (26: 9) In the night and as morning breaks the saints watch for his coming.

According to St. Augustine, the yearning of the human heart for God, the insatiable *nostalgia*, is the heart of all true prayer. Without deep yearning, there is no true prayer, regardless of the many hours in chapel and the length of formal prayers. “*Longing is always at prayer, even though the tongue is silent. If your yearning is constant, then you are always praying. When does our prayer sleep? Only when our desire cools.*” (St. Augustine, Sermon 80, 7)

Even though prayer of the heart is important it does not make verbal prayer superfluous. “*At particular hours and times we entreat God also with words so that, through these verbal signs of the reality we may impel ourselves to greater effort, help ourselves become aware of how much progress we have made in this desire and rouse ourselves to grow in it with greater vitality...Therefore, at certain times, we call our spirit back to prayer from the other cares and activities, which in some way cloud our yearning.*” (St. Augustine, Letter 130: 9, 18) There should be real harmony of word and heart in every verbal prayer.

This yearning of the human heart, which St. Augustine calls “*desiderium naturale*” – “natural desire”, common to all saints, must be a common denominator for everyone who aspires to greater holiness. How can I be perfect, merciful or holy as our Heavenly Father is perfect, merciful and holy if I do not yearn for it like the saints did? The friends of God become the friends of the saints and they

love and take care of all those God loves and cares for. They know that their inner dynamism, the driving force, does not come from them, but from the Lord, whom they want to proclaim by their words and example. In the words of Bl. Teresa of Kolkata: *“I want to, I will, with God’s help, be holy.”*

Yearning for holiness. Even though all are called to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, no one is going to become automatically holy or perfect. This inner longing for holiness is also the strong desire to resemble God’s holiness. God wants us to witness his holiness in our life and work.

The heart of God yearns for each individual soul created in his own image and likeness. He creates in each person a corresponding thirst or yearning for him. To express it graphically, take the example of the magnet and a piece of iron. The magnet has the power to attract the piece of iron and the iron has the capacity to be attracted by the magnet. God is the powerful magnet who draws us to him; and we are like pieces of iron drawn to him. Our capacity to be drawn to God is our thirst, our yearning for God. This capacity to be attracted is not something passive but dynamic. *“I am longing with painful longing to be all for God”*, writes Bl. Teresa, *“to be holy in such a way that Jesus can live his life to the full in me...I want to love him as he has never been loved...I did not know that love could make one suffer so much.”*

Conclusion.

The word “holy” can thus be explained and understood much more deeply. The more we understand the sublime beauty of the reality of holiness, which is a participation in God’s holiness, the more we can appreciate and try to live it. No wonder Jesus speaks of the parable of the pearl the merchant bought: *“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant’s search for fine pearls. When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back and put up for a sale all that he had and bought it.”* (Mt 13: 45-46)

Among God’s creation, human beings alone can become better and holier. Even the angels remain what they are. As long as we live in the world, we can grow in holiness and can resemble our Creator more closely and more perfectly.

“Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”(Lv. 19: 2)

God bless you.

Fr. Sebastian Vazhakala M.C.