

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Blessed are the pure in heart...

With the sixth Beatitude we make the transition to the Beatitudes of *union*, the first of which concerns contemplation, seeing God. Thus far we have detached ourselves from earthly things and have pursued moral virtue. Now we enter into the purpose of that detachment and striving, union with God. Contrary to the stereotype about Catholicism, the summit of our faith is not mortification and moral purity but oneness with God. The others are simply a means to that end. As with the other Beatitudes, this follows logically after its predecessor: the mercy received by the merciful renders them pure in heart.

Saint Augustine says that God is "seen by the heart." Once again, that's bad biology but good theology. We know that there is a kind of sight more important and more personal than the bodily. Every time we ask someone, "Do you see what I mean?" we acknowledge that kind of sight that is spiritual and not physical.

This seeing is with the *heart* – the most interior part of ourselves – because to see God is the fulfillment of all our desires and efforts (whether we realize that or not). The devil deceived Eve precisely by engaging and distorting this desire. She saw that the forbidden fruit was "pleasing to the eyes." Moses begs to see the face of the Lord. The Psalmist returns to this desire again and again: "When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Ps 42:2) Jesus heals the blind not only to reveal his divine power but also to show that he has come to heal our interior sight, to enable us to see God. Saint John describes heaven in just such terms: "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).

What does it mean to be pure of heart? From the fact that this Beatitude follows the moral Beatitudes indicates that it requires moral rectitude. Sin blinds us. It is the only thing we don't learn more about by doing. The sinful man cannot see God, his neighbor, the world, or even himself clearly. His selfishness distorts them. Freedom from sin brings clarity of thought. Just as gold must be purified in fire, so purity comes only by way of trial. By mortification and by the pursuit of justice and mercy, we are freed from sin, make progress in moral excellence, and thus regain our sight.

Like meekness and piety, the word "purity" has lost its true meaning. We usually think of it as a negative, describing what is *not*. We should instead understand purity as a completeness, a full integration, and therefore as a *power*. It is "single-heartedness," the power to focus and coordinate all our efforts on the one thing necessary. The pure of heart don't multitask. They aren't distracted from the face of God but live Jesus' exhortation, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Mt 6:33).

Saint Augustine connects purity of heart with the Spirit's Gift of Understanding. The world and its images can misrepresent God. Further, in our selfishness we see them through the prism of our pride. The Gift of Understanding enables us to see things of this world clearly and to judge rightly the things of God. It enables us to see our faith more clearly and by way of it to see God.