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THROUGH THE DARK VALLEY PART II

Without humility we cannot enter into the world of charity. Without humility we remain in the dark valley, ruled from within by the "queen" of pride. And unless we truly realize "there is no health in us" we abide there, where dead men's bones, lifeless and hollow, suffer the penalty of self-deception.

The darkness deepens. With that darkness that is within there is also that which is without. The devil "as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8). He is the "father" of lies and "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44), masquerading as an "angel of light" (II Corinthians 11:14).

In understanding the devil, St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that while Satan has no power to influence our minds directly from within, he can see the things we do, and listen to the words we use, and watch the places we go and the people we associate with, and take all these and use them to hasten the way into an even darker realm.

Just consider for a moment the actuality of pornography - protected by the freedom of speech, and indiscriminate abortion - under girded by the right to privacy, and obscene wealth - rationalized by the inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." We, out of the treasure of our hearts, desire these things, and the devil uses his power to assist us in every way to falsify love, to destroy life and to indulge our pleasures to the point of grotesque hedonism. There is no doubt that great virtues were espoused in the founding of our country, and many from diverse lands brought the ingenuity and delight of their cultures with them, but the devil has used it all to mock virtue with vice and to keep us in the dark.

The presence of evil in our culture is equally startling to what we discover within our souls. I think we try to ignore it until it hits home, and then we see that evil is all about us and never tires of feeding upon us. The problem is that evil feeds on what is potentially virtuous and distorts it. Moderation is easily pushed into excess. Moral success becomes self-righteousness. Religious practice inflates into spiritual pride. The good is made bad, the true false, and the beautiful hideously ugly. Most often we would not be bothered. Sloth, the neglect of duty, enables the devil and his minions to wreak havoc. Satan has his power in what we give him the opportunity for.

And hence I return to prayer and the Holy Communion. How can it be

that we are so insensible not only to our own darkness - the rotten fruit of pride, willful, ignorant, weak, and beset with passion – but also to the darkness of the presence of evil - pouring forth suffering and death on those we love – so that we do not take into our own existential choice the infinite power of prayer and the limitless strength of the Body and Blood of Jesus? How is that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death - so dead?

Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. He is the way, the truth, and the life, in whom we may find our way through the dark valley. This is the mystery of God's love for you and me. While we have turned ourselves and our world into shadows, he has come among us to live and shine as light.

And this is the real miracle and the greatest of wonders, that Jesus brings us into the world of charity which "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" where charity never fails.

Jesus lived fully as a man, a man in every respect of human nature, in the midst of the world darkened by the devices and desires of our hearts. And he knew it to be so. He grew up in the midst of mankind and when he began his ministry, he would not entrust himself to men, because he knew what was in man (John 2: 24). Still, he came to lighten our darkness. And so he lived by walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

In his temptation the devil focused all his energies on the rights of Jesus' sonship. As a man he intended to be dependent on his Father: for bread; for his calling and work as a man; for whatever power and honor God had in store for him. Jesus knew that his love for his Father could not make its way darkly, but only by the light of truth, by the Father's word, and so only by the way of humility. As a human being the sonship of Jesus would in every aspect of his life be truly human. His experience would grow. His wisdom and stature would grow. And the labor and hardship and sadness of the valley of death would impinge on him from every side. The demons would take the opportunity to test him and ridicule him. The religious leaders would, in fact, call him demonic.

And what did he do? He healed the sick of body and of mind, proclaimed the kingdom of God, and went about doing all manner of good. He uttered the most beautiful and profound teachings ever crafted for the human heart. And even though he was in reality a noble and skillful king, he had no place to lay his head. He loved his own from the beginning to the end, and the entire way was the way through the dark valley.

At the end of the valley was the darkness of his own death. It was there that he took upon himself the penalty of our sins. The gospel writers tell us that when this happened, the sky itself became dark and the earth was shadowed. And not only did he take upon himself the penalty for our sins, but Jesus took all assaults of demonic power and made them of none effect, and by doing so he spoiled them and triumphed gloriously over them (Colossians 2:15). By the darkness of his own death Jesus took all the sin and evil that he found in our valley and wore it with a pure heart. On the third day, with the dawn, he arose to complete his work.

Now we have the means in him to make our way through the dark valley into the light of his kingdom. He pours out on us the virtues of his human life and love, all the perfect justice and satisfaction that he gave to the Father on our behalf. He pours this light of his grace upon us when we ask for it in prayer and when we kneel in humility to receive the Holy Communion. How can we neglect so great a gift? How can we allow ourselves such wicked self-preoccupations? Surely we must pray that the Holy Spirit will work in our prideful, feeble hearts, even now, to want his gifts. He offers them to us. He holds them out for us to take with the open hands of faith, by the confidence of hope, and in the desire of love for him.

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