

THE LORD DISCIPLINES HIM WHOM HE LOVES

(Hebrews 12: 6)

Monthly Reflection:

November 2022

“Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?” (Job 10, 3-4). It is not Job who now asks this, but a spirited Jesus Youth who has experienced soul-stirring encounters with God for the past five years. Suddenly, shaken up by the disappearance of God’s presence and the persistent blankness in the face of her prayers, she approached a spiritual teacher in anguish. “This is nothing, my child”, the godly priest consoled her, “after hours and days before the Blessed Sacrament, finding no sign of God’s presence or consolation, I too have banged my fists and screamed out: “God, have you moved out? Hello! Is anybody home?”

There are more than a few among us who would attest to such experiences in prayer. Why does a loving God sometimes stay hidden from those who serve Him? Arduous testing times involving severe reprimands, disciplining, and even chastisement (Hebrews 12: 5-11) – the scripture clearly asserts – are an inevitable part of every spiritual journey. “Without holiness, no one sees God” (Hebrews 12: 14). So, God draws us to himself through a journey of ‘sanctification’ (Sirach 33:12, Titus 2:14). The saints we know have all journeyed through a time of disciplining that enabled them to partake in the holiness of God. Knowing our severe limitations, God himself instructs us in the way of holiness – inviting us to drink from His cup of suffering (Matthew 20:23).

Often, when the Holy Spirit temporarily recedes (Psalm 51:11) from works whose success we generally attribute to our strengths, it is a sign that God’s time of disciplining has begun in our lives. This is the time we realise that we cannot do anything without Him (John 15:5). Soon we feel the experience of God’s presence slipping away (Psalm 30: 6,7). Before we realise it, prayers dry up; scripture readings become mindless; fellowship gatherings begin to grate on our nerves; activities turn futile; ennui and listlessness grip our souls; insurmountable troubles seem to surround us; we look around for someone trustworthy in vain. Yearning for solace, we run helter-skelter seeking any kind of revival in spiritual centers and through teachers and counselors, mostly to no avail. Sometimes personal sufferings too – the loss of loved ones, sickness, failure, humiliation, or financial crises – can become instrumental in us entering into a period of God’s discipline.

At this point, we realise that all the knowledge and understanding acquired through our faculties are entirely inadequate to lift us into God’s presence. We are left with an evanescent residue of what once was our faith, now overrun by raging passions. The only model and master (Hebrews 12:2)–the only one who can bring our faith to completion– is Christ. Thus, instructed and guided by God himself, we enter into a golden time. “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’” (John 6:45). In fact, no teacher or leader of this world, however skilled, intelligent or charismatic, can truly help us during this period.

God does hear us cry out, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? ... How long must I have sorrow in my heart?” (Psalm 13:1,2). And yet, his question to us would be “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?” (Exodus 10:3). The silversmith himself does not know how long it takes to refine a piece of silver. He purifies it in the fire – over and over again – until one day his face is reflected crystal clear in the metal. For years, Mother Teresa carried in her heart the grief of being deprived of the experience of God’s presence – even as she spent hours on end before the Eucharist. Yet, that was precisely when Christ was being formed within her. And in time, the world beheld in her the face of Jesus.

In this season of disciplining, it dawns on us that the plans and ideas in which we secretly prided ourselves were not ours, but God’s (Philippians 2:13); that the words we proclaimed over the years never once belonged to us, but to the Father (John 14:10); that the works we imagined to be ours, in truth, were accomplished by God (Isaiah 26:12) and that every achievement that we attributed to our hard work was nothing at all but the grace of God at work (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Meanwhile, we realise that the cravings, lusts and habitual sins which we hopelessly struggled against have disappeared. We begin to experience a burgeoning love, forgiveness, mercy and trust in God within us. When this awareness grows into a deeply humbling experience, the season of disciplining is transformed into a season of formation – the time when Christ takes shape within us. That is when we – like St. Paul who was sanctified through colossal experiences of suffering (2 Corinthians 11:23-27) – declare “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

The candle exists to keep its flame burning; our body, mind and faculties exist to keep the light of our Master shining. The reprimands, punishments, chastisements, and disciplining make it possible for us to recommit ourselves completely to God, in holiness, so that he can shine through us.

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