

HOLY FEAR

“The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied” (Act 9:31).

The fear of the Lord is not a popular concept in our society or even in the Church in this 21st century. Yet it is highly prized and highly praised in Sacred Scripture. It lies at the heart of love of God and neighbour and is the basis of Christian life, the foundation stone of every true spiritual edifice. “Fear God, and keep the commandments; for this is the whole duty of man”, says the Preacher succinctly (Eccles 12:13). Popular understanding of this term is often limited to awe or reverence, but the implications are much deeper and more extensive:

“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good?” (Deut 10:12-13).

Put poetically:

“ Those who fear the Lord will not disobey his words,
and those who love him will keep his ways.
Those who fear the Lord will seek his approval,
and those who love him will be filled with the law.
Those who fear the Lord will prepare their hearts,
and will humble themselves before him” (Sir 2:15-17).

According to Proverbs, “The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil” (8:13) and, equally, lack of fear of the Lord is love of evil:

“Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart;
there is no fear of God before his eyes.
For he flatters himself in his own eyes
that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.
The words of his mouth are mischief and deceit;
he has ceased to act wisely and do good.
He plots mischief while on his bed;
he sets himself in a way that is not good;
he spurns not evil” (Ps 35:1-4).¹

And more subtly, “He who withdraws kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (Job 6:14).

This holy fear is markedly associated with wisdom: it is “the beginning of wisdom”, “wisdom’s full measure”, “the crown of wisdom” (Sir 1:14, 16, 18). This wisdom is not merely intellectual knowledge, but divine guidance

¹ The psalms are numbered as in the Septuagint, in accordance with ancient Christian usage.

directing a man's steps; it is dependent on a good heart, the keeping of the commandments and faithfulness to God. (See Proverbs 2:1-15.)

Plentiful blessings are promised to those who fear the Lord, summed up in this line "O how abundant is thy goodness which thou hast laid up for those who fear thee" (Ps 30:19), to quote one of many such texts in the Psalms. And,

"The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation,
and gladness and a crown of rejoicing.

The fear of the Lord delights the heart,
and gives gladness and joy and long life.

With him who fears the Lord it will go well at the end;
on the day of his death he will be blessed" (Sir 1:11-13).

Thus it is for our own good that we are to fear the Lord. All our blessedness lies in loving submission to God's will, which is the essence of this holy fear. It can be tested severely. Abraham was commended for his obedience in being willing to sacrifice Isaac, "Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me" (Gen 22:2). Job was also praised for this quality in the face of devastating calamities. "The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause'" (Job 2:3).

Incidents in Scripture which show an absence of fear of the Lord are not lacking. We can think, for example of the two sons of Heli the priest, whose incorrigibly bad behaviour earned them a violent death at the hands of the Philistines (1Sam 2:22-25; 3:13-14), and the fate of Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar for lifting themselves up against God (Dan 5:18-30).

In the New Testament, the good thief on Calvary, rebukes his complaining companion, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Lk 23:40-41). In the Acts of the Apostles, we see Ananias and his wife Sapphira dropping dead at St Peter's rebuke for lying over the proceeds of a sale of their property, "You have not lied to men but to God" (5:1-11), and King Herod's fate for accepting the people's acclamation, "The voice of a god and not of man!" (12:21-23).

It is the prophet Isaiah who tells us that the fear of the Lord is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, gifts which according to the Catechism are permanent dispositions which make men docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1830). They are infused into the soul at Baptism along with sanctifying grace.

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of fortitude, the

spirit of knowledge and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord” (Is 11:1-3 Vulgate).

This text is, of course a messianic prophecy, and is read at Mass during Advent when we are preparing for the coming of Christ. It is upon him that the Spirit rests with his sevenfold gifts. St Bede comments that all of them “remain in our Lord and Redeemer forever”² and that only he receives them in their fullness,³ a doctrine endorsed by the Catechism (1831). If the gift of holy fear was necessary for the perfection of the sacred humanity of the Son of God himself, how much more so is it for us poor sinners. He was “gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29), he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ... and became obedient unto death” (Philip 2:6-8). We, on the other hand, all too often fall into the temptation to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).

Dom Prosper Guéranger, treating of the gift of fear, asserts, “Pride is the obstacle to man’s virtue and wellbeing. It is pride that leads us to resist God, to make self our last end, in a word, to work our own ruin. Humility alone can save us from this terrible danger. Who will give us humility? The Holy Ghost; and this by infusing into us the gift of the fear of God.”⁴ If it is lost, there is no longer growth in virtue, but a “conceited self complacency ... a secret and habitual pride” which paralyses the soul.⁵ In opposition to this, poverty of spirit safeguards the soul, a Beatitude which corresponds to fear, according to St Thomas Aquinas, “the reason being that filial fear is concerned with showing reverence to God and being subject to him. ... Resulting from such submission of self to God is a disinclination to seek glorification in oneself or in any other except God. For this would be irreconcilable with perfect subjection to God. ... Perfect fear of God, then, accounts for the fact that one seeks neither self-exaltation in a spirit of pride nor the eminence that can be gained through exterior goods, such as honours and wealth.”⁶

Godly fear is very different from cowardly, worldly fear. Our Lord himself exhorts us, “Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him” (Lk 12:4-5). It is noteworthy that both here and in the parallel passage in St Matthew (10:28), this saying is followed, a few verses later, by Christ’s assurance that those who acknowledge him before men will be acknowledged before his Father, and the warning that those who deny him before men will be denied before his Father. The martyrs have believed and acted upon these words of Jesus. They have not feared those who kill the body; they have feared God, preferring to

² St Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, 1:9.

³ Cf. St Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*, 1:2.

⁴ Dom Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year. Paschaltine Vol III*, Whit Sunday.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 19, 12.

acknowledge him before men at the cost of their earthly lives, in order to be acknowledged in heaven and live eternally with God.

Commenting on a verse from Psalm 32, St Augustine has a passage which is equally illustrative of this section of the Gospel: “ ‘Let all the earth fear the Lord, and let all the inhabitants of the world be in awe of him’ (v 8). Let them not fear another instead of him. ... Is a wild beast raging? Fear God. Is a serpent lying in wait? Fear God. Does some man hate you? Fear God. Is the devil attacking you? Fear God. For every created thing is subject to him whom you are bidden to fear.”⁷

St Augustine also addresses the apparent contradiction between 1Jn 4:18 “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” and Ps 18:10: “The fear of the Lord is chaste, enduring for ever.” Explaining the latter, he writes, “The fear of the Lord is not a slavish but a chaste fear. It loves and looks for no recompense; it fears not punishment from him before whom it trembles, but separation from him whom it loves. This is a chaste fear, not that fear which perfect charity casts out, but enduring forever and ever. Here indeed is the Holy Spirit; or rather, this fear is bestowed, conferred, implanted by the Holy Spirit.”⁸ And “It is a chaste fear which leads the Church to avoid what may offend her Bridegroom with a care that equals her burning love for him. Now perfect love does not cast out this fear which abides for ever.”⁹

It is the teaching of the Church that the blessed in heaven will not be without fear of God.¹⁰ St Thomas Aquinas asserts that “blessedness consists in utter submission to God ... The defect implied in fear is rooted in the very nature of the creature, its infinite remoteness from God, and so is one that will continue in heaven. Fear will not entirely pass away, then.”¹¹ In the meantime, St Paul bids us to “make holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2Cor 7:1).

So let us strive to persevere in the humble fear of trustful love, which will lead to the possession of the Beloved in eternity.

“Those who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy;
and turn not aside lest you fall.
You who fear the Lord, trust in him
and your reward will not fail;
you who fear the Lord, hope for good things,
for everlasting joy and mercy” (Sir 2:7-9).

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⁷ St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps 32, 3rd Discourse, 12.

⁸ St Augustine, *ibid*, Ps 18, 2nd Discourse, 10.

⁹ St Augustine, *ibid*, Ps 18, 1st Discourse, 10.

¹⁰ The regional Council of Sens (1140) attested this when condemning Abelard’s contrary error: Mansi, t.xxi., col. 569.

¹¹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 19, 11 ad 3.