



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

July/August 1993

RENUNCIATION

We are apt to think of our Christian life something like this: if we are good Christians, we will get everything we need and our desires will be satisfied. Do we long for the companionship of marriage? If we are faithful, God will supply it. Do we long for a more comfortable home, or would we most like to live not in the city but in the country? We expect that eventually God will come through. We expect to be satisfied as a result of our commitment and efforts. We assume that if God did not intend to satisfy the longings, He would not have allowed us to have them.

But this assumption needs to be examined. Why do we expect our desires to be satisfied? We made no such bargain with God when we committed ourselves to Him. There was no quid pro quo, where we do our part in prayer and virtue and going to church, and He gives us what we always wanted. That is treating Him more as a genie than as God. When we first committed ourselves to Him, we claimed that all we wanted was to serve God, and to let Him make of our lives what He would. Yet somehow we always assumed that this would include our gratification as well -- perhaps not immediately, but that at some point we would be finished with the work of Christian life and ready to enjoy its earthly rewards.

Or did God make the bargain with us? Did He promise that if we would serve Him faithfully He would give us what we want in this life? No -- He promised the cross. He promised what we need to be ready to accept His offer of heaven. He gives what is good for us, though this is not always what we want. (Only when we are well along in the Christian life does the conflict between what we want and what God gives disappear -- because He has so completely reordered our wants that we no longer want anything other than what He gives.)

The signs of our expectation come out in prayer. It helps to step back and listen to ourselves. Do we share our deep desires with God only with the demand that He fulfill them? If we are stuck in a job we don't really like, and yet believe that He has placed us there, do we nag Him daily about finding us something else? Do we complain daily about the unfulfilled desire, and point out how it in-

terferes with life and prayer? It may come down to this: since we have the desire, God must will to satisfy it. Our desire equals His will for us.

But it is just possible that rather than gratifying it, He wishes us to renounce it. An uncomfortable thought! But consider the Christian life more from His perspective. It is not our particular desires (or even our actions and accomplishments) that are of primary importance, but rather the condition of our hearts. Will we receive His love and abide in it or not? Will we thereby be made ready to receive His offer of heaven, or will we prefer to live on our own? All the feelings and actions serve that end; they are of only relative importance. God will use them, and this means sometimes giving us what we desire, and sometimes letting us do without. Doing without may be needed to lead us to depend upon Him for getting through a seemingly intolerable situation.

So we are lead (once again) to the cross. For Christianity the way to self-fulfillment is through self-denial. "The measure that you give is the measure that you will receive." (See Luke 6:38.) We possess not by hoarding or earning but by giving up. This is true for our desires as well as our possessions. It is hard for us to grasp this: that we live exactly so far as we are willing to die. Contentment, peace, and joy in this life are not to be found in the complete and unbridled satisfaction of our desires, but in giving up our desires to God's love.

It is possible that God will ask some large renunciations of us -- to forgo being married, or the indulgences of being single (or childless), the renunciation of having one sort of job and career rather than the one for which we think we are better suited, or of living in one place rather than in one we would enjoy and find more comfortable. If He does, we may be sure that He has our good in mind, and that He will supply all the grace we need (and it may be a lot!) to not only bear up under the deprivation but also to triumph.

Quite apart from the "big" renunciations, we may be sure that God will give us opportunities for little ones. For it is only by the practice of renunciation that we can learn to live not for self but for God. You know what happens to a child whose every wish is gratified: totally spoiled, and incapable of contentment, much less virtue. God would spare us from being spoiled and childish Christians. He does this by giving us the opportunities to renounce our own desires, and thus to live by a deeper principle than self-gratification.

The opportunities are all around us, though we do not always recognize them. For example, how do we spend our money? Do we accept the discipline and prudence of a budget, or do we just buy what we want and hope there is enough left at the end of the month to pay the utilities and the rent? It takes effort and time to figure out a budget, and even more discipline to maintain it. In particular, it requires of us that on occasion, we do **not** buy what we would like. That's the hard part: forgoing something that we want, even though it is available at a good price (especially when the opportunity may not come again -- as with an antique), just

because we cannot really afford it. For many of us this is very hard! We cannot do it without the grace which comes when we admit our weakness and depend upon God.

If money offers us ample opportunities for renunciation, so does the tongue. When we hear some juicy tidbit about someone, we can inquire further and try to find out all we can. Or we can renounce that sort of knowledge -- which doesn't get us any closer to God, after all. And keep our mouth shut. Since knowledge is power, as we well know, it is hard to let the opportunity pass and not pursue the matter.

It is the same with our curiosity: we do not **have** to satisfy it all the time. We can live without knowing ahead of time what is for supper. We do not really need to look round when someone comes into church late to see who it is. This was once known as "custody of the eyes." In church, we do well to keep some control over our curiosity in order to pay attention to God in our worship -- thus not seeking to find out who is there and who is absent, not keeping track of the servers' mistakes in the sanctuary, not checking out the cobwebs to see if the sexton is on the ball. The same is true outside of the church setting. Men do not have to "check out" attractive women they see on the street (particularly when they should be paying attention to their driving!). Many do it by habit: but it is a habit we would be better off without.

There are also emotional opportunities for renunciation. It is not necessary for us to be angry when things do not go our way, nor for us to get impatient when we are caught in a traffic jam. It is an act of renunciation to give up the old habit, to retain our equanimity, and it is one that we are unlikely to accomplish on our own. Renunciation depends upon grace.

In addition to "giving up" there are more positive ways for renunciation. Renunciation is a vital way to love your spouse, for example. We need to put aside our desires for the sake of the other. Sometimes I will want to go out, and she will want to stay home. I will want to leave the dirty dishes stacked beside the sink (so the sink is usable), and she wants them in the sink (so they are out of sight). I want one thing for supper, she another. My love for her can well be expressed by my allowing her some satisfaction in these little things, and not always insisting on my own way. I can also renounce the privilege of being irritated with her for the way she does things -- for resenting the renunciation.

Around the home we have so many opportunities to sacrifice our cherished habits so that things run more smoothly: perhaps to change our bedtime to fit in with the schedules of wife and children, or to keep a dresser neat since it makes it easier to clean, or to change the time I'm in the bathroom in the morning. Control of our time is perhaps the most telling factor, since we are more possessive of time, even than money.

So we have many opportunities to practice renunciation. What is the point? It is not to make ourselves worthy of God and earn a place in

heaven: we cannot do that, even by great renunciations. Even giving it all up and becoming a monk does not automatically achieve heaven. Renunciation is not a work of self-salvation.

Rather the point is to make room in our hearts for the love of God. As long as we are full of self, there is no room for God. The self, the old man, tries to maintain its stranglehold on our hearts, for it is mortally threatened by God's love and sovereignty. Its hold is broken as God's love gives us the strength to renounce our selfish desires. Renunciation is the key to breaking up the hardness of heart, and allowing the love of God to come in. As it comes in, we also begin to return it. We can love God back only insofar as we receive His love. Renunciation enables us to love -- not just for the sake of manipulating others into loving us -- but to love truly and selflessly, as we are loved by God. This is possible only when we have renounced the control of our lives by our selfishness, and thus practiced renunciation.

Renunciation is also the practice of being disciples. We learn discipline, the discipline of not always living for self. It is impossible, as the name suggests, to be a disciple without discipline. While discipline is not always pleasant at the time (Hebrews 12), it is essential for our growth into Christ.

If we are to love -- whether God or another person -- we need to be freed from the tyranny of our feelings and immediate desires. Love is not a matter of gratification but of self-giving. And if we are incapable of acting except to satisfy our desires we will never have much of a relationship with anyone! So the opportunities of renunciation teach us what we need to know in order to love. Since the relationship of love with God is so central to Christian life, renunciation is a vital step for us.

Finally, renunciation is part and parcel of the paradox of Christian life: that we must die in order to live, that we possess by giving away, that we receive by renouncing. (See Luke 6:37-38.) As this flies in the face of the way the world operates, we have trouble grasping it, much less practicing it. We have Jesus' example: He sacrificed His very life, and by dying He is alive.

For our part, we wish to live wholly in obedient love to God. We aspire to have nothing of our own, but only what He wills us to have. The way we do this is to offer all that we have (the bad as well as the good) to Him, asking Him to receive it all. This is our renunciation. Then He will give back to us exactly what is good for us. We will receive it as His generous gift and not as our just reward -- at least we will if we really did renounce it. Then we possess it as His gift, and enjoy it as coming from Him. We will not grasp it or cling to it, for it is His to do with as is best. Through renunciation we find freedom from the domination of the things of this life and our desire for them. We also find God: for in the dynamic of renunciation and God's gift, we are drawn close to God through the things of this life.

