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On Two Subtle Enemies of Holiness



OPENING PRAYER

O God who makes all things new, open our hearts and minds as we come together to reflect on your call to practice holiness in our daily lives. Help us to hear and respond to you every day. May we learn in this time of prayer how to be more loving toward you, others and ourselves. As well, may we learn to trust in your abundant love for us and all of your creation, and inspire us to be witnesses of your love to others. Amen.

TWO COMMON TRAPS

On the path of holiness, Pope Francis says there are two common traps: contemporary forms of Pelagianism and Gnosticism which were condemned as heresies of the early Church. Pope Francis says that Pelagianism and Gnosticism are more concerned with human ideas about God rather than with Jesus and other people. Moreover, they only “give rise to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelising, one analyses and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying” (GE 35). In order to reject the subtle ways in which we might practice new forms of Pelagianism and Gnosticism, Pope Francis calls us to leave the judging and salvation of ourselves and others to God, to focus instead on God’s grace, and to focus on loving each other.

ON CONTEMPORARY GNOSTICISM - “I know the true faith and you do not”

The religious milieu of early Western civilisation involved the existence of many faiths, philosophies, and ‘holy’ teachers. Some even mimicked Christianity. In the end, the imitations were found to be completely contrary to the Good News of Jesus Christ. They were called heresies. One such heresy was Gnosticism.

A faith without flesh

There were many types of Gnosticisms in existence, but all of them had in common the belief in a purely divine Jesus. That is, a Jesus that did not suffer and die, but who imparted special knowledge (*gnosis*, Greek) to just one special group. This knowledge was the key to salvation.

Pope Francis points out that faith for Gnostics is an intellectual exercise: “They judge others based on their ability to understand the complexity of certain doctrines” and they are “incapable of touching Christ’s suffering flesh in others, locked up as they are in an encyclopedia of abstractions” (GE 37). Moreover, Gnostics “absolutise their own theories and force others to submit to their way of thinking”. Pope Francis says it is one thing to approach the Gospel with “a healthy and humble use of reason”. It is another to approach it with “a cold and harsh logic that seeks to dominate everything” (GE 39).

Q. Have you ever judged someone else’s faith based on what they know, or felt judged yourself?

A doctrine without mystery

By presenting a perfect, complete and clear explanation of God, Pope Francis says Gnostics “domesticate the mystery” of God (GE 40). Yet in truth, no one can know when and how we will each encounter God (GE 41).

Inversely, we cannot also claim to know where each of us will NOT encounter God. In the most unthinkable hopeless circumstances, God is present. We are called to find God in these circumstances, “in every human life”. Gnostics find this difficult as it involves letting go of control and perfect explanations (GE 42).



The limits of reason

A further limitation of Gnosticism is becoming deluded about one's superiority over others and believing one has already 'arrived' in this journey of holiness. As Pope Francis explains: "We can think that because we know something, or are able to explain it in certain terms, we are already Saints, perfect and better than the 'ignorant masses'" (GE 45). This not only serves to close us off to relationships with others but also closes us from a relationship with God who reveals and constantly calls us to *metanoia* (Greek) - the conversion of our hearts and minds.

Essentially, Gnosticism is about "a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings" (GE 36). But if our faith exists only to affirm or assure us, then it is a stale faith which is inward-looking and concerned only with its own comfort. Pope Francis challenges us to resist the temptation to practice a contemporary form of Gnosticism so that our growth in holiness is not about having special secret knowledge but rather about always growing and learning in our faith.

FOR REFLECTION / DISCUSSION

- Q. What does it mean to have a thinking faith?
- Q. Describe a time when you were challenged beyond your own beliefs about following Jesus.
- Q. Was there a time you felt the presence of God in the least expected of circumstances?
- Q. Name one way you can practice being open to God's grace in your daily life.

ON CONTEMPORARY PELAGIANISM -

"This is the only proper way of Christian practice"

While Gnosticism is about having the 'right knowledge', Pelagianism is concerned with 'doing the right practice'. Both heresies reject difference and dialogue, asserting that only they have sole possession of 'true' Christianity.

An often-overlooked Church teaching

Pelagianism was a heresy which existed in the early days of the Church. This heresy was especially encountered by St Augustine of Hippo when he promoted his doctrine on grace: for Augustine, there is nothing that we human beings can do to earn or lose God's grace which is unmerited and freely given. We do not save ourselves; it is only because of God's grace that we are saved.

The Pelagians had a great problem with this because they were afraid this teaching would lead to moral laxity. They reasoned that if God alone saves, why should anyone strive to be good at all? Therefore, the Pelagians taught that both will and action saved a person. That is, it is by our own efforts and good works that we are put in right relationship with God. This did not allow room for the gift of God's grace. As Pope Francis says, **"only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation"** (GE, 62). Indeed, our cooperation with grace is an essential part of our path to holiness.

Q. How much do we believe that nothing we do can change God's absolute love for us and mercy towards us?

A will lacking humility

Pope Francis says of those who practice a form of Pelagianism today: "even though they speak warmly of God's grace, ultimately [they] trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style" (GE 49).

By trusting in our own efforts, we close ourselves off from the grace of God. Pope Francis advises: "Unless we can acknowledge our concrete and limited situation, we will not be able to see the real and possible steps that the Lord demands of us at every moment, once we are attracted and empowered by his gift" (GE 50).

Q. Am I being called to see God at work in a difficult or challenging part of my life?

New pelagians

The new forms of Pelagianism today appear as such: "an obsession with the law, an absorption with social and political advantages, a punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programmes of self-help and personal fulfilment." Pope Francis continues by explaining: "Some Christians spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love, rather than being passionate about communicating the beauty and the joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ" (GE 57).

These then are the keys to resist new forms of Pelagianism – to focus on love as the Spirit leads us, and to focus on



the beauty and joy of the Gospel rather than the rigid following of rules and traditional practices at the cost of neglecting the human person in front of us, who may in fact be suffering in ways that are unknown to us.

The summation of the law

Pope Francis points us to Saint Paul who says "that what truly counts is 'faith working through love'" (Gal 5:6). He then says: "We are called to make every effort to preserve charity". By loving another we in fact fulfill the law of God. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Gal 5:14)" (GE 60).

We are called to resist the temptation of practicing a contemporary form of Pelagianism by accepting that people are at different stages of their faith journey, and accepting that people can express their faith in different ways. The very nature of our Catholicity is that it has room for everyone in their diversity. Our role is not to judge but instead to walk with others in the love of the Lord.

FOR REFLECTION / DISCUSSION

Q. Do you show trust in God's grace or is this an ongoing struggle?

Q. Describe a time when you experienced God's unmerited and surprising grace.

– “*Love as our vocation*”

Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognised myself in any of the members...or rather I desired to see myself in them all. Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church has a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church's members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES... IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love...my vocation, at last I have found it...MY VOCATION IS LOVE!

Q. In what ways does love inspire your daily actions?

- What has spoken to me deeply during this time of prayer?
- How do I see Jesus and my relationship with him differently?
- What is one new insight I have gained about holiness in my life?
- What is one thing I can practice this week as a result of my reflection?

At the end of your journaling time, you may wish to share your insights with each other in the group.

FINAL PRAYER

Loving God, we give thanks
for your gracious gift of grace, at
work in our lives each and every day.
Give us the eyes to see your presence
with us, and to align our whole selves
with where you are gently leading us.
Let your grace in us spill out into
loving action for our brothers and
sisters. We ask this through
Christ our Lord. Amen.



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