

CERTITUDE
AND SAINTHOOD

Grace is yours, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This week we are reflecting in various ways about being a saint. For those of us of the Christian tradition, the place we would obviously go is our eschatological hero: Jesus who is called the Christ. After that, the Church has said there are many saints, and they usually wait until after a person is dead before he is made a saint. That is not because that person is any better or in any way different from any of the rest of us, but his death has sealed off who he is. However you and I may hate to face it, there is always the possibility of apostasy before the Lord. There is always the possibility in the future, in that last minute or two, that we might throw our whole lives away. So the Church has wisely waited until we have died before it has proclaimed sainthood. Nevertheless, the demand is there because we start with the revelation of Jesus Christ. What we see revealed is the deeps of humanness that have always been there. Jesus Christ became the first full human being. Once you see that he was the first full human being, you see that is what a human being always has been in history. Therefore, you and I, being people of faith, are and must be saints. For we are out to be what every man longs for, and knows about in the bottom of his being, in order that he may have the possibility of being a full human being. You and I must be saints, for we owe humanity our being, and owe it what we know.

Now, saints live in the Other World. But that Other World is always in the midst of This World: the world of the mundane, the world of everyday existence, the world of the nitty-gritty. I would like to speak today about Certitude; but before I do, let me read to you from Paul, who talks in this area.

All who follow the leading of God's spirit are God's own sons. Nor are you meant to relapse into the old slavish attitude of fear-- you have been adopted into the very family circle of God and you can say with a full heart, "Abba, father," for the Spirit himself endorses our inward conviction that we really are the children of God. Think what this means. If we are his children then we share his treasures, and all that Christ claims as his will belong to all of us as well. Yes, if we share his sufferings, we shall certainly share his glory.

(Romans 8:14-17)

I never will forget my early ministry. I had been through seminary, theological training and special tutorials and meetings and everything else, but something never did "jell" for me. Then, I remember one day hearing someone in a conversation talk about the Bultmann paper we use in RS-I. So, I read that paper, and it was as if I read it for the first time. At every point, there was God. That upagaintness you run into at every point in your life: that was God. That one who shoved you out, out, and out: that was God. I was so excited. All my studying suddenly fit into place. I went around button-holing people and saying, "Look, he says that's God. He says that's God." Some of them would look at me suspiciously; some would get angry; some would say yes. It seemed as if I had to button-hole everybody. You see, everything was now coming into focus. I knew that for the rest of my

life I was going to live before the Father, that every day, every place, everything in this world would break open with meaning. It would bubble, it would dance for me, and it did not make any difference if it was good or bad, rich or poor, better or worse, joyful or painful, or anything like that. I knew it would be alive. I knew it would vibrate. I knew it was going to be Life itself. That was what was given in that situation. It was what I knew at the bottom of my being; and that excitement, that anticipation, no matter how dimmed and dented by time over the years, never went away. In fact, it continued to become more intense.

This has certainly been our journey of the past few years. I will never forget our reading Otto's book, The Idea of the Holy, two years ago. Though I remember it in seminary, and again in the early 1960's, it suddenly seemed as if he spoke more clearly about the Mystery and its awe-filled presence in life. Last fall on a trip to Africa, every night and morning I read that book; I took it apart piece by piece. It seemed to be saying that which was an intensification of all I had ever known.

St. John of the Cross also gave the Mystery back in a brand-new way, especially in our study of transposing him into the twentieth century. Everywhere you live before the mystery. This alien, imposing, over-powering power, this burning awe, this consuming fire has hold of you, and there is no way out. There is no escape. That is just the way your life is---now and forever. You are enabled to see that this consuming fire is divine love. All of life begins to glow with awe, with that divine love. Remember in the book when you come to the ladder, when you move from the first to the second step? There is no longer any decision left---you just know the way life is from the beginning to the end. The only thing you can do is to swoon---or to submit yourself to runnings up and down the ladder, surrendering yourself to that consuming fire which is now Divine Love.

You know how hymns out of your childhood begin to address you---those that you had rejected and refused to sing over the years because they were cast in un-contemporary tunes and an outdated language? A particular hymn has kept coming back to me again and again:

"O, Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be."

When you sing that hymn in your being, you know the universe is glad to have you in it; and that you are glad to have that universe in you. Meaning that is everywhere now comes together in one focus.

Certitude now is given to you as a state of Being. Certitude is not a feeling of comfort; it is not psychological peace; it is not man's love. Certitude is beyond the lucidity each one of us has had to grapple with in the past. That lucidity has already told us everything dies and passes away. We already know there are no absolutes. You know you do not have three good reasons up your sleeve by which you judge life. Certitude is beyond the intellectual. It is beyond the doubt raised by the question "Why?" Certitude is beyond every question, beyond every doubt, beyond self-doubt, beyond every darkness. Certitude becomes real when you see that divine love is loving you all the time; that the universe is glad to have you in it. Certitude is not something inside or outside that you can hold on to. It is a state of Being, and the state of Being one finds oneself in is his state of Being. You see Jesus making an audacious, pretentious claim, "I am the

truth." Then the finger turns around and points at you; and you know certitude is not knowledge. You know Certitude is not a process of rationalization. Certitude is a state of Being; a state of Being that is awareness of one's state of Being. Then you realize that your life is the content of the Contentless Word. When you grasp that the universe is glad to have you, you mean it is glad to have you as you are.

As Jesus said, "I am the truth." Now, I do not have some scale to measure that by. The truth is, "here I am." Certitude is the indicative of "Here I am," Life is all about what life is all about. And the truth of the situation is, "here I am as I am." When I collapse inside and try to crawl out of the abyss, the truth is that I am collapsed inside trying to crawl out of the abyss. If I am riding on the surf of wildness, rushing into the future, filled with awe, almost exploding inside trying to recreate the situation, then the truth is that I am riding on the surf of wildness, rushing into the future, filled with awe, about to explode inside, trying to recreate the situation. Then to say, "I am the truth" is to say, "God loves me and I love God."

Well, whatever else Sainthood is, it is not an abstraction, or applied to a special part of life, but it is in the midst of life exactly as it is. As Francis de Sales puts it: "The holy life is for the shopkeeper and for the barmaid." The Other World is present only in This World. Today we do not need Unamuno to tell us that life is tragic. Lucidity has told this to each one of us. It seems we have had to stand in the deserts of life far beyond our ability or willingness to endure. This is the world of our everyday life---our concrete, practical life. It is only in this world that the Other World is present.

Some of you have had a tough time in your houses this quarter. Families left the House, or you didn't bring in people like you thought you ought to; your finances are in horrible shape; or some of you shaped up your finances, and your recruitment went to pot. Some of you didn't have any RS-I's, or only a few, this quarter. Your spouse has been horrible this quarter. You almost lost Galaxies because of the stupidity of some of your troika or House members. And yet, you have had a great quarter. You have had a great success. You are exuberant, you are filled with joy, and a sense of wildness. But you are fearful of the demands upon you. How can you possibly keep this up? Can you stand another quarter? Here we are, getting ready to deal seriously with the Ecumenical Parish and the Guild. You should never have been sent to your House in the first place! It's either beyond you or beneath you. You thought about taking a year out, and spent the next three weeks filled with guilt, trying to come to terms with that thought! Your personal finances are in horrible shape. You come back here, and you know your colleagues are going to show you up. You get off with that fine speech, and the next guy gets up and outdoes you. Or you feel like a wallflower---not many people greet you; or you feel insecure and giddy, talkative or moody---and you are going to be thrown into the abyss of the future anyway. Your daily days and your daily nights are dark: dark with humiliation, weakness, hostility, and suffering.

Life is just one big humiliation. You have humiliation the rest of your life. But you are not talking about some big moral or specific concretion. Your humiliation is that you have offended Being itself. You have let the universe down. You have refused your contingency. You have rebelled against your finitude. The strange thing is that when you embrace your humiliation, when you eat your way through its concretions, that becomes your pride, your honor, your authenticity.

In other words, now your pride is at your disposal.

And then there is your weakness. You question your own capacity to Do. This is not relative strength such as trying to do something in four hours instead of six, or how you are going to recruit ten RS-I's instead of five. No, you question your capacity to live your life. All your life seems to be insignificant, and without power. You sense you have unbelievable inadequacy. Yet, you have a new conception of strength. As Paul puts it, "I will boast in those things that have shown up my weakness." But, when you embrace your weakness or eat your way through its concretions, you have power. And that power is at your disposal.

Then comes hostility, hatred, anger, or just resentment. Yet, this is not in the realm of the moral, but in the ontological. Your resentment is hatred for Being. You resent the way things are; you resent your humiliation and weakness; you are hostile at life itself. It burns you out inside and never goes away; it just stays there and burns. But, when you embrace your hatred, you find that Being takes that hatred and uses it on his behalf. Life is ripping, tearing, fierce, and bursting into the future. Hatred becomes a tool for breaking into the future, for serving the neighbor. When you embrace your resentment and eat your way through it, through the way life is, you see in a strange way that you are in love with the world, and with the mystery. You care for life itself, and your neighbor. Love is at your disposal.

Life is also filled with suffering. The concretions of your practical everyday life are filled with suffering---innocent suffering. And the more lucid you get, the more you suffer. That will continue. All of life is suffering, and that is the way it will always be. Suffering takes place in struggling from the old to the new, and the past to the future, and from the crucifixion to the resurrection. Our fathers in the Scriptures knew that. Take the Epistle to the Hebrews: "for whom the Lord loves, he chastens." Or Paul: "for I count it as a privilege to suffer." To embrace your suffering, to eat of it, is to see that at the heart of Being itself is suffering. The Hebrew people, whom God smashed up against the wall of life in such a way they could hardly recognize themselves, in faith grasp their lives in such a way that their being manifested itself as suffering. Or again, in the whole play or drama of the Gospels, God comes in the form of Jesus, and dies. The whole crucifixion deals with suffering. Suffering is the saving grace of history itself; it is what saves the world. And you know how the saints of old used to use suffering as a test of their sainthood. They would dare to expose themselves to the sufferings of the world in such a way that the stigmata would appear in their hands. Suffering is now not yours but is at your disposal; to use it for all mankind.

Well, Certitude comes out of the fact of the eternal presence of the mystery. It fills you with dread and fascination. With Camus, in The Stranger, you become aware of the "benign indifference" blowing in your face; for as you are, you are received. Certitude is hoping God's hope; it is saying out loud the great indicative. It is then that you realize that your pride, your power, the disposition of your being, all belong to your neighbor. And also when this awareness breaks in, you begin to sense that every creature you bump into confirms it. Portents of this Certitude appear everywhere. Signs explode. The hunter-warrior is good in pointing to them.

Our fathers made great use of the image of light. Joe has shared with us several times how his grandmother, on her deathbed, rose up and said, "It's light both ways." That is a great image, is it not? Now everything makes sense. I know everything I need to know. I have nothing now that is left for me to learn. I am all truth and all glory. No wonder the saints have been accused of dogmatism. Now you participate in a quiet confidence that is beyond self-doubt; it sets you at ease. No longer do you have the nervous anxiety of quest, of searching, or wondering. You are set at rest. For now you know that you are in the hands of God. Your rest is heavenly rest---blessed, or bliss. Now you have a foretaste of one who has gone to heaven. You have assurance, or as the hymn tells us, "blessed assurance," sanctified assurance. It gives you audacity, it gives you boldness. It puts you beyond harm. Nothing again can touch you. It is "set-aside" assurance; it is sanctified, sacred, missional assurance. It is objective assurance. What I read out of Romans a while ago, the part where his spirit witnesses with our spirit, that is the classic passage of Certitude. You become aware that you are a child of God. And this awareness also points to endlessness. It is not that you are a child of God because of anything you do. You are a child of God only because God ordained that you are a child of God. God has made you his child. There is nothing that you have ever done or nothing that you can ever do to change the fact that you are a child of God. The only thing that you have now to do, as Paul puts it, is to say, "Abba, Father," "Father, my Father."

The New Testament has so many ways to tell us this fact over again and again. Some of them are so pretentious that we are afraid to use them, and yet that uneasiness means that we fear to live our lives. I remember the first time I bumped into Jesus' statement in the Gospel of John, "I and the Father are one....If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Now, this is really living out of the Holy Spirit. You recall in the worship service, Act One is that you come to terms with the way life is. Act Two is that you affirm the way life is. Act Three is the Holy Spirit, that you participate in the way that life is. Now, our Father created the way things are, and he plans to create the future. And I now recreate in my being the way things are, and plan and create the future. I and the Father are one. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. We have only one thing to do the rest of our lives if we would be saints, and that is to give to humanity our being, and give to them what we know. That they may see us and know the Father.

In face of all this, what is there left to say? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not grudge his own Son but gave him up for us all---can we not trust such a God to give us, with him, everything else that we can need?

Who would dare to accuse us, whom God has chosen? The judge himself has declared us free from sin. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us!

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, pain or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to life and limb, the threat of force of arms? Indeed some of us know the truth of that ancient text:

For thy sake we are killed all the day long;
We were accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

No, in all these things we win an overwhelming victory through him who has proved his love for us.

I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of Heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!
(Romans 8: 31-)

That is your certitude.

---Joseph Slicker

12/20/73