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“I will not let you go unless you bless me”: The Combat of Contemplative Prayer

Entering into paths of contemplation means realizing that we need God, to the point of needing to "wrestle" with him... And to ask him, again and again, for his blessing: "I will not let go until you bless me."

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One Christmas night, while celebrating Holy Mass and holding the sacred Host in his hands, Saint John Mary Vianney was visibly moved. He smiled, cried, and lengthened that part of the Mass without ever taking his eyes off Jesus. “He seemed to be talking to Him; then he was in tears, and then, again, smiling,” recounted Brother Athanasius, who was observing him attentively. At the end of the celebration, he asked what had happened during those moments. The Curé of Ars replied simply, “A curious thought had come to my mind. I was saying to our Lord, ‘If I knew that I would have the misfortune of not seeing you for all eternity, now that I have you in my hands, I would not let you go.’”^[1] —

“I have seized the love of my soul, and I will not let him go,” says the bride in the Song of Songs (Sg 3:4). These are echoes of the pleas Jacob

made to the stranger with whom he wrestled all night as he prepared to meet his brother Esau. “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ Jacob answered, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip” (*Gn 32:24-31*).

Say something to me, Jesus, say something

Every time we gather for a moment of prayer, and specifically contemplative prayer, we enter a kind of combat: “almost a hand-to-hand contact that is symbolic not of a God who is an enemy, an adversary, but a Lord of blessing who always remains mysterious, who seems beyond reach. Therefore the author of the Sacred text uses the symbol of the struggle, which implies a strength of spirit, perseverance, tenacity in obtaining what is desired.”^[2]

Contemplative prayer is “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus;”^[3] a gaze that seeks Him and does not stop seeking, that does not let Him go until He blesses us and illuminates “the eyes of our heart”^[4] with the light of his gaze.

What do we seek in his gaze? The features of his face, his feelings, his

peace, the fire of his heart. And if in those serene moments, the encounter we long for is not granted, we are willing to persevere until it happens. “One does not undertake contemplative prayer only when one has the time: one makes time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up.”^[5] — Contemplation is “a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty.”^[6] — This is why God needs our perseverance: He needs us to say, “You are here for me and I for you. I am not going anywhere,” or, as Saint Josemaría often repeated in prayer, “Say something to me, Jesus, say something.”^[7] —

Personalizing

The mysterious figure who wrestled with Jacob had not been invited. He presented himself on his own initiative. God does the same thing today too: He comes to meet us. “God

thirsts that we may thirst for him.”^[8]
It is surprising, but that thirst “arises from the depths of God's desire for us;”^[9] it is as great and mysterious as the love that led Him to create each one of us.

On our part, we simply need to stand before Him. The meeting place is not only the realm of emotions, nor the imagination or reason, but the heart, “the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives.”^[10] He asks us to *be there*, to stay in his presence, remaining in His love (cf. *Jn 15:9*). In contemplative prayer, we are not engaging in a simple psychological exercise, nor merely concentrating in order to empty our minds. We are not struggling in vain: our contemplation takes place in the framework of our Christian faith, and it is “a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God.”^[11]

We are not going to fight with unwelcome visitors who arrive just when we are sitting down to pray. Instead of trying to drive them away, our best hope is simply to ignore them. Alone with Christ, each of us realizes that He is fully focused on *me*, inviting me to be completely available to Him. There are no empty moments with this “opponent;” He never stops gazing at us, even for a moment. We, on the other hand, can turn away and leave Him standing there – but then we would lose his blessing.

Jacob does not take his eyes off the One he is wrestling with. He must stay attentive, without diverting his gaze, without losing the direction of his heart. Glance at a cell phone screen? No; that would make us lose our interior contact. Turn to the distractions we see coming, like the myriad organizational matters, or our curiosity about events around

us? No. And neither should we focus on thoughts about measuring up or being good enough, as these can subtly redirect our attention back to ourselves. Our entire life is centered on Someone, “the Person of Jesus Christ, whom we want to get to know, deal with, and love. Putting Jesus at the center of our life means deepening in our contemplative prayer.”^[12] — The call is radical and increasingly all-encompassing. God blesses those who strive for the gift of contemplation, a foretaste of the gift of eternal life, which we begin to savor even now. “Our prayer, which began so child-like and ingenuous, now opens out into a broad, smooth-flowing stream, for it follows the course of friendship with him who said: ‘I am the way.’”^[13] —

“Contemplative prayer seeks him ‘whom my soul loves’ (Sg 1:7). It is Jesus:”^[14] — someone like me, whom I can relate to on my level, because He

has called me friend (cf. *Jn* 15:15). Contemplative prayer will not be true contemplation if it is not personalized. “In order to draw close to God we must take the right road, which is the Sacred Humanity of Christ.”^[15] Jesus is the bridge that, through the corporeal, leads us to the divine. Our “wrestling” means that our eyes, smiles, and – above all – hearts meet. It means embracing the feelings of Jesus’ heart, learning “the ‘interior knowledge of our Lord,’ the more to love him and follow him.”^[16] How is He looking at me today? Are we in harmony? Do I notice and share in His joys and sorrows?

In darkness and trials

The struggle takes place at night: our face-to-face encounter is unmediated. Our search takes place in darkness, “in that pure faith which causes us to be born of Him and to live in Him.”^[17] Neither feelings —

welcome when they come,
unregretted when they go — nor
pure reason are the foundation of
our fight, because we are not
performing mental gymnastics. What
has been ignited in us is faith in a
living person who wants to meet us.
In faith, we do not have the
immediacy of the senses or the
clarity of syllogisms; we walk in
twilight until the moment of vision
arrives. But the darkness of faith
allows us to see farther. By day, our
vision reaches a few dozen
kilometers, stopping at the blue of
the atmosphere, but at night, we see
stars millions of light-years away.
Faith reveals new worlds to us.

Contemplative struggle also involves
facing discouragement, dryness,
weariness of faith, even the sadness
of not giving ourselves entirely to the
Lord because we have many
possessions (cf. *Mk* 10:22); or an
inner rebellion against God's logic,

which sometimes seems so different from our own; or the suggestion that it is not for us, that we lack that sensitivity... “Am I caught up in a fantasy? Where is this going? Is this too mystical an approach?” Jacob could have stopped fighting. He must have had some doubts while wrestling, but he went on nonetheless. We need to move forward with determination and a childlike spirit, knowing that we are on a path of love, which means trust and surrender.

While meditative prayer focuses on means, contemplation focuses on the end. We are with the One we wanted to be with. We no longer consider virtues, goals, or struggles: all those are addressed in meditation. In contemplation, the emptiness of our time is filled with God’s simple presence. We ignite the yearning, the longing, the foretaste of heaven. The measure of our heaven will be the

measure of our desire: a thirst for God, “a longing to understand his tears, to see his smile, his face...”^[18] —

We walk through life with that peaceful desire when we step on the path of contemplation: “We begin to live as captives, as prisoners. And while we carry out as perfectly as we can (with all our mistakes and limitations) the tasks allotted to us by our situation and duties, our soul longs to escape. It is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet.”^[19] —

Jacob had to walk a long way before he reached the place where God would meet him. He was unaccompanied: the Bible tells us that he was alone when all this happened. And he had no baggage; he had just sent everything he owned across the river (cf. *Gn* 32:24-25). The encounter required the solitude of nightfall. “For once he is no longer master of the situation — his cunning is of no use to him — he is no longer

a strategic and calculating man [...]. For once Jacob has nothing but his frailty and powerlessness, and also his sins, to present to God.”^[20] God comes to seek him when he is defenseless and free from distractions. For contemplation, we need freedom and openness of heart: nothing more than the awareness of our smallness and the desire for the encounter. The One we await will not appear if our hearts are occupied. None of our desires should surpass the desire to be with Him.

I will not let you go unless you bless me

“Bless me.” The patriarch will settle for nothing less. He has seized his Lord and has Him captive. But what does this blessing consist of? Jacob’s joy comes from seeing God, and his joy is amplified when he realizes that, despite seeing Him, he is still alive. The blessing is the

contemplation of God's face, which fills us with his peace, joy, and mercy. We cannot achieve this by an act of our will alone, but through the opening of our hearts to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. "our entire lives are like this long night of struggle and prayer, spent in desiring and asking for God's blessing, which cannot be grabbed or won through our own strength but must be received with humility from him as a gratuitous gift that ultimately allows us to recognize the Lord's face."^[21]

We must wait patiently. Jacob had to wait the whole night until daybreak. He did not flee; he did not give up. The blessing will be granted to us if we ask for it time and again. We do our part, seeking silence, solitude, and the freedom of heart... and it is up to God to grant the specifically contemplative gifts: knowledge, understanding, wisdom. We are incapable of practicing them on our

own. They are receptive attitudes that He gives when He chooses. We must ask for them and await them with humility. The Lord will grant them to us gradually, or perhaps all at once. And when we receive this blessing, whether in small sips or in torrents, we will continue our journey with our gaze set on the distance, because this blessing is not transient but permanent. The patriarch set out, and where did he go? That is of little consequence. What matters is that he now bears the face of his Lord imprinted on his soul. “The blessing that the Patriarch had requested at the beginning of the struggle is now granted to him. However, it is not a blessing obtained through deceit, but one given freely by God, which Jacob can receive because he is now alone, without protection, without cunning or tricks; he gives himself over unarmed, agrees to surrender and confesses the truth about himself.”^[22]

“I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is spared,” Jacob says.

Throughout this strange struggle, he has come to know the One who was before him. In our own lives, through our prayer, we come to know God, understanding Him, or at least accepting his ways, even when we don't fully comprehend them. We want to know his name: “Who are You?” We want to see Him. And God reveals Himself, but He also hides so that we will keep seeking Him, living from Him and from the search.

The outcome of this mysterious story is paradoxical, as is almost always the case in our faith. God blesses Jacob and congratulates him for his victory, but ultimately, He has dislocated his hip. The patriarch has fought the good fight, confronting the mysterious opponent without faltering. But from then on, he will walk with a limp: it will be a kind of medal that reminds him of the battle.

“It is *this* Jacob who receives God's blessing, with which he limps into the promised land: vulnerable and wounded, but with a new heart.”^[23] —

We, too, will emerge from the struggle wounded and renewed: our earthly securities will be

“dislocated,” and we will be guided by the mark of God. He has blessed us, and He will continue to bless us, but He makes us profoundly aware that our true security lies in Him.

The more we pray, the more we realize how much we need Him, how much we need to “wrestle” with Him. And we will ask Him more and more for his blessing: “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

^[1] Cf. F. Trochu, *Le Curé d'Ars Saint Jean-Marie Vianney*, Lyon-Paris, 1925, pg. 383.

[2] Benedict XVI, Audience, 25-V-2011.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2715.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, no. 2710.

[6] *Ibid.*, no. 2713.

[7] Cf. Intimate Notes, 12-XII-1935, quoted in A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* (vol. 1) Scepter, Princeton 2000, pg. 448; Intimate Notes, 20-XII-1937, quoted in *Camino*, edición crítico-histórica, note to no. 746.

[8] St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 64, 4; quoted in the *Catechism*, no. 2560.

[9] *Catechism*, no. 2560.

[10] *Ibid.*, no. 2563.

[11] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Orationis Formas* on some aspects of Christian meditation, 15-X-1989, no. 3.

[12] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14-II-2017, no. 8.

[13] *Friends of God*, no. 306

[14] *Catechism*, no. 2709.

[15] *Friends of God*, no. 299.

[16] *Catechism*, no. 2715.

[17] *Ibid.*, n. 2709.

[18] *Friends of God*, no. 310.

[19] *Ibid.*, no. 296.

[20] Pope Francis, Audience, 10-VI-2020.

[21] Benedict XVI, Audience, 25-V-2011.

[22] *Ibid.*

^[23] Pope Francis, Audience, 10-VI-2020.

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