

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE DISSATISFACTION OF GOD; THE DESIRES OF GOD

God desires to introduce me to a person I do not know: a "myself" with a much deeper faith than the faith I now have, a "myself" far more sensitive to other people than I am, and far happier.

I defend myself against this image. I spend much of my psychic energy in guaranteeing that I see myself in a positive light. I must see myself as okay, no matter what the facts may be. This is a universal temptation, and it leads to inertia. The promises are uttered within me precisely to shake this inertia. It is this sense of "all's well" that most frustrates God's actions within me. I make God into a support for my self-esteem, into an approval of my status-quo. Not that I see it this way, no. I seem aware of the need to grow. But it's all on the surface. God's call to grow touches only surface spots. I see no need for radical conversion. After all, basically, "I'm doing okay."

Into that mood God is struggling to enter. "You could be really believing, and it would be worlds apart from what you are now. You could be so much more sensitive to others."

So it happens that the promises of God produce in me, whenever they take root, a sadness, a sadness at being so far from living in the same world as these images. The promises light up my darkness. As the light comes, we see resentments



and anger where there could be affection, great anxiety where there could be assurance. This leads to what St. Bernard calls a salutary sadness. A gap begins to open between where I am and where I could be. I begin to feel dissatisfaction with where I am. My sense of spiritual well-being begins to crumble. It is very unpleasant. I lose my standing before the Lord. It doesn't feel good, at all.

It is only natural that we should seek to avoid this saddening, this dissatisfaction. Since it is the automatic result of coming to believe the promises, our defense against the sadness takes the form of a defense against the promises. If believing the promises has this negative effect, I use nonbelief to keep myself from experiencing it. This nonbelieving takes a variety of forms, but it is, fundamentally, a refusal to believe the promises. I cannot afford to hear God speak His promise because it will depress me. My sense of self-esteem will be shattered. From being reasonably satisfied, I will become dissatisfied. I will feel a certain desire not to be where I am. Being me will lose some of the glow.

I am tempted to see myself as already the new creation. I picture myself as having already put on the Lord Jesus, with just a few improvements to work on. Not so the saints! They see themselves as fundamentally apart from where they could be, as insensitive and not really believing, not really willing to hand their lives over to anybody. It is not the saints who see themselves as loving people, as a—for the most part—finished work of God. No. They expose themselves to God's word. "What if, at best, I am an unprofitable servant!" "What if I have stayed on the surface of faith, and have feared to enter in, on the surface of love. Where it is largely words—words that deceive me, delude me, and conceal the truth from me." "What if I am really in a state of self-satisfaction, inertia, paralysis."

To encounter God, at any moment in my life, is always to encounter one who makes promises, who calls my attention to the future, to what I could be, and who, by doing this, fills me with dissatisfaction. It arouses in my heart a complaint. I see

with sadness my own poverty, dullness, and imperfection. By getting me to taste the sweetness of His dreams for me, the sweetness of what my life could be, I experience the staleness of what it is.

"How sad that I commit myself to the gospel so halfheartedly!" "The person God had in mind when He chose to create me: how unaware I am of it all, how reluctant I am to become that new me."

Now this is not just God's way of dealing with beginners, so that there comes a stage in spiritual growth where dissatisfaction disappears. Just the reverse is true. As we draw nearer to God and to that being-clothed-with-Jesus that He created us for, our dissatisfaction grows. We become more and more free to look at ourselves honestly and to see the vast areas of unfaith, insensitivity, and unhappiness within us: we become more and more willing to hear God's promises. We see ever more clearly what true faith is, and how far we are from it, what true love is and how feeble is its grasp on us. And we see with greater astonishment God's desire to fill our vacuum with Jesus' faith and His love. The determination that God has, His total absorption in bringing about this transformation in our inner life—that comes to occupy all our attention.

The two combine: the unlikelihood, as I look at myself honestly, that I will ever come to believe and love other than superficially, and the bold determination of God's will-act to transform me into Jesus, to fill my heart with a confidence in the Father like to Jesus' own, and a sensitivity to my brothers and sisters like to Jesus' own.

These two are the focus of the spiritual consciousness of the believer. The believer lets God make him aware of how powerfully he is obstructing "the great things God wishes to accomplish in him" (St. Ignatius to Francis Borgia).<sup>3</sup>

God shares with me His dissatisfaction. By enabling me to share what He sees about me—where I am and where I could be—God gets me to enter into a share of His dissatisfaction. If I



persist in a false self-image, I leave God all alone as He focuses on me. I may even pray, and feel a sense of God's presence. Still God is alone, His will blocked out. I may be going to prayer in order to strengthen my sense of self, my sense of spiritual well-being, rather than to come into touch with the living God. My prayer may be very consoling, even though I never let Him speak. The consolation comes not from Him, but from a sense of well-being.

God can be seen and felt as a silent, reassuring presence, rather than as He really is—a word, a person determined to transform me, quite dissatisfied with the little I allow Him to do, quite set on bringing into my life a far larger share of faith and love.

If, then, I experience a dissatisfaction with my spiritual state, that is a spirit, a mood whose origin is the Lord.

Along with this dissatisfaction with where I am, the promise of the Lord will fill me with desire to be where I could be. Once I taste what the experience of the believer is actually like, I desire to be there. God's promising is our letting Him project into our imagination what I could be like, and it acts as a pre-taste; it fills us with a longing to be there. The shallows we dwell in are revealed in their true colors. I desire to be faith-filled, at least once before I die. I wish that love would at last have its way in me.

Perhaps this takes the form of moments when such a life is glimpsed as really possible, an ejaculatory-type prayer. More often than not I am in the grip of the need to be "realistic," and I see any such imagining of myself as a gospel believer as a pure fancy. Not only is it seen as impossible, but it can bring to mind past experiences in which I was swept up, and I recall the pain of returning to reality.

But those momentary glimpses, when for a few seconds we reach out to what God has in mind for us—these moments are from the Lord. It is His promise acting within us as a seed, stirring the soil, getting things moving. "Put on the Lord Jesus!"

What if that is where He is leading me: toward being loving as Jesus was . . . toward a deep-rooted, unshakable trust in the Father such as Jesus had . . . toward an inability to doubt. What if the Father sees that as my life, as my real future, a future quite realistic because of His loving determination that it be so.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE ROLE OF DESPAIR IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The despair I feel, the dissatisfaction I feel as I honestly face the fact that I am where I am and where I would be—these are divine. They are a share in God's experience as He grows in love. It is like a mother gazing at her crawling infant. First she already sees the child walking, and with the child so weak, and slow in bringing that walking into the present, and interested the child does not move in that future, and consoles the child and encourages it to move toward walking, etc. etc. God doesn't wish us to waste in despair, and He struggles to get us to that full vision and His love. His Spirit moves within us, drawing us toward that new way of being, clothing that new way of living with a reality, saving us up from the feeling of inevitable frustration. He is saving us up from it by enabling us to believe in it as real.

When reality is so weak, when we are so weak, we do not have an experience of love. But it is with God. His laughter at our little failures and our weakness is not a new love, and He is filled with love. This is the foundation of His way of dealing with us just as He dealt with David with his own royal clothing until David got to look like Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:24-25). It is God clothing us in His armor, in His beloved, in faith and in love, until we become like Him.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ROLE OF DESPAIR IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The desire I feel, the dissatisfaction I feel as I honestly face the vast gap between where I am and where I could be—these are divine. They are a share in God's experience as He gazes at me.

It is like a mother gazing at her crawling infant. Just as she already sees the child walking, and wills the child to walk, and acts to bring that walking into the present, and interests the child more and more in that future, and consoles the child and encourages it to move toward walking, so, too, God deals with us. He wants us to grow, and He struggles to get us to share His vision and His task. His Spirit moves within us, drawing us toward the new way of living, clothing that new way of living with a reality, raising us up from the feeling of inevitable frustration. He enables us to focus on it by enabling us to believe in it as real.

When we imagine something most attractive that we do not have, we experience desire. So it is with God. He imagines us faith-filled and deeply sensitive to others' needs, and He is filled with desire. This desire is the foundation of His way of dealing with us. Just as Jonathan clothed David with his own royal clothing until David got to look like Jonathan (1 Sam 18:2-4), so, too, God clothes us in His armor, in His Beloved, in faith and in love, until we become like Him.



Since, once we let God's promises come alive, it leads to dissatisfaction, we try not to let those promises get a start. At the same moment when we are lifted by a sight of a possible new way of living, we move away from it: "Let's be realistic."

The self gathers its defenses around it. We minimize the value of the promises. "All that really means is . . ." and we end up with some image of ourselves just a bit more loving than we are, a quite believable future. The Desert Fathers identified this mood as diabolical. Partially because the mood, or attitude, is so powerful, it seemed to them more than human. "He does not really have that in mind for me." This enables us to ignore His word in the name of common sense. "I am no saint." Under a cloak of humility, we turn away from God's word; we take His promise with a grain of salt. We push Him and His will to transform us—which can seem so fairy-story-like—into the periphery of our life. It becomes translated into "Do your best." The Gospel is stifled.

We fear to brush up against His determination, His word. We prefer His silence. Becoming aware of His desires is being impelled toward this unreal future, a future that was realized in the lives of the saints—and we can read about it—but that has no realistic hold in our world.

Imagine a mother at the bedside of her badly injured son. All her will is into healing him. Or a doctor, a close friend, bending over you by the roadside where you were thrown from a car, impelled by an image of you—healed. When God saw that the one He loved was sick, He made Himself a doctor, out of intense desire. It can frighten us, to be stirred toward the future. It can appear cruel—as April is, in Eliot's poem, "the cruellest month"—drawing us out of our slumbers, our sense of spiritual well-being, into the unknown future of a much fuller confidence in God, and a much deeper awareness of others' needs.

But what if the seeds of His promises do take root. We will then be flooded with desire. This desire will lead to action. We will feel called upon to make this vision real in our lives. We will

arouse ourselves to generous efforts to realize ourselves as believers. We will see a need for courage in overcoming our failings, our falling-short, our deep-rooted weaknesses.

We will set out on a path of reform. Frequently it begins in a greater faithfulness to our prayer periods. We add some discipline, and an effort to be nice to people who turn us off. This tendency of desire—that it leads to action—is very visible at retreat times, and often it takes the forms mentioned. The person can leave the retreat happy to be launched on the path of conversion: a bit anxious about how it will go, and especially whether it will survive the post-retreat let-down, but determined.

And it usually does not survive the let-down. It's such a common occurrence: to be with someone who has had an unusual retreat experience, as he returns to earth. Actually the efforts are doomed from the start. The focus is in the wrong place, on the wrong person. The worst thing that could happen would be if I did see myself succeed and become more faith-filled, more prayerful, more disciplined, and more friendly with those I don't like. That would put me back in that state of inertia where God's ever-present promising cannot penetrate. I would be again needing to hear Him, and largely unaware of that need. To arrive at that sense of spiritual well-being where I see myself as fundamentally sound, basically on track and moving forward—to get such a self-image, I have to do a lot of falsifying, a lot of not letting much contrary data come into view.

A friend recently told me of an experience in a class on debating. He was to share the podium with a student he despised. He had, as usually, been angered by the other's talk, but he felt he had himself well under control, and was happy that he had not lost his temper. It was videotaped. When he watched the videotape, what he saw was a very angry self—not only very angry, but quite obviously angry. What he had hidden from himself and thought he had concealed from others was known to everyone.



But we can kill such data. We can bury them. We can see ourselves as loving people no matter what the facts may be. This tendency, as I mentioned, returns us to that worst state of all, inertia and self-satisfaction, a mood most difficult for God to deal with.

But what happens if we admit the truth? If we allow the facts to surface? We start to see instances of failure. In relation to this person I see my hostility. My jealousy of those two! My contempt for that one! My persistent judgment on so many! How easily resentment gets its teeth into me! How commonly in my dealings with people I am carrying heavy baggage from past experiences.

If my courage grows, and I can become even more honest, I will find abundant data to show a pervasive selfishness in my relating to almost anybody. I will begin to see myself as fundamentally selfish. And, to all appearances, incurably so. I will come to see that I have no real love in me, that the love-command is beyond me.

The same will happen in the faith area. If I allow the real depth of my anxiety to be revealed, I will see that I keep my life quite firmly, quite carefully in hand, that I hand over very little to the Lord, that when the vital choices are made, I invariably and instinctively choose to take no chances, to play it safe. I will see myself as incapable of trust, filled with deep anxieties, crippled by them, fearful of reality.

This seeing myself as falling short of real love and real faith usually leads to renewed efforts. I pick myself up from the floor and courageously steel myself to get back on track.

This may happen a few times more before I give up, or it may go on and on. For years I may lock myself into a pattern of spiritual life that gradually takes its toll, weakens me, depresses me, and leaves me with one consolation, "at least I can say I tried." My defense on judgment day, "I did my best; what more could God ask?"

This pattern is one we are comfortable with, painful though

it is. The pain is a dull pain. The pattern is dishonest.

But I may be able to break the pattern and let the truth in: I am not a loving person. I do not believe very deeply in the Lord's care. This will bring me into a state of despair.

The filling up with despair in the midst of our massive efforts is a necessary stage even though it is not God's doing, but our own. I feel: "What's the use of all this effort? It has not delivered—exactly as I felt when I launched myself on this path. I was a happy person before I got caught up in the promises of God. They are unrealizable. How many more times will this happen before I learn to settle for realistic goals."

A temptation comes, to return to a life apart from imagining the great things God wishes to accomplish in me. At the same time, another voice is heard, the voice of the Lord: "Ask and you shall receive!"

We crucify ourselves by placing upon ourselves the task of conversion. It is a gift. God is not looking to us to transform our affections, to make ourselves sensitive, to increase our faith. It is all His work, and it enters our life by a different path, a gift path. It is all for the asking. The fulfillment of God's promises in us takes place if we ask for it to happen. The effort path with its focus on the self leads to despair.

It is much easier, unfortunately, to believe that God has imposed a heavy burden on us: the task of growing into the Gospel. It is impossible to believe that all is gift, that all is for the asking, yet that is what God invites us to believe. It is so incredible, so much against common sense, so contrary to human wisdom, that we do not believe it until we experience a despair about ourselves. It is only when we have tried and tried, and failed and failed, that we can hear the Lord's words suggesting that there is another way. It is only because we are without any reasonable way out that we entertain the possibility that Jesus meant what He said: ask!

In a way, it is the cruelest verse in the Gospel: Ask and you shall receive. It reveals to us that our misery and our cross comes



from our unbelief, our refusal to take God seriously. Yet at the same time that it condemns us for our imbedded self-reliance, it is the good news of deliverance. It confronts us with the spectacularly good God proclaimed by Jesus. It summons us to the central act of faith, which were we not to believe, all other believing becomes useless.

All of God's moving in us reaches its goal at that moment when we hear His invitation to ask. For that were we given ears. Through His promising, He hopes to lead us, through desire and dissatisfaction, not to a program of massive self-improvement, but to an asking filled with expectation. It is in the asking that our focus becomes centered on reality, the reality of God's great power to transform us, and His intense desire to do so. We find ourselves at the core of the Gospel.

Before going into more detail on the specifics of asking, I would like to take two concrete examples of the way God's promising works within us.