

CHAPTER TEN

HONESTY, THE GOAL OF OUR SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY

Let us now look at the role that this gift of faith plays in the spiritual life.

When I look at my spiritual scene, I will find some areas where growth is evident. "At last, I am keeping to a regular prayer schedule." There will be others where there is no sign of growth: "I still cannot see why I should forgive Harry."

How are we to acquire "indispensable self-esteem"? If we focus on our areas of weakness, we will become permanently depressed. As we lose all sense of self-esteem, we lose our ability to function. So we are tempted to focus on our strengths. We keep in our memory the indications of growth. We dwell there. It leads to a feeling of being loved by God. "I know God loves me," and I have ready at hand the evidence for it. This is, of course, a false faith.

Imagine yourself called to the principal's office. "Mary, our coach, is quitting. There are only three games left on the schedule. None of us knows a thing about basketball. Would you mind just being there? The coach will be at today's game. If you go, you might learn enough to be able to fake it through the last two games."

That afternoon you are in the stands. There is one player on your team who has fantastic hands. They even look bigger than

normal. Whenever the opponents come near him, he steals the ball and fires it up. He is extraordinarily quick. But his shooting—frequently from half court—is very bad. You start counting after a while and you notice one basket out of thirty-one attempts.

At half time they all gather at the bench, He sees you and says, "Sister, did you see that shot I sank from half court!" Yes, you did. But you also saw something he didn't see, or, at least, soon forgot—the thirty misses.

Will you play him? Probably not. He's no real help. And when you don't put him in, he'll blame it on the fact that he's Irish and you're Italian! He is out of touch with reality. As a result he will have great difficulty in relating to you. If you had filmed the game, then you could make a short film out of his thirty misses. You could tell him, "Sean dear, I will play you, on one condition. Every afternoon you must look at this film three times." He would see himself in a new light—as others see him. That kind of knowledge always leads to changing our ways.

If I insist on focusing on my strengths, I will experience consolation perhaps, but it is not from the Lord. It is brittle. It can be shaken by facts. It requires endless effort to keep up—lest the truth appear and depress us. Keeping my attention on my acts of loving and believing does not lead to true growth, but is only an appearance of true growth.

What if there are no signs of spiritual growth anyway! What if the deeper our love becomes, the less we see it, and the more we see our insensitivity. What if the deeper our faith becomes, the less we are aware of it, and the more we see our reluctance to trust. How could we persist in our spiritual endeavor if we had no way of knowing whether we are going forward or backward? As St. Francis DeSales put it: "You do not know whether you are going forward or backward. But the Captain knows, and you trust the Captain."

What makes up for not seeing any evidence of growth is a hearing, a faith experience. We must be assured by the Captain.

Otherwise we will never be free from misusing our good deeds to console ourselves. The question then becomes: how do I go about receiving these assurances from God?

The path is parallel to the path of faith in general. Just as believers seek out those parts of the world where God appears absent, so, too, in order to hear God's assuring word in my spiritual life, I must enter into those parts of my spiritual life that are as yet unredeemed. I must enter my weaknesses. I must look honestly at my unloving ways. I must dwell on them. Into that sad scene will come the Lord with His assurance, "I love you anyway. I am at work within you in ways you do not know. Where else would I be but there, within you, healing your wounds."

It is the strength that comes from hearing His voice that frees me to be honest, to get clear of the need to distort my self-image, to enter the real world where I stand in terrible need of Jesus' death.

Honesty is the essence of prayer. It is in your weaknesses where the Spirit dwells, and where He can be encountered. It is very easy to enter prayer and to say, "Lord, I want to be here. Lord, I love You. I do believe in You. Sacred Heart of Jesus, I put my trust in You. I do want to love others more." Perhaps it's the truth. But it is not the whole truth! No. There is present in us, alongside these wonderful desires and loves and believings, another part of the self. This part does not yet trust or love or desire. This part is silent, ignored, left outside in our prayer.

At times, of course, I do not even feel like praying. It is crucial to pray from this weakness: "Lord, I do not want to be here." At times I feel no trust. The temptation is to put off the prayer until I feel better. "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I do not put my trust in You." This is the moment when I need prayer, not later when I'm feeling better. But to pray is to be honest. I must not cover up my reluctance to pray, my lack of trust, my lack of desire, by some pretense. I must trust that the Lord will come to me as I am, turned off, dispirited, desolate, without any sense of Him or desire for Him. And He will come.

We strive so hard for virtue and good desires. The Little Flower said, "When He sees me *without* virtue and *without* desire, that is when He makes me the object of His consuming love." She knew that He came into her weakness, her despair.

Rarely did Jesus speak in abstract forms. He was constantly using images and parables, and he boasted that he would only speak in parables. But occasionally he utters a principle. Here is a principle he used at the end of his longest statement on prayer—the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. He offers us an experience of exaltation. It is one of God's great promises—always being made to us were we to get near to Him and hear Him. "You will be exalted!" That is the promise-part of it.

Notice that the verb is passive. Here, Jesus is describing the second moment of prayer, the moment when we are acted upon by God. We do not exalt ourselves in prayer. We do not need to hypnotize ourselves into feelings of belief. In prayer something will be done to us that is beyond our powers to achieve. An exaltation will occur that does not depend on or use our energies. This being-exalted will produce energies within us.

If this doesn't happen during our prayer, we should ask ourselves why. It is promised. St. Ignatius has his retreatant look back at his prayer and ask about what the Father was hoping to do for the prayer. Was He hoping to fill you with "courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace"? Was He hoping to arouse within you "an interior movement" by which you would be "inflamed with love" for Him? Was He hoping that you would experience His touch so intensely that you would weep?

In other words, was God wanting to fill you with exaltation during that prayer? We can be very uncomfortable with this promise. It seems to condemn our prayer as not up to the mark. "Must I be exalted every time I pray?!" But the real question is, "Does God want to exalt me when I pray?"

"You will be exalted." That is the main clause of Jesus' statement as he puts down the principle of effective prayer.

That tells us what will be done to us if God is allowed to do what He wants. But what is the path that leads to this being exalted? Jesus spells out the path in a subordinate clause that precedes the main clause. It is a conditional clause. It tells us the one condition that must be fulfilled before God can exalt us. It is not, "If you love Me...." "If you love your brothers and sisters...." "If you trust Me...." "If you desire...." He can exalt us even when we have none of these. In fact, if He does not exalt us first, we cannot become loving and trusting. No, the only condition Jesus lays down for effective prayer is to be honest. "If you humble yourself...."

The Pharisee had strengths and weaknesses. So did the publican. The one prayed from his strengths. He had programmed into his prayer thanksgiving. The other ignored his strengths. He had programmed into his prayer his weaknesses. Both felt consoled. The Pharisee felt good about his self-image. The publican was met by the Lord, and justified by Him.

For the Lord to come to us in prayer, we must be present to ourselves. We must be honest. We must let go that false image. We must be willing to let the Lord introduce us to ourselves. We are so competitive, so judgmental. Resentment finds a ready welcome within us. We are anxious people. We are unforgiving. These words are not meant to describe other people. They are for us, each of us. As we grow in holiness, we become more able to see this truth. Our unlikeness to God starts to come out of its hiding place. He has such intense desire to bless us, and *we* are so little willing to have Him come near. He has such love for the poor, and we are so cold to them. He identifies with our enemy: the very person who is so unfair to us, who infuriates us—or for whom we have nothing but indifference, or (a more honest word) contempt.

It is the assurance of His love for us that exalts us in effective prayer, not any love we feel for Him. Even when we have feelings of love and of desire, they are not the believer's focus. How can we become absorbed in the Good News of His love for us if our focus is on our feelings of love for Him? These feelings

can be very superficial, and can be present even when, in deeper areas, we have suppressed strong negative feelings. The Lord can help us from being drawn to center our attention on these feelings. He can reveal to us how little we love if we are willing to hear Him.

To a medieval mystic, God said, "I am the One who loves; you are the one who does not love," That is the authentic voice. He consoles us with His loving, and He reveals our darkness.

There is a going-down, a death, in gospel spirituality. There is no "rising from the living" in the gospel. There must be an honesty, a death to the inflated self-image which we cling to for the great consolation it brings. This dying is not just for beginners. The inflated self-image is present even in the saints. There is no getting out of the need to deal with it. What comes with holiness is not a being-free-from-it, but an ability to acknowledge it, to recognize it, to specify its workings. As it looms larger in our conscious awareness, it loses its power over our choices.

For effective prayer, then, all that we need to do is to stand in the fullness of our weakness, just as for a growing faith we need to stand next to people with great needs. It sounds simple, but it is not so. Both psychology and the gospel reveal a terrible flaw in human nature. It is not easy for us to come up with the negative realities about ourselves.

We have defense mechanisms that thrust away from our consciousness any images of ourselves that are unpleasant. Like the basketball player with the marvelous hands, we easily forget the thirty missed baskets. It results in a distorted self-image, and great difficulties in relating to other people—who are equally caught in these mechanisms.

When the celebrant invites us to enter into our sinfulness, it can easily happen that we have no particulars. We know we are sinners, but we cannot prove it. Edmund Burke called such knowledge-without-particulars a cloak of hypocrisy. For without the particulars, our confession of sinfulness is just words in

the mouth. Our hearts are not convinced, or disturbed. "Oh, Father, if there's one thing I am sure of, it's that I'm a sinner." But when any particular is suggested, "Oh, no, Father, I'm not contemptuous of anyone. I never judge them. I really love people." And so on. Somehow I have become a sinner without any sinful acts!

When someone starts to try to pray from weakness, he will find that the particulars are not easy to come by. His memory will serve up one or two minor items—ones where he feels rather justified, anyway—and his general sense of spiritual well-being remains strong. The Eucharist has to be reinterpreted as something other than the coming into his heart of Jesus' forgiving blood. It becomes a thanksgiving to God for how nicely He is bringing him along.

Here is the great enemy of spiritual growth: a sense of spiritual wealth. We can even feel invited by God to count over our spiritual goodies, and thank Him for them. In this way, as St. John of the Cross tells us, our good deeds act like mirrors, and we see only the self, the shiny, adorable self. "I am a loving, sensitive person." He urges us to focus on our weaknesses, and he assures us that they will be like windows, and the Lord will be seen through them.

But how to find a weakness, when our psyche has these hidden ways of burying them? That is the task of Christian prayer, to get around the defense mechanisms. For that purpose, brief prayer was found to be most useful.

Let us take the method St. Ignatius recommended for reaching the truth. It is a method that was not new. It was most traditional. In fact, it was the ordinary form of mental prayer through the centuries. In looking closely at his method, the examen, we will be seeing traditional spirituality in a detailed form.

Let us consider a typical day. When we awake, we tend to be rather peaceful. There are no strong antagonisms. Nobody is around yet. The negatives are buried deep. At breakfast,

perhaps, a word is spoken, and emotions are aroused. They approach the surface. They may even break through the surface, and I snap at someone. As the day's work begins, tensions increase. People impose upon me. By noon I am into the swing of things, quite absorbed in the minute-to-minute events. After supper things may start to settle down again. By nine or ten o'clock, the negatives are no longer near the surface.

When should I pray? The usual advice is: an extended period of thirty to forty-five minutes each morning. Or in the evening. Why at these times? Because that is when you will feel most yourself!

Remember the task of our prayer: to provide me with the negatives I need for effective prayer; to give me an honest picture of the self; to enable me to come readily into my own presence. If I come to prayer—any prayer, mental or vocal, the office, the Eucharist—if I come to this prayer realistically present to myself, I will be exalted. This will happen even if the prayer is very brief, even if it is ejaculatory! St. Ignatius affirmed that if a person is alert to his true weaknesses, he should expect "great vitiations" even in short prayers.

But how to become alert to my weaknesses? If I pray early in the morning, I am praying at a time when my weaknesses are far from my consciousness, buried deep. In the evening this is also true. It's like drilling for oil in that part of the field where the oil is nowhere near the surface. What purpose does such prayer serve? It may provide me with a few moments of peace before the day starts. But that is not what God wants. "Doesn't He want me to feel myself when I pray?" Of course. But the "yourself" He is wanting you to feel is the true self—the "yourself" that lives through the day.

St. Ignatius suggests that we must pray during the day when the negatives are near the surface—or even on the surface. That is when we can easily reap a rich harvest of negatives. But we do not have time for any long prayer during the day. Therefore he recommends that this daily prayer be very brief and very

frequent—as did Augustine and Chrysostom and the Desert Fathers.

How frequent? There's a story about St. Ignatius meeting a Jesuit one morning. He asked the man how often he had made his examen that day. The man replied, "Seven times." St. Ignatius responded, "Humph! Only seven times!" The examen was meant to be very frequent, and, of course, very brief.

Let us take an instance.

I may see myself as a person of deep faith. I notice that my prayer includes many assurances to God of my trust in Him and much listing of my many reasons for trusting. Some preacher says: "How little we trust Him!" I wonder: can this include me?

I take a phrase: "Do you expect victory?" The true believer expects victory. It is the atmosphere of the believer's consciousness. We may be behind 31-0 at the half. So what! The second half will be fascinating to watch as we come back to win. Surrounded by lions, the true believer is filled with God's assuring word, and he sings.

I use: "Do you expect victory?" as my ejaculation. It will be a quick path into the atmosphere of my consciousness.

Early in the morning, I feel good each time I use it. It reminds me of the great truths of the faith. By breakfast, though, it may seem less welcome. By noon, I realize that unless the blue Buick is back by two, utter disaster threatens. The ejaculation has become irrelevant. Survival is the issue. So the day goes. The ejaculation becomes a form of mockery, a friend no longer. By the evening God is back in His heaven, all is right with the world.

Through the examen I come to see the true self—that large part of me that was hidden from me. For that part of me, the gospel is terribly and simply irrelevant. For a huge part of my day, the atmosphere of my soul is identical with an unbeliever! God's word has no grip on me most of the time—only in the early morning and in the late evening: when there are no threats! In other words, I believe only when I do not have to.

In this new image of myself, I will be coming to the Eucharist as an unbeliever. It is the right place to be. With Jesus' flesh will come a share in his faith in the Father. He has purchased it for me. He is determined that the price he paid for it will not be wasted. He is at work within me. "Lord, help my unbelief." Now I am talking from the heart of the gospel. The Lord will hold this unbelieving son of His in His arms. "All will be well. Have I not promised. Even your unwillingness to believe is being bathed in the willingness of Jesus."

Unlove, of course, is the root area of negativity. It is our refusal to love that leads to our inability to believe. Were we to love as Christ did, we would be among friends only, very needy friends, and we would be anxiety-free. But unlove is even harder to locate than unfaith. We much more readily acknowledge our anxiety than we do our malice. We know some angry people, and we dread seeing ourselves like them.

When we are angry with someone, we bury it. Anger, though, is hard to bury—it's too hot. We transform it into something cooler: contempt. "I used to get so angry at her, but ever since I realized what a fool she was, she doesn't bother me any more." We change the word "contempt." It's still unacceptable to see ourselves contemptuous of anyone. We become "indifferent" toward that person. "Do I have to love everybody?" I become uncomfortable.

An ejaculation for unlove: "what if once again he's sitting opposite me at supper?" A sadness may surface. It's hatred. I would prefer to avoid him. I would prefer that he not be around. I want him out of my world. But God wants him close to Him. The face of my enemy is the ejaculation for unlove.

If I would prefer to feel positive, I could ask, "What if she is transferred suddenly to San Diego?" A pleasure comes. It is hatred. God identifies affectionately with her. He takes her as His other self. He does not want to be without her, apart from her. He wants to share His affection for her with me. The living God wants to talk to me about her.

What I may experience as I go through the day can be a surprise. My animosity may reveal itself to be massive, self-justifying, in possession of my soul. My reluctance to love may be seen in its full strength. The contrast between my will and His will may become terribly clear.

Then I can enter into the Eucharist effectively. "Lord, here is unlove come into Your presence." That vision of the self that comes from the examen can undermine the false idol of myself as a basically good person needing just a delicate touch here or there. If I come to the Lord seeking a low-strength pill because I feel that's all I need, He can give me only a low-strength pill. But if I see my real neediness, I will be asking for more—a transfusion. "I am a living need before You, the loveless in the presence of Love." I may hear Him express His desire to give me more than a transfusion. "You need a new heart!" But to hear those words I would have to be willing to see myself during my day treating others with my heart of rock, ruthless in my condemning, judging, contempt, and resentment. That is painful. Any sense that I am worth something is undermined. The power to continue looking comes only from hearing the Lord's words as He raises me up. "I love you anyway. Fear not." What using the examen brings us to see is a powerful antagonism—so powerful that it appears more than human. It seems to be stronger than we are, irremovable in its grip on us. For that reason, in Christian tradition, it has received the title "devil". We appear to be possessed by a force greater than ourselves.

Let's use an image. I walk around with a sharp knife in my pocket. At table, one of the brothers makes a very unfair remark to me. I take out the knife and plunge it into my own shoulder. He keeps on, and I keep hearing him and watching him and stabbing myself.

The Lord appears. "Look at what you are doing to yourself!" I snap back—still looking at my enemy—"What am I supposed to do when he says things like that? Two evils are taking place.

My enemy is being unfair to me, and I am giving way to resentment. My inner world is growing dark, expelling all joy. The Lord is trying to get me to look at what is happening *within* me, but I am wanting to talk to Him about the unfairness of my enemy.

If I follow His lead, I will be introduced to a much more savage enemy. I will see an inner world in torment, myself inflicting wounds on myself. I will get a good look at what is behind injustice and war—a suicidal pattern of self-destruction at work within me. It will be frightening to see. That is the path of the examen.

One of the Desert Fathers, the Abba Macarius, said, "If you keep on remembering the evils that men do to you, you will lose the power that comes from remembering God. But if you remember the evils that the devils do to you, you will become invulnerable."

Jesus leads me to focus on what this devil is doing to me. It is not the words of the enemy which are so catastrophic. It is my willingness to entertain resentment.

One day, Jesus was visiting two ladies. The one, Martha, worked in the kitchen to prepare the lunch, while the other, Mary, sat and chatted with Jesus outdoors.

As Martha worked away, a pleasant fellow entered and asked her, "What are you doing?" She replied, "Preparing lunch for us: Jesus is visiting."

"Where is Mary?"

"She is out chatting with Jesus."

"Isn't she going to help at all?"

"I suppose not."

"Didn't she do this the last time?"

So, Martha roars out the door and strikes back. "Look at her, Lord, not helping a bit."

"Martha, Martha. *You* are upset and anxious."

Jesus calls Martha to notice the disarray taking place within her own soul.

"What am I supposed to do when she treats me so poorly?"

But if she is willing to look, she will see another Martha, in the grip of a demon of anger, in need of the Lord's power to deliver her. In the course of seeing herself honestly there comes a new awareness of God. I stand before Him filled with rage and righteousness. But He is the only foundation of my life. I have no rights in His presence. My birth was unmerited, as are my eyes. Had I not His loving gift of ears or a mind, would my rights be of any importance to me. He could have not bothered. But He did. He blessed and blesses me each day with breath, and lungs, legs, and a nose, and a free will as a crown. It is all intended for one moment: for me to welcome forgiving love into my life. That is the gift of Himself for which He made me. The greatest gift He can give me is forgiving love—it is His personality at its most divine. It is the "becoming like to God," the "becoming God," that the Fathers of the Church speak of.

I stand here in His presence heaped high with His precious gifts, and filled with anger. I am not angry at being starved. Nor am I angry at the fact that children are starving in a world of abundant food.

Fortunately for us and for her, Martha did not pray as we so often pray. She must have been tempted to enter the Lord's presence leaving her angry self, the bad Martha, behind in the kitchen. Smiling, "Now, if you two would like to continue your conversation in the dining room, everything is ready."

Jesus could have said nothing. But she is very honest. Her anger is in her mouth, not just in her heart. The anger is not directed only at Mary. Jesus, too is attacked. "Lord, don't you care...."

In a brief moment, Martha sees herself and the Lord anew. It is not a long prayer, but it is an honest one, and it receives its reward. "Martha, Martha." His strong affection for us—the incredible reality, too good for us ever to be quite at home with in this life—His affection enables us to forgive.

"I forgave you. Should you not also have forgiven your sister?"

"But, seven times, Lord?"

"Seventy times seven—as I forgive you."

Once Jesus was speaking to a Pharisee at supper, and he used a parable to explain the new wine He was offering the world. It centers on the question of how to become a person who loves much, for it is in loving much that we fulfill the New Law. How do we get close to the perfect fulfillment of the Law?

Jesus introduces us to a character in the parable who does indeed love much, and describes how she got there. "She was forgiven much." That's the step that leads to the highest intimacy with God, to the very peak of Christian perfection. You must experience being forgiven many times.

It's all very odd. Imagine poor Simon the Pharisee as he hears this. He has been trying hard to keep the Law, using the old skins and the old wine. Now Jesus calls his attention to a rare experience in Simon's life, those moments when he was forgiven. Those moments must become common, everyday. If I am forgiven little, I will love little. If I am forgiven much, I will love much.

Jesus invites Simon to take a fresh look at himself. That perfection he has been striving for is available to him. But it demands a new look. Simon must find that part of himself which needs endless forgiving. There are deeds in Simon's life that need Jesus' blood for their undoing. There is a self so filled with self-love and pride that it demands that others worship. It will even murder. "He who hates his brother is a murderer." It will even murder God Himself.

Unless I look honestly at that depth of malice within me, the much greater power of God's love for me will not grip me either.

Jesus calls us to repentance, to change our way of thinking. It is a call to put our trust in ruthless honesty rather than in our prayer-efforts. It is an invitation to find within myself the reason why my brother is starving, why my sister goes her way unforgiven by me. I am invited to see in the way I choose to live the very patterns of selfishness that led to Jesus' death.

I need methods not to console me. Nor to help me see myself acceptable, in a good light. Consolation is God's doing, not ours. I need methods to help me see myself realistically, to see where I block and obstruct the "great things God is wishing to accomplish in me."

CHAPTER ELEVEN TRUE MYSTICISM

There is a way of imagining union with God that is not the devil's own path with its illusions. I see myself as perfect, my heart beating in perfect rhythm with God's own heart. I see myself being totally absorbed in God's will. I imagine my being totally in the grip of the Holy Spirit. I imagine myself feeling the tremendous mystical ecstasies of the Holy Trinity within during my prayer, and I am in such ecstasies in this movement.

There is a kernel of truth in this movement, a glimpse of the self. A Spirit has indeed been let loose upon the world. The very energy of God was introduced as energy that was only thinly veiled when He created the world. That mighty act, before which scientists are in awe, was the work of His little finger as one of the early Fathers said.

What He offers to us now is that same energy He used when He raised Jesus from the dead. There is a force in the world that transcends all human energies. It will not make us invincible, it will not make us physically indestructible, or even a bit more muscular. It will not make us move with the speed of light. All these could be measured and brought to a halting halt.

What then will it do? It will change our hearts. But this change will not be measurable to us. We will not see it. We will not be conscious of our new being. The great power will break us