

28. November 2023

The virtue of fortitude Part IV

In yesterday's meditation, we had heard that, according to St John of the Cross, when one makes the decision to follow Christ more intensely, the Devil tries to prevent the decisive step by instilling fear, distracting us and tempting us in various ways. Not infrequently the obstacles can come from people who are close to us, but who have not made up their minds to follow the Lord fully, nor do they understand this path. They may even be pious people, but who do not have a deep enough relationship with the Lord to understand the mystery between God and the soul called by Him. Thus, it may happen that these people feel they have to discourage or even warn against embarking on this more intense path.

God permits such temptations, so that the soul may respond to His call with greater determination. In such circumstances, she must show courage and fortitude, for those who want to prevent her from taking this path may be people whom she respects and loves. By resisting them for the Lord's sake, the soul is strengthened and prepared for the path ahead. I am referring here to the Christian vocation in general, but especially to religious vocations, which have to leave everything to follow Christ.

However, trials come not only from without, but also from within, through thoughts and feelings that want to frighten the soul. If the soul does not deal wisely with these thoughts and feelings, it may begin to doubt, become insecure and, in the worst case, not continue on the path she has decided to take.

Those who find themselves in such a situation should devote themselves intensively to prayer. If possible, he or she should turn to an experienced spiritual guide, who also follows an intense inner way. It is important to remember that the call comes from God, and that it is not our "qualification" that is in the foreground, but the will of the Lord. All fears and uncertainties that arise in the soul are to be presented to God in prayer. He who calls us will also give us the strength to courageously follow our path. One should not concentrate too much on oneself and one's weaknesses, but rather deepen one's trust in God, Who calls us to a more intense way in following Him.

When one has overcome these initial obstacles with God's help and has grown in the virtue of fortitude, the next challenges await.

God purifies those whom He loves. Thus, having set out on the inner way, it is up to us to undergo the corresponding inner purifications. Often the soul does not yet understand that this stage of the journey is also a sign of the Lord's great love. With these purifications He gives us to understand that He takes seriously the soul that wants to correspond to His courtship. It begins to perceive more clearly its attachments to the things of this world, and has the impression that it is faced with an enormous mountain to be removed. Thus, she can easily become discouraged, for it is more difficult to deal with the passions and disordered attachments than to offer resistance to the attacks from without.

Here again we are helped by the virtue of fortitude, which in this case will consist in taking a step of trust. Every act of trust in God detaches us from ourselves, and thus becomes a purifying element, because we will no longer build so much on our own abilities. Precisely at this stage of purification, one begins to abandon the securities one used to have, and the soul becomes more and more anchored in God, instead of trusting in itself. This is a great challenge, which challenges our strength. In this case, it is not so much a question of "resisting", but of going into a certain "darkness". Although by faith we know that God waits for us and accompanies us, the soul is not yet sufficiently rooted in God and not sufficiently sure of His love. So now, when her sense-satisfactions, which used to give her a natural security, are being purified, she has to take a courageous step which brings her into the "night", so to speak, but which actually brings her closer to God.

It can happen that on our way of following the Lord certain temptations are repeated again and again, and one falls into them. Then the soul would like to "throw in the towel" and become discouraged. Although the sacrament of penance strengthens and fortifies the soul again and again, she is not able to resist the temptations as she had intended. Perhaps the Lord permits this "plague" so that she may grow in humility, for she is still too self-confident. Here again the virtue of fortitude is required, not to give up and to set out again and again to do everything in our power to resist in the fight. It takes courage to get up again after defeats and fight on, instead of staying down and giving in to one's weaknesses.

On an intense way of following Christ and in the purifications that are part of it, we may again and again come to situations that require us to take a new step. It is always a question of abandoning ourselves even more to God. Christian mysticism speaks of two "nights" that the soul has to go through. The first "night" (called "night of the senses") consists of leaving behind those securities that give us the pleasures and attachments in the sensual sphere. The second "night" (called the "dark night of the soul") consists in our being purified of our own ideas, imaginations, thought constructs, etc., in which we often place our security. The aim is that the soul becomes more and more anchored in God and detached from itself.

In this context, we cannot go into the details of these stages of the way of purification. In the context of the virtue of fortitude, it is sufficient to point out that in all these processes of inner transformation it is necessary to take courageous steps, or also to be courageous in allowing God to purify our soul.

So, for all the struggles we have to face in our Christian life, the virtue of fortitude is very important: whether in professing our faith, or in enduring the threats and sufferings that may come our way, or in leaving behind family and loved ones when our vocation demands it, or in going the inner way....

If we take all these steps with the help of God - who, by the way, will never deny us what we need - then the virtue of fortitude will grow and become more and more natural to us. Thus we will be able to exclaim with St. Paul: *“Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ - can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence; (...) No; we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us” (Rom 8:35,37)*