

THE PRECAUTIONS

The precautions¹ of St. John of the Cross are principles that can help experience union with God quickly. Of course, this process takes its own time. When we are distracted and dissipated our goal becomes obscure and difficult to attain. St. John of the Cross helped his disciples attain God experience through these precautions because they direct our memory, intellect and will to the sole purpose of our existence, i.e., God. God experience does not just mean to be alone with God doing nothing; or being lifted in ecstasy; rather it signifies a paradigm shift in one’s life of selfishness to selflessness.

In our daily lives the ability to remain untouched by evil is not acquired all at once. It is the fruit of a lifelong process of self-conquest and grace that makes us grow in the theological virtues. It is an aspect of spiritual maturity, more a gift from God than the result of our efforts. But this gift will be given to us more quickly and surely, the more we strive for it, desire it, and try to practice the attitudes described in the precautions, that is, rooting ourselves in God through faith and prayer; not blaming people and things around us for what isn’t going well in our lives and stop seeing ourselves as victims; resolutely shouldering responsibilities and accepting our lives as they are; and using our present capacity for believing, hoping and loving to the fullest extent at every moment. That is what the precautions help us to attain.

INTRODUCTION

St. John of the Cross being the spiritual director especially of cloistered nuns, wrote the Precautions for the nuns in Beas while he lived at El Calvario (1578-79), after he had escaped from prison in Toledo. These precautions were the outcome of his spiritual talks and spiritual direction to nuns at Avila and made a huge spiritual impact among the Carmelite friars and nuns in all the monasteries. Consequently, they later made copies of these and distributed them to other convents and monasteries for reading and learning more about how to attain perfection quickly.

The condensed character and objective in the precautions are found elaborated in his major and minor works. The precautions are a set of principles for a life of prayer and union with God exclusively meant for those who dedicated their entire lives to God.

¹ *The original text of the precautions is in italics*

The spirit of the precautions can help a soul quickly to come in the presence of God and experience His deep love and grace.

Prayer and Precautions

We have seen and heard the word “caution” quite often in our lives. Caution is a reminder to protect oneself from impending dangers. Mountain hikers, trekkers, bicycle riders, car drivers, swimmers etc. are cautioned of the imminent dangers involved on their course of action through sign boards and other reminders. We notice the word ‘caution’ in regular construction sites too warning that there could be imminent danger present in the area. What is then a ‘precaution?’ it is safeguard, protection, security from falling away and hurting oneself.

When you want to meet your friend with whom you had no contact whatsoever for a long period of time would you experience a bit of fear or anxiety and would be cautious when the moment draws near to meet him? Similar experience would be when you plan to play a game if you have not played it for a long stretch of time, you will be cautious while playing. You think of riding a vehicle without getting in touch with the techniques, if you are not cautious you would put your life in danger. For a long period of time you have not worked, and you would like to begin now, certainly you would be cautious about your body, your back, and your hands and legs. The same would happen if you neglected prayer and would want to begin now. To begin again prayer and virtuous life that sustains our soul, requires a sort of precautions that can gear up at perfecting the approach to God.

When we speak of prayer and its impact on our life, it is always good to be aware that “prayer” as any other activity, requires exercise, practice, effort, diligence and co-operation with the grace of God, in order that we may reap rich harvest for our life. Prayer is a kind of experience that enhances our life, work, health, concentration, relationship etc. Prayer changes us strengthening to face multiple and complex realities of life. But prayer cannot just be prayer unless its effects are translated in our daily life as Jesus affirmed: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mat 7.21). And in His farewell discourse, how wonderfully He reveals the spiritual character of true prayer and obedience as it is born of love, is inspired by it, and as it opens the way into the love of God: “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever... He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me ...If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (Jn 14.15–16, 21, 23).

I was giving a short seminar on prayer to a group of people and the usual question I asked the audience was: What is prayer for you? Then there were a number of awesome answers: 'prayer is intimate conversation with God', 'prayer is loving God', 'prayer is union with God', 'prayer is being with God', 'prayer is loving', 'prayer is accepting God's will', 'prayer is staying with God' etc. All these answers were well thought and indicated the outcome of each person's personal experience with God.

In fact, praying does not mean spending a long period of time at a place of worship or observing set time for recitation of prayers. Prayer is basically personal relationship with God with requires conviction, dedication, determination, faith, hope, love, and devotion. You cannot pray if you have neglected 'precautions' for its fulfilment. For example, you cannot be hungry for food if you have already fed yourself with some junk food. In the same way prayer requires a great deal of precaution such as, presence of God, fasting, silence, discipline, and a genuine thirst for God. But if you have fed yourself with a lot of distractions to your mind and heart, prayer is going to be a difficult experience.

Prayer is a way to God and an awakening of self. There is no way to prayer because prayer is the way. There is no way to God but through a life enriched with prayer. When we become God centered in our daily lives, we experience more of God. The "precautions" of St. John of the Cross are a quick and short means for prayer and God-experience. They systematically present the nature of our spiritual journey unfolding each layer of our life simply to be open to God. It is a map that can instruct us exactly where we are and how to go about in our spiritual venture. These precautions are powerful in their content and are certainly practical. In the following pages I have tried to reflect upon these precautions that they may help our spiritual and community life. In this highly complex world of widespread economic inflation, computer technology, instant worldwide communication through mass media, constantly changing job markets, ever more prolonged education for developing skills, and of the use of nuclear energy for building cities or destroying the world in a matter of seconds has resulted in confusion in minds and hearts of people. Therefore, precautions, a set of rules and regulations can help us, who have dedicated our life to God and neighbour, can gather strength to fight multiple distractions around us.

When our faith is weak, we are confronted with the question of God, we feel vulnerable and lonely in mind and heart before the vast, threatening, and fast-moving world. But a genuine desire for God and a systematic approach to this experience can enhance our ability to deal with the world and with our tensions and

uncertainties. God in His wisdom reassures the one who prays, that He cares for him and leads him to a definite destiny. As a result, the praying person experiences a definite assurance of God's assistance in the decision about to be made and about the plans that take shape in his/her life.

In these precautions, as *guidelines for prayer and union with God*, we will be led to face the realities of the community and ourselves so that we can better live our life in a challenging, absorbing and authentic way. The goal of the precautions is *to reach union with God quickly* as John² insists throughout this writing.

Loving union with God through faith and hope with Christ the true vine is the precondition laid down for the efficacy of prayer in these precautions. Prayer is the surest way that can transform our lives. When I pray, I pray as a branch in the vine. As the vine is in the branch, and the branch is in the vine, Jesus is in me, and I am in Him. His divine nature, His life, His power, His Father, His Spirit, His sap, His glory, His prayer is in me. He is the one who prays in me. The life in the vine is the life in tree branch. The power in the vine is the power in the branch. The prayer of the vine is the prayer of the branch. And at the same time the prayer of the branch is the prayer of the vine, the fruit on the branch is the fruit of the vine, the beauty of the branch is the beauty of the vine. We are all one and in Jesus we live to experience God. This union is awakened in prayer. The prayer that ascends to God from a heart full of love and goodness gives greater glory to God and brings down more graces and power on the world than all books written, and sermons preached, and retreats attended.

Christian spirituality, rooted in Scripture, spoke commonly of three spiritual enemies: the *world*, the *flesh*, and the *devil*. Within this tradition, John finds the structure for his work: three precautions against each of the three enemies.

In our analysis of the *Precautions*, the italicized words and texts should be taken as original texts from St. John. The highlighted bold letters and texts are for the purpose of indicating importance of the material taken for interpretation.

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² Here after St. John of the Cross will abbreviated as St. John