

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

23

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Should We Fear God?

God so great, God so close

There was a time when people were afraid of God and that fearfulness was cultivated. All the stress was on God's height, his majesty, his holiness. A demanding God, hard to satisfy, a powerful, threatening God, a severe judge, who saves, but also condemns. He was all the more dreaded because misfortunes and tribulations were attributed to his will, or at least his permission, as punishments. Almost, as a caricature, a terrifying God.

Nowadays there is a tendency to go to the other extreme: "Not at all, God is infinitely good, patient, gentle, merciful." He neither judges nor condemns. Toward him we should not feel fear – a word to be avoided – but great confidence. He shows himself so close, so human, so very humble and even, they say, weak, if we think of Jesus in his passion. (Actually, there is nothing weak about Jesus; from Gethsemane to Calvary his inner strength is clear and surprising.) With Saint John we repeat: "Perfect love banishes fear" (1 John 4:18), perhaps forgetting that perfection is not of this world, for who could boast of living a perfect love? Almost, as a caricature, a "nice" God.

There is much truth in both these ways of seeing. The failing they share is that they are both partial, monocular, instead of holding together and resolutely uniting both points of view. Faith is always dialectical; it finds itself obliged to maintain a balance

between virtually opposed realities, to walk along a crest, fighting against the temptation to retain and develop only one of two aspects. An uncomfortable situation, demanding constant vigilance, the courage to live in the full truth. For the human mind tends to simplify, for efficiency's sake, or often out of laziness and a liking for comfort.

Taken alone, the first of the two views ends in despair. Now it is possible to sin by despair. But as Saint Bernard notes, it is also possible to sin "by hope," telling ourselves that God in his goodness is not so fussy, that it's nothing to be upset about; sooner or later we'll get out of it, find a way round his demands.

Demands and mercy

Demanding, yes, God is certainly demanding, but not out of authoritarianism or a malevolent pleasure in burdening us, as might be suspected by a childishness in us that we have not completely overcome. God remains our Creator, by whom we live and move and have our being. It is because of a complete respect for his creation that he awaits from each one a response to what he offers that will be free and therefore responsible. He wishes each one to be a partner in his covenant, in the accomplishment of his great project of creation and re-creation. Such is his love that he expects each one to be holy and perfect, as he is. What is extraordinary about loving those who love us? Yes, he calls us to something extraordinary, and it is all to our credit. In his eyes we are persons in his image, and his way of looking at us aims to encourage our freedom, that of sons and daughters, of responsible friends with him.

In his love, his tenderness and his mercy, "our God is a consuming fire", says the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:29). Consuming all that shows itself unworthy of him, and of us too: whatever in us is small, vile, selfish. This fire is offered as a love within us which consumes what Saint Paul called "the old humanity", so that we can better rise in praise with a heart burning with love. Of course, love is gentleness, but it is also passion in its strength, and there-

fore includes a mysterious violence. In its quest for peace, in spite of itself it may well prove to be, as happened with Jesus himself, a stumbling-block, a sign of contradiction, a cause of division and of violence: “I did not come to bring peace....”

Our God reveals himself as infinitely lofty, having no common measure with his creation nor with our scale of values; at the same time he reveals himself as infinitely close, tearing open the heavens to descend. He joins with us in his Son in order to dwell in us by his Holy Spirit.

Greatness and closeness do not oppose or exclude one another, any more than demand and mercy do. We do not have to choose, but in faith hold them together, and in practice unite them in a close, constant to-and-fro. Surely that is the sense and the role of the “fear of God”? The expression is so frequent in both Testaments, it is all to our advantage not to get rid of it but recognize its value as something precious.

Insofar as we become aware who God is and who we are, before this greatness and closeness, surely we have every reason to tremble? Not from fearfulness but from a shock that takes our breath away, leaves us dumbfounded and spiritually “shattered.” Of course, we have an unfortunate tendency to grow accustomed to everything indifferently, and our trust in God can easily become careless. And yet the mystery of God is not only out there before us: we are called to enter into it, become participants in it.

Surely that mystery should stupefy us, shake us, petrify us with surprise and amazement?

Like a needle on a dial

There are terms and expressions in our languages that have several meanings, depending on the context. Such is not the case with “the fear of God”; it only has one meaning, a meaning that shifts like a needle on a dial, from left to right, from zero to infinity, moving by degrees from the greatest fear to the greatest love. We are going to number them off.

1. Furthest to the left, then, comes being afraid of God. This may seize us for a variety of reasons, even simply the threat to our independence we feel God represents as we imagine him in our own image! Besides, the reasons why we may be scared of God are also those that make us afraid of other people. Very often they derive from psychological problems, largely unconscious, connected with childhood: the feeling and the dread of being abandoned, the experience of being rejected, of inferiority, of failure; from parental failures or on the contrary from strong pressures, to say nothing of undeclared hatred or shame-ridden aggression sustained by the false feelings of guilt that can result from ill-treatment, sexual abuse, violence.... May the discovery of the heart of God in faith, of God’s unlimited generosity, prove stronger than such reasons, and open them to a process of healing.

For it is certainly not fearfulness that God wishes

for us or from us. “He has not given us a spirit of fear [in the sense of cowardice] but of courage, of love and self-mastery” (2 Timothy 1:7), three qualities that are the opposite of fearfulness. In the same sense: “we have not received a spirit of servitude bringing us back into fear” (Romans 8:15), which would be a form of subjugation. God would hate us to be fearful before him.

Yet at the same time the same Saint Paul evokes the state of sinners by saying “they do not have the fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:18). So although there is no reason to get bogged down in dread before God and if it is a matter of letting God set us free from it, this is far from suppressing fear before him. This first degree of the fear of God, dreading or being afraid of him, is something that the love of God urges us to go beyond, to overcome, every time we find ourselves back in it. Then the space of a very different kind of fear opens up, one that is highly positive: “Serve the Lord with fear, pay homage to him trembling” (Psalm 2:11), the trembling mentioned above.

2. After this zero degree the needle moves to the next step, one very close and, in fact, very legitimate: the fear of becoming lost far from God, of remaining indifferent to his promises, of banking only on this present life and refusing any future beyond it; the fear of choosing oneself and exiling God from one’s life, considering the life of Christ as null and

void; the fear of choosing death. Becoming lost far away from God is something within our power: the freedom for which God has created the human person and to which we are called is a freedom God respects infinitely. He has bound himself to it; he lets us misuse it if need be, although he does so most unwillingly, so to speak. Moreover, it is the key of loving. A person can lose himself far from God. Strictly speaking, it is not God who loses and condemns, but I myself who, if need be, oblige God to let me go away and lose myself. Such a fear really is legitimate, but it is important, again, not to remain fixed in it; rather let it act as a life-saving reflex.

3. One small step further, where the needle stops next, a new fear appears, again one that is quite justified: being afraid of judgment. What have I done with God's grace, his calling, his covenant? Have I sold everything to acquire the true treasure? Have I multiplied the value of the coin or coins he gave me? Have I made of this present life the expectancy, the preparation, the symbol of the life to come, of that festival where God waits for us to be with him? Have I lived accordingly, in hope? Let us listen to Saint Paul here: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). And in the first epistle of Saint Peter we find: "Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your exile here in fear. You were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:17).

Have I truly valued the life of Christ offered for me? Moreover, it is not so much God who will judge – that is an image –, it is we ourselves who will be confronted with what we promised to be... But if we judge ourselves all through time, we will not be judged in eternity. Here again, we should not get bogged down in a paralyzing fearfulness, but neither should we run away from this fear, comforting ourselves too easily so as not to have to think about it. We should call on the mercy of God and rediscover his demands as a lifeline. *Work out*, says Saint Paul, let the trembling of fear be transformed into a quivering of hope and ardour.

At this stage the goal is not to escape with a minimum of effort, like a slave or an employee, but to find our honour and our happiness in the collaboration that God offers us, as friends of Christ who has enabled us to be in on the Father's plans.

It is at this point on the dial that we need to listen to something that is often affirmed in the Old Testament: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 110:10).

4. The needle moves again, stopping at a new fear, where love is already close at hand, and is the cause of it: being afraid of offending God by disappointing him and hurting his trust. The Scriptures suggest to our stupefaction what a place God makes for us in his plan, the impatient patience with which he comes seeking us, setting us off again, stimulating

us. It is not only that he counts on our cooperation, he desires ardently that we should find in him our happiness, a life blossoming in communion with him.

5. The needle moves up another notch on the dial: here the fear consists of a feeling of shame at the thought of how little attention my love pays to God, the gulf of my inattention day by day. Such a shameful mess, whereas I can hear God saying: Seek my face, search for my presence. May that invitation from him transform my shame into presence to his presence.

6. One notch further on the dial: here, there is no feeling of guilt but a perception of my littleness, almost my insignificance, in the face of the dazzling holiness of God. Who am I in his eyes? What is a human being that God should remember and care about him? Yet he does not limit himself to bending down: he came, he humanized his holiness; it revealed itself to us in Jesus, his eternal Son; it went so far as to make its dwelling in us by the Holy Spirit. Such sublime height and loving proximity leave me speechless; confusion takes hold of my heart with an inexpressible gratitude and a trust that never stops amazing me. So the disciples, after the storm had died down, realized that they were carrying God the Creator in their boat; their fear now is very differ-

ent from their fearfulness a little while before, surrounded by wind and waves. Likewise Peter, James and John, on the mountain of the Transfiguration, an experience that left them dazed, Peter not knowing what he was saying. Or the officer from Capernaum: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof” (Matthew 8:8).

Such are the different degrees of fear as the needle moves from left to right. But it also moves back through them in the other direction, since we will be rid of none of them during our life here on earth. One or other of these fears will sooner or later need to be mastered, in other words lived out not as a failure in which we might remain buried, but as a springboard re-launching us in renewed confidence and dazzled good will. The last two, especially, need to be rediscovered constantly and preciously maintained.

Chaste fear

7. There still remains the last degree which goes definitively beyond all the others. We should use the future tense in speaking of it, since it is a matter of perfect love, something to be considered, or to be contemplated, it would be better to say, as the horizon to be aimed at. It proves to be of the order of the new world that we still wait for, but whose first-fruits we already experience, which is also a paradox and a dialectic (to-and-fro) of faith.

This love, truly, banishes fear, all fear. Yet very soon Christian thought understood that still fear does not disappear, neither in time nor in eternity. It becomes inward to love as what Saint Augustine called “chaste fear”. Psalm 19 also mentions a “pure” fear, a most surprising fear, for as a Cistercian father of the twelfth century remarked, “Why conceive of a fear that is scared of nothing? We would do better to call it love, since where God himself loves us, and where we will do nothing other than love him, fear has no more place.” Yes, regarding God it has no further reason to exist, but within us, at the heart of our love, it keeps its role.

What role? Preserving the quality of the love, both toward God and toward our neighbour. Friends of God, we are still his creatures, without rights in the face of his grace. Familiar with God we may be, but without familiarity. Chaste fear inhabits love in order to maintain its delicacy, its

humility, its surprise, its refusal to take over the one loved, God or neighbour. Love always has to keep from turning into a right; it remains a gift received with wonder. Chaste and pure, here fear aims to be a vigilance against our tendency to level down the most precious realities, by habit and routine. It also aims to be a humble deference since, from the start and for ever, we owe everything to the generosity of God, even this completely gratuitous fear. Perfect love is full assurance before God, and fear preserves it from the excessive assurance that would debase it. Ultimately, this fear within love protects it from becoming banal, preserves its mystery, its effect of surprise, its gleaming brightness.

Such are the motivations of this fear, but love is unaware of them, carried away by its own impetus.

8. One question: whereabouts on the dial should we situate the eminently positive fear to which the Scriptures exhort us so often? It accompanies faith as a burst of fervour, a spiritual eagerness, the offering of a humble affection, a consecration of oneself. “The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, those who hope in his love” (Psalm 33:18). “Let us perfect holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). “Serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Hebrews 12:28).

Where then are we to situate that fear, which does not banish all the rest, though tending toward perfection? We should understand it as being already of

the order of chaste fear, our way of approaching that as closely as we can. Insofar as our love is purified in gratuity, present fear begins to banish all fearfulness and take to itself all that we have mentioned regarding chaste fear. And insofar as the perfection of the new world remains as yet our horizon, present fear recalls the other kinds of fear, lower down on the scale, but as far as possible in order to heal them of their fearfulness and draw them into love.

Truly “happy whoever fears the Lord” (Psalm 113:1).

To illustrate and verify what we have tried to show above, here follows a passage from Gilbert of Hoyland, an English Cistercian abbot and writer of the twelfth century.

In order to approach the paradox of “chaste fear”, he invites us to join his search for intellectual and spiritual understanding, rather than simply serving up his conclusions. He suggests three degrees for understanding the concept of the fear of God, which cover the same ground as the different divisions we have proposed above. Gilbert envisages the third degree of fear as something characteristic of the eternity to come; but God’s future is already at work in our present, and chaste fear is already offered to us as a joy to be experienced today.

What shall we say then? Does this mean that eternal punishments are not something to dread? Of course they are, and we need to beware of them. For “no-one hates their own life” (Ephesians 5:29). But love for Christ is stronger than this, and it has no need for fear to motivate its desire for righteousness. This love dreads sin more than anything else, but it does so simply because it is sin, not because it leads to punishment. This remains true for as long as we are in the fluctuating uncertainty of the human world, during which it is unsure whether a human being is worthy of praise. But it is after this life, when we are brought into the presence of the Truth, that this fear too will disappear completely in favour of the third fear, which

will take the place of the previous two, but which will never be replaced by anything further, since it lasts for ever and ever.

The first fear, then, dreads having to expiate faults committed by over-confident pride; the second fear dreads committing sins by weakness; but the third fear has nothing to dread. For what could entire happiness and complete love be afraid of? This fear springs from the seedbed of love. I would hesitate to say that it is love itself; but I would hesitate equally to deny it. What else does it strive to be, but that love which knows no feeling of dread? How could it not be love, this attitude which has already almost ceased to be fear?

For how are we to conceive a "fear" which fears nothing? This fear, which is so assured, I would like to call by the name of love; for where God himself loves us, a majesty so high allows no place for fear. But in ourselves, how could such a fear be separated from love? And what else could it mean here to fear, if not simply to avoid becoming self-important in the face of the Lord of Glory? What is this fear, then, if not a submission which one offers of oneself, a spontaneous obedience, a reverence entirely free of self-interest?

How are we to conceive of a fear that is not afraid of offending God? And it is true, offending God is the last thing it would do. But then, how should we not call "fear" this attitude which would not dare to offend him? On the one hand it seems not really to be a fear, since it dreads nothing, neither sin nor danger; on the other hand, it does seem to be a fear in that it claims

nothing for itself in a provocative or over-confident manner. What then is this fear, if not a humble reverence paid almost as something necessarily due – yet without any kind of necessity being imposed? For it is true, there is an obedience stemming necessarily from our condition as created beings: but the freedom of love knows no necessity! What is this fear? It is rather an absence of arrogance and of carelessness, than a necessity that is imposed.

Do you see how close this fear is to love? It is very nearly the same thing, only not quite totally. In its motivation it is different from love, but in the movement of the heart it is the same. What is its motivation? It comes from our condition of being lower than God, which leads to an obedience at the least sign from such a high majesty. This is a necessity that is right and just; but love has no need of such a cause: it is seized by wonder at the divine majesty, not by looking down at our low condition! So what motivates fear is something that love has no knowledge of, since love is propelled forward for more powerful reasons.

So fear and love stand apart from each other in their causes, but they are closely related in their results and in the free movement of their feeling.

So the first fear dreads having to experience punishment; the second experiencing loss; the third dreads neither the one nor the other. Love banishes the first of these fears; it bears with the second for a while; but it takes the third in indissoluble union to its side. This is the fear, daughters of Jerusalem, that you should take

*hold of! But keep away from the first, the one that is
banished by love.*

(Sermons on the Song of Songs, 18,7f)

