

THE PRECAUTIONS - 3

2. *It should be noted, then, that all the harm the soul receives is born of its enemies, mentioned above: the world, the devil, and the flesh. The world is the enemy least difficult to conquer; the devil is the hardest to understand; but the flesh is the most tenacious, and its attacks continue as long as the old self lasts.*

The World

St. John affirms that *the world is the enemy least difficult to conquer*, because the things in the world are outside of us and they cannot constantly disturb us as a cancerous cell does in a human organism. Outside things can harm us only when we want to possess them or if we have become attached to them or become victims to their fascination. St. John affirms: “all the wealth and glory of creation compared with the wealth that is God is utter poverty and misery in the Lord’s sight” (*Ascent I,4,7b*). God created this beautiful world to enjoy its fruits and goodness. We must know in this context that every evil is a misplaced good and therefore, not much harm can accrue to our soul by the world. He affirms as follows: “Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within that cause the damage when set on these things” (*Ascent I,3,iv*).

Speaking about the ‘world’ and the things of the world, the assumption that we cannot be happy without them and that we consider them so precious, is false. The fact is that there is not a single day in our life when we have everything to keep us happy always and all through. Momentarily we may be happy with one thing or the other, but we cannot have lasting happiness with the things of this world. Think of that for a minute. The reason why we are unhappy is because we are focusing on what we do not have rather-than on what we have right now. However, becoming aware of all that God has given us should make us happy, for example, family, friends, health, our community, Sunshine, water, air, beauty of nature, mountains, valley etc.

In St. John’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel* book Three, Chapters 19, 22, 25,28,31 and 41 he describes the “harm” that is caused to a soul when the will directs the emotion of joy to objects of the world other than God. He establishes six categories of “objects or goods” (*Ascent III,17,ii*) in which a person can actively rejoice: Temporal (wealth, status, position, family etc.); natural (endowments of both body and spirit such as physical grace and beauty, intelligence, discretion...); sensory (all objects

pertaining to the exterior and interior sense faculties...) moral (virtue, works of mercy, observance of God’s law, urbanity, good manners etc.); supernatural (extraordinary gifts of God exceeding one’s natural faculties and powers, such as charismatic gifts described by St. Paul (I Cor 12. 4-11), and spiritual (good which help persons grow in their relationship with God, such as religious statues and paintings, places of prayer, ceremonies, devotions, sermons etc. In all these objects and goods, most importantly the temporal, natural and sensory can be considered belonging to the world.

He also carefully explains what he means by rejoicing in objects. He defines the emotion of joy as “satisfaction of the will with esteem for an object it considers fitting” (*Ascent* III, 17.i). Normally we rejoice in what is valuable and satisfying to us. One such joy, for example is the delight arising spontaneously within us when we experience the goodness of creation, such as, a beautiful sunset or a newborn infant. John calls this “passive joy” because the will “has no power either to possess this joy or not to possess it. It is simply there, arising in the presence of a satisfying object without the person necessarily understanding the object itself.

John excludes passive joy from his consideration of the will because it is spontaneous and not under will’s conscious control. Instead he concentrates in *Ascent* Book III on active joy which is deliberate and voluntary. This is what hinders a soul to coming closer to God. John strongly recommends that attachment to the things of this world weakens our relationship with God. Despite the things of this world being outside of us, they can cause a great deal of damage to the soul. According to St. John, “the beauty of creatures compared with the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness” (*Ascent* I, 4,iv). Those who are attached to the things of this world are called little ones because they become as little as the things they love (cfr. *Ascent* I,4 viii).

The Devil

The ‘devil’ we know, is evil being, who hides behind everything to delude us and literally does not really manifest his existence. The moment someone says, ‘devil does not exist’, that is moment he becomes triumphant and strong. Devil’s triumph is based on falsity and hiding his own identity and making people believe in hypocrisy. This is an enemy that cannot be easily conquered. Many have become the victims of devil’s power, thinking that he does not exist. Great saints have elaborated on how devil can deceive humans through his crafty actions that underly many of our perceptions we do not give much attention to. Our Lord Jesus Christ was tempted in the desert three times and he vanquished the devil and his evil designs, utterly overcoming those malicious

temptations. St. John is genuinely concerned about the power of the devil in distracting and misleading the souls on their path to God experience.

The devil always sees opportunities to tempt the soul on its journey towards God. “The devil considers that it is worth noting that, since he accomplishes more through a little harm caused in these souls than by great damage effected in many others...” (*Flame* III,64). “The devil sees every high thing, says Job [Jb. 41:25], that is, every spiritual height of souls in order to combat them.” (*Flame* III,64b). We can be sure from this text that the devil always acts in a subtle way and deceives that we understand not. But the devil fears a soul close to God. “The devil fears a soul united to God as he does God himself” (*Sayings* 126). St. John himself suffered violent attacks by the devil on various occasions. The weapon against the evil one is constant prayer and faith in God. The occasions in our communities for the works of the devil are innumerable. The devil transforms himself into an angel of light for the sake of deception (*Ascent* III,37,i). Crafty as he is, he will disguise himself, to catch us off guard, in the very means we use to procure help for ourselves. That is why St. Paul calls us to put on the armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph 6.11) and the shield of faith to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Eph 6.16).

The Self

Understanding our ‘self’ needs courage. Often, we do not understand ourselves. To admit one’s fault and live in a humble way is the greatest task each one has in this world. Ultimately the one who conquers self has conquered everything else. The best knowledge we can have is to know ourselves. This knowledge also helps us understand that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Cor 12.10). Our weakness has opened heaven to us, because it has brought the mercy of God down to us and won us His love. Even sin has played an unwilling part in saving sinners, for the infinite mercy of God cannot be prevented from drawing the greatest good out of the greatest evil. God has left sin in the world in order that there may be forgiveness; not only the secret forgiveness by which He himself cleanses our souls, but the manifest forgiveness by which we have mercy on one another and so give expression to the fact that He is living, by His mercy, in our own hearts. When we acknowledge our sinfulness, we literally begin to know ourselves. When we overcome sin, we overcome ourselves. Overcoming ourselves we can fight all sorts of evil that can push us downward.

This is easily said than done. To overcome one’s self is to conquer everything else in life. It is the ego and our selfishness that blocks very often our journey towards God and our relationship with our neighbour.

Our life, as individual person and as members of a perplexed and struggling society, provokes us with the evidence that it must have meaning, a meaning without self-centeredness. Part of the meaning still escapes us. Yet our purpose in life is to discover this meaning and live according to it. We have therefore something to live for, something nobler than living for ourselves. The purpose of living is growing up, and becoming a person, is precisely the gradually increasing awareness of what that something is. This is a difficult task, for many reasons.

Overcoming ‘self’ requires rediscovering of one’s purpose and meaning in life. Discovering oneself is discovering God in ourselves. Ultimately it is not discovery of ourselves, rather discovering of Christ in us. It is the realization that “I live now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2.20). It is the mystery of recapitulation, the summing up all in Christ, its beginning, and its end. To find ourselves then is to find not only our poor, limited, perplexed souls, but to find the power of God that raised Christ from the dead and “built us together in Him unto a habitation of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2.22).

To overcome our ‘self’ the first step is to love ourselves. The best way to love ourselves is to love others, yet we cannot love others unless we love ourselves since it is written, “You shall love thy neighbour as yourself” (Mk 12.31). But if we love ourselves in the wrong way, we become incapable of loving anybody else, and we fail to discover our true self. And indeed, when we love ourselves wrongly, we hate ourselves; if we hate ourselves, we cannot help hating others. Yet there is a sense in which we must hate others and leave them to find God. Jesus invited “If any man come to me and hate not his father and his mother... yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14.26). As for this finding of God, we cannot even look for Him unless we have already found Him, and we cannot find Him unless he has first found us. We cannot begin to seek Him without a special gift of his grace, yet if we wait for grace to move us, before beginning to seek Him, we will probably never begin. This is how we begin to discover our “self” and then move towards conquering our ego and selfishness. This paves a path towards discovering our new self, casting out the old man and putting on the new man.

This truth never becomes clear if we assume that each one of us, individually, is the center of the universe. We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others. What is this loving ourselves mean? First, desiring to live, accepting life as a

very great gift and a great good, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give to others.

It is therefore of utmost importance that we consent to live not for ourselves but for others. When we do this, we will be able first to face and accept our own limitations. If we secretly adore ourselves, our own deficiencies will remain to torture us with an apparent defilement. But if we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be perfect humans. We begin to realize we are human like everyone else, that we all have weakness and deficiencies. It is because of them we need others and others need us. Each one making up in himself for the lack in another.

When we understand and act on how to tame our “self”, then a sense of freedom descends on us. We feel lighter and can carry out our daily tasks with ease and flexibility. When our connectedness to others dominates our beliefs, we don't need to defeat anyone, fight for what we identify as our rights, wage war, take advantage of others, or continually try to be someone we think of as a winner. Instead, seeing the unfurling of God in everyone means that there is no conflict, since we see ourselves in others and this is how we can discover and overcome our self.

*3. To gain complete mastery over any of these three enemies, one must vanquish all three of them; and in the **weakening of one**, the other two are weakened also. When all three are overpowered, no further war remains for the soul.*

When one evil is conquered many more evil tendencies are conquered in the process. As it is understood one good habit or virtue begets other many good virtues so, one evil thought leads to another evil thought and eventually to action. One evil action can lead to another bad action. It is true also then when one enemy of our soul is conquered the others are also weakened. Limitations and weaknesses are apparent part of human life. In this modern world it is truly a huge task for each one of us to overcome the distractions that surround us and can destroy us. Of course, some of such distractions can be good if used responsibly.

Conquering them (world, devil, self) one after another can guarantee integration and spiritual upliftment. When one is weakened the other two are easily weakened as well as St. John affirms “*no further war remains for the soul.*”

We can obviously notice that in entertaining these three enemies there is a false and momentary happiness we feel in self-satisfaction, but it always leads to sorrow because it narrows our vision and suffocates our spirit. True happiness is found in unselfish love, a love which increases in proportion as it is shared. There is no end to the sharing

of love, and therefore, the potential happiness of such love is without limit. Infinite sharing is the law of God's inner life. He has made the sharing of ourselves the law of our own being, so that it is in loving others that we best love ourselves. In disinterested activity we best fulfill our own capacities to act and to be. This is how we gain mastery over ourselves and on the world and devil. The point is not that we should become indifferent. Just the opposite. The holier we are, the more we will suffer due to the evil and sin in the world. But external evil only harms us to the degree we react baldly to it, by fear, worry, discouragement, sadness, giving up, rushing to apply hasty solutions that don't solve anything, judging, fostering bitterness, and resentment, refusing to forgive, and so on. Jesus says, "there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him" (Mk 7.14). Harm does not come to us from external circumstances, but from how we react to them interiorly. Harm is self-inflicted. But once our 'self' is conquered we become capable of conquering the world and the deceptions of the devil. Therefore, overcoming our selfishness and ego are a great remedy to wage war against the world and the devil.

Fr. Rudolf V. D'Souza OCD