

First Mansions

Selected Reading for Reflection

Chapter 2

10. I do not know whether I have put this clearly; self-knowledge is of such importance that I would not have you be careless concerning it, though you may be lifted to heaven in prayer, because while on earth nothing is more needful than humility. Therefore, I repeat, not only a *good* way, but the *best* of all ways, is to endeavor to enter first by the room where humility is practiced, which is far better than at once rushing on to the others. This is the right road;—if we know how easy and safe it is to walk by it, why ask for wings with which to fly? Let us rather try to learn how to advance quickly. I believe we shall never learn to know ourselves except by endeavoring to know God, for, beholding His greatness we are struck by our own lowliness, His purity shows our misery, and by meditating on His humility we find how very far we are from being humble.

11. Two advantages are gained by this practice. First, it is clear that white looks far whiter when placed near something black, and on the contrary, black never looks so dark as when seen beside something white. Secondly, our understanding and will become more noble and capable of good in every way when we turn from ourselves to God: it is very injurious never to raise our minds above the mire of our own faults. I described how murky and foul are the streams that spring from the source of a soul in mortal sin. Thus, (although the case is not really the same, God forbid! this is only a comparison), while we are continually absorbed in contemplating the weakness of our earthly nature, the springs of our works will never flow free from the mire of timid, weak, and cowardly thoughts, such as: ‘I wonder whether people are noticing me or not! If I follow this course, will harm come to me? Dare I begin this work? Would it not be presumptuous? Is it right for any one as faulty as myself to speak on such sublime spiritual subjects? Will not people think poorly of me, if I make myself noticed? Extremes are bad, even in virtue; sinful as I am I shall only fall the lower. Perhaps I shall fail and be a source of scandal to good people; such a person as I am has no need to try and seem set aside for something special.’

12. Alas, my daughters, what loss the devil must have caused to many a soul by such thoughts as these! It thinks such ideas and many others of the same sort I could mention arise from humility. This comes from not understanding our own nature; self-knowledge becomes so warped that, unless we take our thoughts off ourselves, I am not surprised that these and many worse fears should threaten us. Therefore I maintain, my daughters, that we should fix our eyes on Christ our only good, and on His saints; there we shall learn true humility, and our minds will be ennobled, so that self-knowledge will not make us base and cowardly. Although only the first, this mansion contains great riches and such treasures that if the soul only manages to elude the reptiles dwelling here, it cannot fail to advance farther. Terrible are the wiles and strategies the devil uses to hinder people from realizing their weakness and detecting his snares.

Thoughts for Reflection

1/ True silent prayer allows us to discover ‘dark areas’ within ourselves. What do we do with this knowledge of ourselves that is revealed to us in prayer in order to grow in this life of prayer?

2/ To know something, we have to meet it head on; but, to know ourselves we must fix our eyes on Christ . What takes our eyes off of Christ?