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THE MORAL LIFE

BY DEACON JAMES KEATING

VULNERABILITY AS A PLACE OF DIVINE ENCOUNTER



God acts only for the good. God acts only to share himself as love, namely Jesus Christ. The human person is invited to respond to this revelation of love with his own vulnerability; he is invited to allow God to act in his being. In welcoming the divine action of love we become what Love summons us to become: adopted children of God sharing in his own happiness. This capacity to receive God is fundamental to faith and is the necessary component for our being able to live in communion with God. This communion transforms hearts and lifts our minds from where they presently abide to a plane more befitting the expansive nature of love. To be vulnerable to divine love is to let the beauty of God wound us and so fills us with the desire to commune with him, receive from him, and be taken up into him. Beauty—as is clear in our

Catholic faith—is not an ideal; rather, it is the Person of Christ. The Christ is beauty because he radiates the truth of God’s own being: love. The Christian is to behold Christ as beauty itself and the cause of our “wound,” the cause of our very openness to love and loving. He—the God-Man—and the actions that flow from his own being—the Paschal Mystery—are capable of *radiating* the truth so that we remain fascinated with him through time and into eternity. We are then convicted by this beauty to know no other except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). We must, however, open our heart to receive such truth or we will miss the hour of our visitation (Lk 19:44) and remain opaque to beauty, and thus sadly unmoved by the love that can be contemplated within his actions upon Calvary. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that the mystery of Calvary, Christ’s own spousal self-giving to the Bride, his Church, is the source of all truth and is therefore beauty itself.¹ We must abide at this source and entrust ourselves to it as a child entrusts himself to his father. The drama of human life is clear: will we rely on this source and drink from it always, or turn away from it and rely on our own mind and strength?

To rely on the self contradicts all that is revealed about God’s love for us and the fact of our deep vulnerability before the circumstances of life. Our nature defines us as limited and tending toward sin. God loves us not because we are perfect but because he is good. He loves us always, not simply when we are “scrubbed up” and ready for public display. We can at times believe, wrongly, that everything will be “okay” in our lives once we are perfect or invincible. This is a lie. We will never be perfect and staying in this lie undermines what God wants to share most deeply with us: his own compassion in the sight of our weakness. Those who live in the lie that “I will be perfect someday if I only follow a certain regimen of life” will have difficulty mercifully embracing the weaknesses of others. Not only will one be constantly disappointed oneself, everyone else

will be a disappointment to us as well! To accept that we will never be perfect does not mean there will be no triumphs over temptation. There will even be such deep healings that we become free from attraction to one or more sins. To accept our frailty, our ontological vulnerability, simply means that our lives are a long procession of battling temptation, offering it to the mercy of God, and gratefully receiving the mercy that binds us to his heart. If we believe the lie of “perfection” we may come to believe, in the face of regular setbacks, that we are “failures at being human,” or judge others to be such failures. Our advance in holiness is partly measured by how well we no longer resist this truth: I am not God, and that is good.

To be dependent upon this truth for life’s meaning is to become a little child and in so becoming we remain open to listen to the Son leading us deeper into the mysterious source of life, his own self-giving in obedience to the Father’s voice. “The more like young children we are in opening our hearts to this source to receive its riches, the more . . . adult we shall be in opening our hearts to give to the world and its needs.”² This receptivity to divine riches was the key to the mystery of Christ’s own maturity. Imitating Jesus’ maturity entails a sustained choice not to choose the self and “keep one’s options open” but, instead, to choose the welfare of others. Christ’s identity as Son, his embrace of his own childlike identity, was the paradoxical source of his stunningly mature love upon the Cross. (“Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:7).)

To meditate upon Christ’s act of self-donation upon the Cross as a direct result of his obedience, as a result of his listening to the Father’s heart, becomes the model of our own vulnerability before God. In such obedience,

Christ re-ordered human reality and bestowed upon man a new relationship with God. If we too listen to the Father *in Christ*, we can participate in this great “re-ordering” and thus prolong Christ’s own listening heart in time. But first we must make a commitment to become “like little children” so that our actions are established, through grace, upon the same intimacy that Christ had with the Father.

What did Christ do to be the listening Son he is, how did he become the obedient one? Primarily he remained in a disposition of vulnerability toward the Father.³ From this communion he invited his disciples to live with him so they could attune their own hearts to Christ’s. Jesus tutored the disciples in how to remain open to the Father. The key to the vulnerability of Christ before his Father is revealed in this simple truth: he *lived out of* his sonship. For us this means that we must embrace the truth that the Father reveals himself only to the “childlike” (Mt 11: 25, Lk 10:21). To share all that is in our hearts, like a humble son joyfully entrusting himself to a loving Father, we need to *desire* “life and life to the full” (Jn 10:10). But to be so trusting is a struggle due to sin. Often we choose not to come to Christ for life (Jn 5:40). We choose to reveal ourselves to idols, those realities in our life that “have mouths but do not speak; . . . eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not hear; nor is there breath in their mouths. Their makers will become like them and anyone who trusts in them” (Ps 135:16–18).

To be vulnerable before “idols” is not to be vulnerable at all, it is to have all of our thoughts, feelings, and desires suppressed and swallowed up within our own puny egos. To be vulnerable before Christ is a choice to come to life by revealing oneself and becoming “childlike” in trust. To share our pain, grief, joy, and confusion with Christ is to enter the deepest levels of reality—the only place where God lives. To be vulnerable and share all truth with Christ in prayer is the very substance of humility, and living in humble truth enables us to flourish (Prv 14:11).

Vulnerability as a Way of Securing Communion

So we stand before God as creatures “in need.” That is the truth and this truth is beautiful. It is beautiful because this truth unveils the substance of our existence: radical dependency upon a provident and merciful God (Mt 6:26-34). In this state of ontological vulnerability, we are invited by God to draw life from his only Son and to no longer remain “independent,” isolated from grace. To draw life from Christ is to first reveal all that we carry in our hearts. This personal revelation is an effective way to stay with Christ (Lk 24:29), attaching our hearts to the loving essence of Christ. In so doing, we remain one with him. Vulnerability is above all a commitment to be radically affected by the beauty of the Paschal Mystery. Vulnerability places one in the liminal position between the affective movements of the heart and this same heart’s desire to rest in complete self-giving. This self-donation is not the will exerting itself. Rather, it is the will *being moved* as a result of the heart’s dynamic reception of divine love. This receptivity is ever deepened by the correspondent act of human self-revelation. The more one receives, the more one wants to open the heart to God. The more one opens the heart and shares its contents, the more one receives from the fount of divine love. The Christian life is the circulation of love, and love’s deepest desire is self-revelation. This revelation is the adhesive that bonds the person to Christ and Christ to the person.

In order to live the way of divine “wounding” or vulnerability, we have to become experts in noticing the interior movements of our hearts. Once noticed, we pour the substance of our hearts into the heart of Christ so that he can carry them to the Father, the fount of all healing. Our spiritual exercise through most of our lives is to avoid the hardening of our hearts. In this condition a person has become lifeless and dry. He no longer desires to share any affective movements with Christ, even negative ones, because the burdens of life

have robbed him of the glorious freedom of children of God (cf. Rom 8:21). The only way to soften a hardened heart is to place it before the “living water” (Jn 4:10) and let this water flow into it. We do this by ever so slowly entrusting our hearts to Christ. The universal human grief we bring to Christ is that we think we want someone or something other than him. However, we know in faith that God’s *self-donation to us* is his most satisfying and enduring gift. Once we are healed

of this universal error of wanting something other than God, we realize that a pure heart is our true desire. The pure heart wants *only* Christ; all other desires pale and distract. Vulnerability has as its ultimate goal the inculcation of a pure heart—a heart that knows *only God* suffices (Ps 62:1). The key to vulnerability before God is to identify the deepest affective movements of the heart and show them to him: “Pour out your hearts to God” (Ps 62:9).

How can one do this?

1. First, place yourself in God’s presence and ask him to raise up in your heart the places of deepest vulnerability: those places that you hide, or those places that carry such beauty and joy that you subject them to scant attention to avoid confronting tears triggered by the fullness of beauty.
2. As these places gently arise, receive them by name and pour them from your heart into Christ’s own Sacred Heart.
3. It is this pouring by you and this receiving by Christ’s heart that maintains your communion with him, a communion originating in the gifts of faith, hope, and love.
4. As you enter into a life of vulnerability before Christ, both the healing of burdens and the joy of graces received quicken and deepen within you.
5. Notice when you are tempted to retreat back into the hardened heart, and immediately ask for the graces to endure the burden of love shared and resist the lie of isolation as the “better way.” Christ revealed that the better way is only one: rapt attention to him—an attention so consuming that the entire being is eager to surrender to his open heart (Lk 10:42). Such surrender and all that is given in it will “not be taken from you” (Jn 16:22).

If we are to grow to the stature of Christ and become mature (Eph 4:13), we must, paradoxically, become like children, entrusting ourselves to the Father. In this act of surrender, we give to Christ the contents of our heart, like a child vocalizing every dream and sadness that passes through him. In this disposition of *self-disclosure* lies the path to spiritual maturity—a maturity that meets Christ himself in our own growing desire for *self-donation*.



NOTES

1 Hans urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008) 46–49.

2 Ibid., 49.

3 See, for example, Mt 3:17; 4:4; 4:10; 5:19; 5:44–45; 6:6–8; 6:25–34; 7:7–11; 7:21; especially 11:25; 14:23; 17:5; 18:1–4; 19:13–15; 26:36ff; and 27:46.



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