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A Healthy Self-Esteem

A new article in the series on developing a strong Christian personality. "If we are to judge ourselves truthfully, we need to acquire self-knowledge. This is not at all an easy job and is in some sense a never-ending learning process."

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You were ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold,

but with the precious blood of Christ. [1] Saint Peter reminds the first Christians that their very existence has acquired an immeasurable value, since they have become the object of God's overwhelming, redemptive love. Through the gift of divine filiation Christ fills our passage through this world with security. A young fellow once told Saint Josemaria spontaneously: "‘Father,’ said that big fellow, a good student at the Central University (I wonder what has become of him), ‘I was thinking of what you told me—that I’m a son of God! And I found myself walking along the street, head up, chin out, and a proud feeling inside... a son of God!’ With sure conscience I advised him to foster that ‘pride’.”[2]

Recognizing our greatness

What does it mean “to foster that pride”? It is certainly not a matter of conjuring up imaginary virtues, nor

of leading a self-sufficient existence that sooner or later betrays us. Rather it means recognizing the greatness of our creaturely condition. The human being is the “only creature on earth that God has loved for its own sake.”^[3] Created in God’s image and likeness, we are called to fully develop this image by an ever closer identification with Christ through the action of grace.

Such a sublime vocation provides the foundation for a healthy self-esteem. The light of faith enables us to rightly judge our achievements and failures. The serene acceptance of our own identity shapes our way of being and acting in society. It also fosters self-confidence and lessens fear and shyness, and helps prevent us from acting rashly; it makes it easier for us to be open to others and to new situations while fostering optimism and cheerfulness.

The positive or negative view we have of ourselves depends on self-knowledge and the fulfilment of the goals we each set for ourselves. To a great extent these goals take as their point of departure the role models we choose of men or women we hope to emulate. These models are presented to us in many different ways, for example through the education we receive at home, through the influence of our friends or acquaintances, and through the ideas prevalent in our particular social milieu. And so it is important to define our reference points, for if they are high and noble, they will foster a healthy self-esteem. It is also helpful to be aware of the role models prevalent in our society as a whole, as they can more or less consciously influence our own self-evaluation.

Sound role models

Sometimes we can form a distorted judgment about ourselves by adopting standards of success that can in fact be unrealistic or even harmful: professional success at any price, self-centered sentimental relationships, pleasure-based lifestyles. We might overvalue ourselves after attaining goals that some people seem to appreciate. Or the reverse is also possible: we might undervalue ourselves for not having reached certain goals or because some people don't seem to appreciate us. These mistaken appraisals are due in large measure to paying too much attention to those who evaluate people exclusively in terms of what they achieve or possess.

To avoid such risks, it is worthwhile asking ourselves what our reference points are in our professional, family and social life and whether these are compatible with a Christian perspective. We also know that, in

the end, Christ is the only complete and fully coherent model for our life. Looking at our life in the light of his is the best way to evaluate ourselves, for we know that Jesus is our closest role model, with whom we have a personal and loving relationship.

Self-knowledge with God's light

If we are to judge ourselves truthfully, we need to acquire self-knowledge. This is not at all an easy job and is in some sense a never-ending learning process. It starts by overcoming a purely subjective perspective reflected in expressions such as “how I see things,” “in my opinion,” “it seems to me,” making room for other considerations. If it is impossible for us to even know exactly what our own voice sounds like or what our physical appearance is for others, how much more do we need to admit that we are not the

best judges in assessing our own personality traits.

Besides personal reflection, self-knowledge comes from what others teach us about ourselves. This requires learning how to open up to those who can truly help us: what a wonderful means we have in personal spiritual direction! There we receive another person's advice and consider it in relation to a truly worthwhile ideal for our life. Self-knowledge is also gained by our interaction with those around us, although we have to be on guard against a superficial environment that can hinder self-reflection and make it harder for us to get to know ourselves truly.

Therefore we need to foster personal reflection and ask ourselves how God sees us. Prayer is the best moment for this, since while getting to know God we also get to know ourselves

with the help of his light. Among other things, we will seek his help to understand better the comments and advice we receive from others. In some cases, we will see the need to distance ourselves from other people's judgements that are not very objective or perhaps given thoughtlessly, above all when they judge according to criteria incompatible with God's will. We need to be selective in who we pay more attention to, in keeping with what Sacred Scripture says: *Better attend to a wise man's reprimand than listen to a song sung by a fool.*^[4]

Moreover, since we are all partly responsible for the self-esteem of those around us, we need to do all we can to make sure our words reflect consideration for each person we encounter, seeing each as a child of God. This is especially so if we have a position of authority or guidance over others (a parent-child or

teacher-student relationship, etc.), trying to ensure that our advice and suggestions help to reaffirm the conviction of their own worth, even when the need arises to correct with clarity. By doing so, we provide others with the “oxygen,” the hope they need to breathe and grow on their own.

Self-acceptance: God loves us as we are

When we reflect upon our own way of being in God’s light, we are helped to accept ourselves as we are: with our talents and virtues, but also with the defects that we humbly acknowledge. True self-esteem implies recognizing that we are not all equal and that other people may be more intelligent, more musical, more athletic.... We all possess good qualities we can develop, and even more importantly, we are all God’s children. Here lies the key to genuine

self-acceptance, the positive sense of the self-esteem we need, rejecting any undue comparisons with others that could lead to sadness.

In the final analysis, we will accept ourselves as we are if we do not lose sight of the fact that God loves us with our limitations, which form part of our path to holiness and are the raw material for our personal struggle. Our Lord chooses us, as he did the first Twelve: “ordinary men, with defects and shortcomings, more eager to say than to do. Nevertheless, Jesus calls them to be fishers of men, co-redeemers, dispensers of the grace of God.”[5]

Facing success and failure

This supernatural vantage point gives us a better grasp of our own way of being and life story, and enables us to understand its full meaning. Temporal events and achievements are seen in their true

perspective, in the light of eternity. Thus, while happy to see we have been successful in some area, we also know that what is truly important is how it has helped us grow in holiness. This is Christian realism, human and supernatural maturity. Just as we should not be carried away by our own success or the praise received from others, neither should we fall into pessimism when facing failure. How much it helps us to say, with Saint Peter, that anything good we have done has been done *in the name of Jesus Christ!*[6]

At the same time, admitting that external obstacles and our own imperfections limit our achievements helps shape our self-esteem, grounds personal maturity and opens the door to genuine learning. Growing in true knowledge requires recognizing our deficiencies and being ready to glean positive experiences from whatever happens

to us. “You say you’ve failed! We never fail. You placed your confidence wholly in God. And you did not neglect any human means. Convince yourself of this truth: your success—this time—was to fail. Give thanks to our Lord, and try again!”^[7] We are now ready to set out upon the way of the Cross, which teaches us the paradox of strength in weakness, greatness in poverty, growth in humiliation, with all its extraordinary effectiveness.

Acting with confidence and a readiness to rectify

Self-confidence is more secure when it rests on knowing we are God’s beloved children and not on the certitude of attaining a success that often eludes us. This conviction enables us to accept the risk involved in any decision, to overcome the paralysis of insecurity and to be open to new situations. “A person is

prudent not because he never makes a mistake, but because he corrects his errors. He shows his prudence in preferring to miss the mark twenty times rather than give in to an easy-going ‘do nothing’ attitude. He won’t rush into things foolishly or behave with absurd rashness. He will run the risk of his decisions. Fear of failure will not make him give up in his effort to do good.”[8]

Given our human limitations and our need to grow in self-knowledge, rectifying means a personal enrichment that leads both to an increase in our self-confidence and in our trust in those around us. Those who entrust themselves into the hands of their heavenly Father rest secure, since *in everything God works for good with those who love him*. [9] Even our falls are included here, when we ask God’s forgiveness and with his grace get up again, growing in humility. Thus the

readiness to rectify forms part of the process of conversion. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*[10]

An indispensable virtue

Self-esteem ultimately flourishes under the shelter of humility, “for this is the virtue which helps us to recognize, at one and the same time, both our wretchedness and our greatness.”[11] When this attitude is missing, problems related to self-esteem may easily arise. But when humility is present, it brings with it a realism that enables us to evaluate ourselves correctly. While we are not impeccable, neither are we totally corrupt! We are children of God, and our shortcomings rest on an unimagined dignity.

Humility engenders an interior atmosphere that allows us to know ourselves as we truly are. And it moves us to sincerely seek the support of others and also to lend them ours. In the end, each and every one of us needs God, for *in him we live and move and have our being*. [12] He is a merciful Father who constantly watches over us. What security and trust we see in the life of Mary Most Holy! Our Lady could say that *the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name*[13]because she knew very well *the lowliness of his handmaid*. [14] In Mary, humility and knowing the greatness of her own calling are wonderfully combined.

[1] 1 Pet 1:18-19.

[2] *The Way*, no. 274.

[3] Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

[4] *Eccles* 7:5.

[5] *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 2.

[6] *Acts* 3:6.

[7] *The Way*, no. 404.

[8] *Friends of God*, no. 88.

[9] *Rom* 8:28.

[10] *1 Jn* 1:8-9.

[11] *Friends of God*, no. 94.

[12] *Acts* 17:28.

[13] *Lk* 1:49.

[14] *Lk* 1:48.

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