



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

January 1984

## HOLY DEPENDENCE

One of the great myths of our age is the Independent Man, alone out on the frontier, facing hardships and trials, and overcoming by the force of his will. We think of the pioneers whose great virtue was self-reliance. From the Lone Ranger to Superman, our heroes are those who had to depend on no one other than themselves.

We usually think it is a mark of strength to be independent, and we idolize those who manage to make it on their own. We despise the weakness of having to depend on anyone else for anything. We try, desperately sometimes, to build ourselves into strong creatures that have no needs that we cannot meet ourselves. This, we think, will give us control over our lives. We feel a certain pride in being able to say, "I did it;" that the things we do alone are more worthy than those in which we were helped by someone else.

This happens in the spiritual life just as it happens in a career or in a relationship. We tend to feel that it all depends on us. We feel that our success in the spiritual life is determined by our effort. We know that God has done things for us, in getting us started in Christian life: we have experienced something of His love, we know that He has forgiven us our sins, we perceive that He has done a great work for us on the Cross. And so we want to do something in return. We feel that He will not want to do it all for us. God helps those who help themselves, and all that. We feel that it is weak of us to have to depend on God in everything: surely He would want us to be strong enough to do some things on our own. We feel we should at least do the little things on our own, and trust in His help for the big things.

Rather than desiring to be saved by Jesus, we want to accomplish good things for Him. We want to do good deeds (by ourselves) and present them a fit offering to Him. The fact is that we are afraid of being completely dependent on God, so we try to do spiritual things on our own. Usually, we find that when we do that, we end up making a mess of things. In trying to overcome some hated and sinful habit, we fail -- and in doing so fail ourselves and also have nothing to present to Jesus. When we try to do something special for someone, we end up hurting them inadvertently, as a child making a present does a much worse job alone than if he had accepted the help of his parents. The lesson of such failures is that we should not try to do these things on our own. We should do them in Christ.

This means admitting that we cannot do them on our own. It means admitting that we cannot make ourselves holy. It means admitting that we need Him, even to do little things that we somehow feel we ought to be able to do on our own. It means accepting His Lordship, His authority in our lives.

Jesus taught that He comes to call sinners and not the virtuous. This was a hard saying at the time, and it still is. The point is that we must know our need for Him, or we will have nothing to do with Him. Our Christian lives begin with that realization of our need -- with our willingness to be dependent on Him for what we cannot do on our own. Christian dependence requires that we renounce all attempts at self-salvation.

This means letting go of our desires for independence. For to be completely independent is to live on our own -- and that means apart from God. That is the very antithesis of life in Christ, where we don't want to live by ourselves. We must learn to live in holy dependence on God, readily receiving all that we need from His hand. This is harder than it sounds.

To begin with, we are afraid of being dependent. We see this in our relationships of love or friendship, where we fear being emotionally dependent on anyone else. For then we are vulnerable. We risk our happiness: the other person might not do what we want them to. They might even betray our trust in them, and leave us shattered. Those who have loved unhappily know this all too well.

Insofar as our relationship with God is one of love, this fear of dependence will arise. It is not so much a fear that God will betray our trust. We know that He is trustworthy even if we don't always act like it. But we are afraid that God might want us to do something we don't want to do -- and if we are already pretty dependent on Him we won't have much choice. We fear that we will lose ourselves, our identity. We are afraid that once He is done with us we will not be the people we grew to know and love. We are afraid of getting too close to God, for being close to Him means being dependent upon Him.

This dependence is not one which violates our integrity. It is in fact perfectly human to live in dependence upon God -- as Adam did before the Fall. He was responsible for the Garden, for naming the animals and all, and at the same time subject to God and dependent upon Him for his being. Adam attains his full human stature only in dependence upon God. When he goes off on his own -- eating the forbidden fruit and leaving the Garden -- he becomes less human even as he becomes more independent. Our nature calls us to learn our true dependence. Only thus will we learn to be fully human.

To learn holy dependence, we need first of all to be careful not to take credit ourselves for our spiritual accomplishments. Rather we should be ready to recognize the hand of God at work in us. So when we come through a time of temptation, or succeed in obeying some particular and difficult calling of God's, we should be ready to thank Him for seeing us through, knowing that it is His power and not our virtue that is responsible for the success. By the same token, we need honestly to acknowledge our weakness and helplessness without Him. We need to see in our failures the occasion to depend more closely on God's strength. For as Paul found out, when we are weak, then we are strong, for then the power of God can work through us.

In particular, this means letting God into all the corners of our lives. We are tempted to reserve some of the little things for our own. We think we shouldn't bother God about our distractions at prayer or our frequent but petty impatiences at work. These are problems we should be able to solve on our own. Nonsense! Either Jesus is to be Lord of your life -- that means your whole life -- or you will try to be your own lord. This temptation comes up a lot, and must be met head on. We must then tell ourselves that there is no reason in the world to expect that we can do it ourselves. Our failures in these instances throw us back into the strong arms of God, and there we are safe.

Second, we should take advantage of those occasions when we must depend on others: when we are sick in bed, or out of work, or depressed and at wits' end, or need help from others to put the kids through school. Those are times when we really need other people to help us out. The question is how we will accept the ministrations of others. Will we resent them for what they do for us and make it hard for them? Will we hate ourselves for being dependent? Or will we accept gracefully what they are doing for us? Will we allow them to help us?

At stake is our ability to receive. Our pride (expressed in our desire for independence) rebels at being dependent. It tries to deny that we cannot do everything for ourselves, that we have a need for another. So it pretends that we do not really need the nurse's help in the hospital. It is a pretension: it is false. It just doesn't want to admit that in reality we are needy. If we can come to the

point of admitting that we are needy, and accept the fact, we will be a long way down the road to accepting our dependence on God. Recognizing that we are dependent on others in various ways all the time -- and that there is nothing wrong with such dependence -- is the beginning. We then begin to accept the fact that human life in its fullness is a matter not of independence but of interdependence.

We see this most clearly in relationships of love. It is impossible for an independent person to love, or to accept love. Love of its very nature requires giving and receiving. If you are going to love another person, you must be open to receive what they might give you. They might return your love, or they might hurt you. But either way you must be ready to receive, even as you seek to give your love to the other. In loving another, we know most fully what it means to be dependent. This is a dependence which we choose. As the relationship grows, we sense our growing vulnerability, and we are tempted from time to time to draw back. If we go on, we risk allowing ourselves to become dependent on another -- dependent for our happiness, our fulfillment, even our self-acceptance.

It is in such a relationship that we find true humanity. We find that the zestful life is not one of independence but one of radical dependence. We take for our heroes not those who have gone it alone, but those who have risked the dependence of love: Jesus Christ rather than the Lone Ranger. We see that it is they who have the most human integrity. The others pale in comparison as merely self-seeking. It is sacrifice and self-giving love that we come to really admire, as we find in our own experience that these are both more difficult and more rewarding than mere independence.

So it is when we look at Jesus, the true Man. He did not celebrate His independence in His life on earth. He gave Himself into the hands of men. He allowed Himself to be dependent upon them. He left Himself at the mercy of His disciples, and one of them betrayed Him. But even His betrayal did not bring Him to abandon His love: He could have decided to go it alone and come down from the Cross. Instead, He loved us to the end. Through our dependence upon Him we come to the full stature of our humanity.

We are created to depend upon God. In Adam we rejected that dependence, thinking that we knew better. In Christ, we have the chance to return to our true dependence on God: a mature and well-integrated dependence of full human beings and not of obsequious toadys. In Christ we learn to celebrate our dependence, not feeling sorry for ourselves because we cannot do it all on our own. Instead we rejoice that He will work in us, and that He shares His love with us. In sharing God's love lies the way of holy dependence.

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