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“Declaring bankruptcy”

Letter 27

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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Do you know what I was thinking, as I read your last letter? That you are acting like business executive even in your life of mental prayer. Believe me, I do not scorn the businessman that you are. Rather, I have a secret admiration for the human gifts which makeup your strength and your success: initiative, clarity of vision, the will to succeed, a sense of organization and command, and efficiency.

But mental prayer is not a human affair, and the mentality of the businessman has no place in it. Now, I believe I glimpse signs of this mentality in your reactions. During our first encounter, you asked me to suggest subjects for mental prayer, and you were disappointed when I told you that I knew of none better than the Gospels. You answered, “Reading the Gospel doesn’t help me very much to pray.” In your letter, you complain that you cannot find a precise method of mental prayer in our *cahiers*. This seems to reveal your “business executive” mentality, concerned with efficiency, productivity, and profits.

Far be it from me to think or say anything against the ancient instinct to succeed that is embedded deep within our being. Mankind owes its development and progress to it. The evils associated with the desire to succeed are caused, not by it, but by its perversion by egotism, ambition, and the will to power. But this instinct to succeed is the worst possible obstacle to prayer. Mental prayer is not a human undertaking, to be successfully executed. It is a willingness to give in. That is perhaps why you find it so difficult. In your eyes, to abdicate is the worst cowardice. After all, isn’t a difficulty meant to be mastered and opposition meant to be overcome? You are probably right where business is concerned, but not in the realm of prayer.

You are engaged in mental prayer. You question a page of the Gospel, and it does not answer. You knock, and the door remains closed. That is enough to exasperate you. It is not one of your habits to accept resistance on the part of men and things. And besides, you reflect, what good is it to dawdle, to lose precious time that could be used

more effectively, perhaps even in God's service? Or else you say, "Let someone else find an efficient method!"

Well no, you must accept the resistance of that page which withholds its secrets from you. It is not a question of seeking another, more eloquent page, or taking up a more stimulating book of spirituality, or of discovering an infallible method of meditation. You need: to confess that you are powerless to understand God's thoughts; to humiliate yourself in the presence of this mute text; to prostrate yourself before God's silent transcendence. You need to wait in the attitude of the repentant sinner until the Lord deigns to have pity, and grants you the grace of prayer. You have no right at all to this grace. God will give it to you freely in his own time.

Grace is freely given, and is not capricious. If it is slow in coming, it is not that God hesitates to give. It is because you are slow to clear the paths by which the Lord wants to take possession of your being.

A memory comes to mind whose meaning you should grasp better than anyone. A friend of mine was about to declare the bankruptcy of his business. His wife came to see me one day, greatly disturbed. She could not understand her husband's reaction to this situation, which she described to me:

"I cannot find words to translate what is going on inside of him: suffering, collapse—words such as these do not apply. It is much more than suffering, and it is not collapse, since he is reacting and doing everything that the situation demands. It is a kind of death, as if he had been stricken in the wellsprings of his life, in his dignity as a man. It seems that we women are incapable of imagining the interior disaster that failure means to a man when it affects his undertakings, his creative activity. We experience such distress only at the level of love."

I am sure that you evaluate better than my visitor this dismay of a man confronting bankruptcy. Might not your revulsion against mental prayer be of the same nature? In the mainstream of your life you are a success, but here you are a failure. Everywhere else you are called upon to combat, but here you are required to abdicate, to declare bankruptcy. That goes counter to all your habits, and more than that, counter to the essential aspirations of your being. You love to conquer, and you are right in feeling that way. But please understand that where God is concerned our victory is to consent to be conquered. Consider St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

In your daily activities, you say, "I want." At mental prayer, you must say, "I beg of you." There you are no longer the man who wields authority, but the child who asks, the beggar who holds out his hand, the failure who accepts humiliation.

To succeed in life we need to know, to will, and to have the power to do. To succeed in mental prayer you need to agree to know nothing, will nothing, and have power to do nothing, so that God may give you his knowledge, his will, and his power.

Some time ago you said to me, "That's contrary to nature!" Yes, I can readily see that it is torture for you (for you more than for someone else) to remain there powerless before God. I can understand that you would prefer any activity at all, indeed, any other kind of torture but this. But it is precisely through mental prayer that this turning around of your nature will come about, this conversion that is the only way of adapting yourself to God's action.

On the other hand, don't imagine that I am inviting you to a quietistic passivity. To abdicate, to declare bankruptcy at the hour of mental prayer, is a very positive act. It implies intense spiritual activity. It presupposes that you believe in God present and acting, that you are mercilessly mortifying everything in you that clamors to live and to succeed. It presupposes that you are giving yourself (or rather are waiting patiently), in an attitude of offering and receptiveness, for God to come and take possession of you.