

the
VIRTUES
OF HOLINESS

The Basics of Spiritual Struggle

Copyright (c) Midwest Theological Forum
More Information Available at
www.theologicalforum.org

Juan Luis Lorda

 Scepter

Contents



FOREWORD vii

INTRODUCTION ix

PART I VIRTUES 1

1. The Sense of the Presence of God 3
2. Self-Knowledge 9
3. The Ascetical Struggle 13
4. Fortitude 17
5. Detachment 22
6. Chastity 27
7. Humility 33
8. Simplicity 39
9. Cheerfulness 44
10. Prudence 49
11. Integrity 54
12. Living for Others 60
13. Work 65

14. Identification with Christ 72

15. Love of God 79

16. Prayer 86

17. The Eucharist 93

18. The Sense of Sin 101

19. Confession 110

20. Death and Life 117

21. Love for the Church 125

22. Mary, the Mother of God 132

Copyright (c) Midwest Theological Forum
More Information Available at
www.theologicalforum.org

1.



The Sense of the Presence of God

One of the most beautiful incidents in the Acts of the Apostles is St. Paul's address to the Athenians. After preaching for several days around the town, he was invited to explain his teachings in the Areopagus, where citizens of that cultured city liked to gather to converse. There, using the resources of classical rhetoric, which he knew well, Paul began a marvelous discourse, speaking first of what God is and then going on to speak of the Redemption through Jesus Christ. His address was not successful. The Athenians mocked him when they heard him speak of the resurrection of the dead. He only obtained a few conversions (Acts 17:16–34).

The skeptical Athenians could not accept the idea that Christ had been able to rise from the dead. But regarding even the first part of the address, there were great differences despite apparent agreement. This is how Paul speaks about God: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth . . . gives to all men life and breath. . . . And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth . . . that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each of us."

In this admirable summary, Paul presents three essential elements of Christian theology about God. God created all things and is, therefore, Lord of all; God created man for himself, so that he could know and love him; to encounter God is possible because “he is not far from each of us.”

One finds this same idea many centuries earlier in another beautiful discourse, in which Moses reminds the people of the great care that God had shown for them. “What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” (Deut 4:7).

God is much nearer for us than for those Greek listeners of St. Paul, whose ideas about God were rather confused. We Christians know that the world exists because God wishes it, not only wished it at the first moment, but wishes it now. The world depends at every moment on the divine will. Therefore God is behind everything that exists. Fundamental to the existence of each thing is the activity of God, who wants that thing to be.

This is the theological foundation of the presence of God. God is behind the activity of things and therefore behind historical events. Nothing happens that was not foreseen or willed by God. The world is not governed by blind fate but by the design of an intelligent being, infinitely powerful and good. Christian tradition calls this plan of God “Divine Providence.”

These two convictions, that God is present in all things (divine omnipresence) and that God is behind all events (divine providence), give Christians a special, new way of being in the world.

The world is not dominated by dark, evil forces, as the most important ancient civilizations thought. It is something good that has come from the hands of a good God and shows his greatness. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). In this

world, man can meet God, because “ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20).

These convictions of faith should be pervasive in the conduct of the Christian. If our aim is to get to know God with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with all our strength, we should become accustomed to seeing him behind whatever is and happens. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

It is not necessary to seek special times or places. It is enough to want to speak with him. “The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth” (Ps 144:18). But it requires a certain maturity to have this sense of the presence of God.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition has understood the sense of the presence of God in two ways: first, seeing God behind his creatures; second, knowing oneself to be a creature of God and therefore in God's presence. Psalm 139 expresses this in an eminent way: “O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me! Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. . . . Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me” (Ps 139:1–10).

Christian iconography sometimes expresses this by representing God as an all-seeing eye. But that look is not accusing: it is the look of a Father affectionately observing

what his children are doing. If we accustom ourselves to the idea that God is at our side, we will find it easy to speak with him during the day and our activity will be saturated with his presence.

Another consideration also can help: God is in things and in events. St. John of the Cross says creatures are “like a trace of the footsteps of God” (*Spiritual Canticle*, 5:3). It is easy to see God in the marvels of nature, the vast panoramas, the harmonies of color of the sky and the earth, the serenity of the forests, the clamor of storms, the immensity of the oceans. But we must see him also in the most ordinary realities, the ordinary circumstances of life. As if wishing to balance the lyricism of her fellow Carmelite, St. John, St. Teresa reminds us that “the Lord also walks among the pots and pans” (*Foundations*, 5:8). It is up to us to find him there. “He is not far,” St. Augustine says, “Love and he will come near you, love and he will live in you” (*Sermon*, 21).

This sense of the presence of God is the first step in asceticism. A close relationship with him allows us to advance step by step on the path that leads to loving him with all our strength. But it is not enough merely to say, “I want to live in the presence of God.” We must create a habit by repeated acts, returning many times to fundamental convictions: God sees me; God is behind all things and events.

The practical problem of keeping these things in mind was considered by the early Christians, meditating on our Lord’s saying, “that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Lk 18:1). How is it possible continually to recall God when we are so easily distracted? The solution they found—still valid today—was the frequent recitation of short prayers—petitions, exclamations, and acts of prayer that they called ejaculations or aspirations.

St. Augustine tells us that in his day this was already an old tradition among the Egyptian hermits. Later, it extended

throughout all of Eastern Christianity, and later throughout the West. The Eastern monks have a strong affection for this practice, which they have developed and made a basic point of their spirituality. So, for example, from them come the custom of repeating “Christ have mercy on us, Lord have mercy on us, Christ have mercy on us,” the passage from the liturgy of Good Friday (*Hagios o Theos*) translated in the West as “Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Immortal One, free us O Lord from all evil,” and the now traditional “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.”

Useful as it is to repeat very simple prayers, we don't have to repeat prayers of others. We can use thoughts such as: Lord, help me! Lord, give me more faith! Lord, increase my charity! Lord, make me faithful to you! We must deal with God like children. “In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:7–8).

At times, aspirations can be joined to small actions including very ordinary ones. In some places it was said that an egg should be boiled for the time it took to say two Our Fathers. In this way the faith penetrated the details of life. We can do something similar, making entering or leaving our home, beginning or ending work, or eating meals occasions for aspirations. Getting up in the morning and going to bed at night are suitable moments. Any task that is somewhat mechanical or repetitive can be an occasion for praying aspirations.

The effort to attain a sense of the presence of God produces an interesting psychological effect: one's interior monologue is transformed into a dialogue with God. The effect is splendid. For, while the monologue tends to deform reality by exaggerating aspects favorable to us and obscuring those which show our weaknesses, the dialogue with God makes our spirit crystal-clear and transparent, so that the best that