

owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the price of the things they sold, and laid it down before the feet of the Apostles. And distribution was made to every one according as he had need."

No one denied those men the right to own land, or to keep what they owned, or to sell it and give away their money. Yet that right implied an obligation to satisfy the needs of others as well as their own, and brought with it the privilege of doing so in a manner that was beyond the strict letter of any law and which could go as far as a charity that was heroic.

If you have money, consider that perhaps the only reason God allowed it to fall into your hands was in order that you might find joy and perfection by giving it all away.

It is easy enough to tell the poor to accept their poverty as God's will when you yourself have warm clothes and plenty of food and medical care and a roof over your head and no worry about the rent. But if you want them to believe you—try to share some of their poverty and see if you can accept it as God's will yourself!

## Humility against Despair

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*  
1961

DESPAIR is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.

In every man there is hidden some root of despair because in every man there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us. But because our own resources inevitably fail us, we are all more or less subject to discouragement and to despair.

Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves.

*But a man who is truly humble cannot despair, because in the humble man there is no longer any such thing as self-pity.*



It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life. For the beginning of humility is the beginning of blessedness and the consummation of humility is the perfection of all joy. Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul. It is the only key to faith, with which the spiritual life begins: for faith and humility are inseparable. In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself for God: and it is lost and submerged in Him and transformed into Him.

At this point of the spiritual life humility meets the highest exaltation of greatness. It is here that every one who humbles himself is exalted because, living no longer for himself or on the human level, the spirit is delivered of all the limitations and vicissitudes of creaturehood and of contingency, and swims in the attributes of God, Whose power, magnificence, greatness and eternity have, through love, through humility, become our own.

If we were incapable of humility we would be incapable of joy, because humility alone can destroy the self-centeredness that makes joy impossible.

If there were no humility in the world, everybody would long ago have committed suicide.

There is a false humility which thinks it is pride to desire the highest greatness—the perfection of contem-

plation, the summit of mystical union with God. This is one of the biggest illusions in the spiritual life because it is only in this greatness, only in this exalted union, that we can achieve perfect humility.

Yet it is easy to see how this mistake is made: and, in fact, from a certain point of view it is not a mistake at all. For if we consider the joy of mystical union abstractly, merely as something which perfects our own being and gives us the highest possible happiness and satisfaction, it is possible to desire it with a desire that is selfish and full of pride. This pride will be all the greater if our desire implies that this consummation is somehow due to us, as if we had a right to it, as if there were something we could do to earn it for ourselves.

This is the way mystical union appears in the minds of those who do not realize that the essence of that union is a pure and selfless love that empties the soul of all pride and annihilates it in the sight of God, so that nothing may be left of it but the pure capacity for Him.

The joy of the mystical love of God springs from a liberation from all self-hood by the annihilation of every trace of pride. Desire not to be exalted but only to be abased, not to be great but only little in your own eyes and the eyes of the world: for the only way to enter into that joy is to dwindle down to a vanishing point and become absorbed in God through the center of your own nothingness. The only way to possess His greatness is to pass through the needle's eye of your own absolute insufficiency.



The perfection of humility is found in transforming union. Only God can bring you to that purity through the fires of interior trial. It would be foolish not to desire such perfection. For what would be the good of being humble in a way that prevented you from seeking the consummation of all humility?

THOUGH it is intrinsically reasonable and right to desire mystical union with God, we so easily misunderstand what this means that it can sometimes become the most dangerous of all desires. To desire God is the most fundamental of all human desires. It is the very root of all our quest for happiness. Even the sinner, who seeks happiness where it cannot be found, is following a blind, errant desire for God which is not aware of itself. So that, from one point of view, it is impossible not to desire God.

On the other hand, when you use the expression to "desire God" you implicitly reduce God to the status of an "object" or of a "thing," as if He were "something" that could be grasped and possessed the way we possess riches, or knowledge, or some other created entity. And though it is true that we are bound to hope for the fulfillment of our deepest needs in the vision of God, yet it is at the same time very dangerous to think of God merely as the satisfaction of all our needs and desires. In so doing, we tend inevitably to distort and even to desecrate His holy and infinite truth.

I have seen many men enter monasteries with an

earnest, devouring hunger for God, for contemplative experience. And I have seen them leave the monastery beaten and frustrated by the very intensity of their unfulfilled desires. There is no hope more cruel than the vain hope for a supreme fulfillment that is so misunderstood as to be utterly impossible. There is no defeat more terrible than the defeat of the human heart driven wild by its desire of a mystical mirage.

What makes this defeat so cruel is the inexorable complacency of the teachers of the spiritual life who insist that "if you have not found God it is because you have refused Him something. You have not consented to pay the price." As if union with God were something put up for sale in monasteries like ham or cheese, a kind of secret bargain offered to men on the contemplative black market—offered to this or that unfortunate buyer at the precise moment when his pockets were empty.

Did not Isaiah say clearly that the waters of life are given to those, precisely, who have no money?

It is the duty of anyone who has had even the faintest glimpse of God's love to protest against an inhumanly cruel and false psychology of mysticism, this psychology which presents "sanctity" and "contemplation" under the guise of riches to be acquired. As if sanctity and mysticism were "goods" that one must have in order to be acceptable in the Kingdom of God—just as one must have a new car every two years, a ranch house and a TV



set in order to be acceptable in the cities of men. The new car and all that goes with it seem to indicate that one is not a bum or a slacker. That one is faithful to all the accepted standards. So too, spiritual consolations and very obvious virtues are supposed to be the sign that one has worked loyally in the service of God.

Little do we realize the meaning of spiritual poverty, of emptiness, of desolation, of total abandonment in the mystical life. Contemplative experience is not arrived at by the accumulation of grandiose thoughts and visions or by the practice of heroic mortifications. It is not "something you can buy" with any coin, however spiritual it might seem to be. It is a pure Gift of God, and it *has to be* a gift, for that is part of its very essence. It is a gift of which we can never, by any action of ours, make ourselves fully and strictly worthy. Indeed, contemplation itself is not necessarily a sign of worthiness or sanctity at all. It is a sign of the goodness of God, and it enables us to believe more firmly in His goodness, to trust in Him more, above all to be more faithful in our friendship with Him. All these should normally grow up as the fruits of contemplation. But do not be surprised if contemplation springs out of pure emptiness, in poverty, dereliction and spiritual night.

In point of fact, too ardent a desire for contemplation can be an obstacle to contemplation, because it may proceed from delusion and attachment to one's self. The very desire for contemplation may be a dense, opaque,

heavy thing that fills our emptiness, enslaves us to the idol of our exterior self, and binds us, like blind Samson, to the mill of vain hopes and illusory desires.

BE careful of every vain hope: it is in reality a temptation to despair. It may seem very real, very substantial. You may come to depend far too much on this apparent solidity of what you think is soon to be yours. You may make your whole spiritual life, your very faith itself, depend on this illusory promise. Then, when it dissolves into air, everything else dissolves along with it. Your whole spiritual life slips away between your fingers and you are left with nothing.

In reality, this could be a good thing, and we should be able to regard it as a good thing, if only we could fall back on the substantiality of pure and obscure faith, which cannot deceive us. But our faith is weak. Indeed, too often the weakest thing about our faith is the illusion that our faith is strong, when the "strength" we feel is only the intensity of emotion or of sentiment, which have nothing to do with real faith.

How many people there are in the world of today who have "lost their faith" along with the vain hopes and illusions of their childhood. What they called "faith" was just one among all the other illusions. They placed all their hope in a certain sense of spiritual peace, of comfort, of interior equilibrium, of self-respect. Then



when they began to struggle with the real difficulties and burdens of mature life, when they became aware of their own weakness, they lost their peace, they let go of their precious self-respect, and it became impossible for them to "believe." That is to say it became impossible for them to comfort themselves, to reassure themselves, with the images and concepts that they found reassuring in childhood.

Place no hope in the feeling of assurance, in spiritual comfort. You may well have to get along without this. Place no hope in the inspirational preachers of Christian sunshine, who are able to pick you up and set you back on your feet and make you feel good for three or four days—until you fold up and collapse into despair.

Self-confidence is a precious natural gift, a sign of health. But it is not the same thing as faith. Faith is much deeper, and it must be deep enough to subsist when we are weak, when we are sick, when our self-confidence is gone, when our self-respect is gone. I do not mean that faith *only* functions when we are otherwise in a state of collapse. But true faith must be able to go on even when everything else is taken away from us. Only a humble man is able to accept faith on these terms, so completely without reservation that he is glad of it in its pure state, and welcomes it happily even when nothing else comes with it, and when everything else is taken away.

If we are not humble, we tend to demand that faith

must also bring with it good health, peace of mind, good luck, success in business, popularity, world peace, and every other good thing we can imagine. And it is true that God can give us all these good things if He wants to. But they are of no importance compared with faith, which is essential. If we insist on other things as the price of our believing, we tend by that very fact to undermine our own belief. I do not think it would be an act of mercy on God's part simply to let us get away with this!

A HUMBLE man is not disturbed by praise. Since he is no longer concerned with himself, and since he knows where the good that is in him comes from, he does not refuse praise, because it belongs to the God he loves, and in receiving it he keeps nothing for himself but gives it all, with great joy, to his God. *Fecit mihi qui potens est, et sanctum nomen ejus!*

A man who is not humble cannot accept praise gracefully. He knows what he ought to do about it. He knows that the praise belongs to God and not to himself: but he passes it on to God so clumsily that he trips himself up and draws attention to himself by his own awkwardness.

One who has not yet learned humility becomes upset and disturbed by praise. He may even lose his patience when people praise him; he is irritated by the sense of his own unworthiness. And if he does not make a fuss



about it, at least the things that have been said about him haunt him and obsess his mind. They torment him wherever he goes.

At the other extreme is the man who has no humility at all and who devours praise, if he gets any, the way a dog gobbles a chunk of meat. But he presents no problem: he is so obvious that he has been a character in every farce since Aristophanes.

The humble man receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass.

THERE is danger that men in monasteries will go to such elaborate efforts to be humble, with the humility they have learned from a book, that they will make true humility impossible. How can you be humble if you are always paying attention to yourself? True humility excludes self-consciousness, but false humility intensifies our awareness of ourselves to such a point that we are crippled, and can no longer make any movement or perform any action without putting to work a whole complex mechanism of apologies and formulas of self-accusation.

If you were truly humble you would not bother about yourself at all. Why should you? You would only be concerned with God and with His will and with the objective order of things and values as they are, and not as your selfishness wants them to be. Consequently you

would have no more illusions to defend. Your movements would be free. You would not need to be hampered with excuses which are really only framed to defend you against the accusation of pride—as if your humility depended on what other people thought of you!

A humble man can do great things with an uncommon perfection because he is no longer concerned about incidentals, like his own interests and his own reputation, and therefore he no longer needs to waste his efforts in defending them.

For a humble man is not afraid of failure. In fact, he is not afraid of anything, even of himself, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom no other power has any meaning and for Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.

Humility is the surest sign of strength.