

How to see oneself¹

True self-knowledge is to see one's own defects and weaknesses so clearly that they fill our whole view. And mark this—the more you see yourself at fault and deserving of every censure, the more you will advance.

Pay heed to yourself. ... Progress in the spiritual life is shown by an ever-increasing realization of our own worthlessness, in the full and literal sense of the word. The moment we ascribe some value to ourselves, in any sense whatever, it will mean that things have gone wrong. It is also dangerous; the enemy will draw close and begin to divert our attention, throwing stumbling blocks in our path. A soul that thinks highly of itself is like the crow in the fable who listened to the fox's flattery, and let the piece of cheese drop in order to show off. May the Lord help you to become more thorough in the task of attributing no value to your labors.

What a list you have composed—calling yourself bad, sly, inconstant, ungrateful, proud, ill-tempered, ignorant of how to pray to God! Very well—but you should add one thing more: good for nothing and worthless. Repeat this often to yourself, making your whole soul say it, not just reciting it mechanically by rote. For deep down we can and do value ourselves very highly.

When we do value ourselves, the tongue or the memory repeats the words you mention, or similar ones, while in the soul lives the conviction that we are not like others. The strange thing is that it is almost impossible for the soul to notice this self-deceit. And so it remains hidden until the Lord brings it out one way or another and shows it up in all its hideousness. Perhaps we may guess the presence of such a state of affairs inside us when we see that words of criticism said either directly or behind our backs provoke in us displeasure or annoyance against those who spoke them. Try to discern the state of your soul at such times. But beware of self-justification which is a great hindrance.

A sense of our own righteousness does us great harm. Keep firmly in mind the point that the moment this feeling arises, however feebly, it is a sure sign that our efforts have gone wrong. The greater your conviction that you are a sinner, the more certain it is that you are traveling on the right path. But this feeling of sinfulness should spring from the depths of the soul

¹ All of this bulletin is devoted to excerpts from letters to spiritual children by St. Theophan the Recluse taken from *The Art of Prayer*, Faber and Faber, 1966.

in a natural way, instead of being suggested from without by our own reflections, or by some remark from another person.

There are many good feelings, but the feeling of worthlessness is the most fundamental; and when it is absent, everything else is of no use. Commit this carefully to your memory.

Picture other people walking on a hill or on the roof, while you are far, far below them. And if your soul happens to look down on another person as being inferior, you should reproach yourself vigorously and hasten to beg the Lord's forgiveness. The worst thing of all is self-exaltation, vanity, condemnation of others. It is the smoke and stench of hell. Accustom yourself to rejoice more when you are treated with contempt, reproached, and even wronged, than when you are welcomed and kindly treated. In this lies the surest way to humility.

Imprint this, I beg you, on your memory. From the moment of awakening to the moment of closing our eyes in sleep, we should behave in such a way that the whole day becomes an unbroken chain of acts of self-denial, undertaken always for the sake of the Lord, before His face and to His glory. There is nothing so very unusual about acts of self-denial; they occur in the daily activities of life and consist in an inner decision and turning of the will. They can lie behind any word, look, movement, or trifling matter. Their distinctive feature is a refusal to pander to oneself in anything big or small, a constant resistance against self-will.

Examine yourself to see whether you have within you a strong sense of your own importance, or, negatively, whether you have failed to realize that you are nothing. This feeling of self-importance is deeply hidden, but it controls the whole of our life. Its first demand is that everything should be as we wish it, and as soon as this is not so, we complain to God and are annoyed with people.

The high value we set on ourselves, in consequence of this feeling of importance, not only upsets our relationship with other people, but also our attitude to God. Self-importance is as wily as the devil and cleverly conceals itself behind humble words, settling itself firmly in the heart so that we swing between self-depreciation and self-praise.

Times of Spiritual Desolation

The abiding of our soul with the Lord, which is the whole essence of inner work, is not something that depends upon us. The Lord visits the soul, and the soul dwells with Him; the soul rejoices before Him, and He fills it

with spiritual warmth. Then the Lord withdraws, and at once the soul is empty, nor does it lie at all within its power to make the Good Visitor of souls return. The Lord withdraws to put the soul to the test, or sometimes to punish it, not so much for external trespasses, but for some inner evil to which the soul has granted admission. When the Lord withdraws to put the soul to the test, He quickly returns once more when it begins to call out to Him. But when He withdraws as a punishment, He does not soon return—not until the soul has realized the sin it has committed, has repented, has wept over it and done penance.

Above all, watch carefully when the soul grows cool. This is a bitter and dangerous state. The Lord uses it as one of His means of guidance, instruction, and correction. But it can also be a kind of punishment. The reason is usually an open sin, but since in your case no such sin is in evidence, the cause should be sought in inner feelings and dispositions. It may be that a high opinion of yourself has stolen into you, and you think that you are not like the others? Maybe you are planning to tread the path of salvation by yourself and to ascend on high by your own efforts?

As soon as you turn away—however slightly—from God, and no longer place your trust in Him, things go awry; for then the Lord withdraws, as though saying: “You have put your trust in something else—very well, rely on that instead.” And whatever it may be, it proves utterly worthless.

You see how cold it is without grace, and how listless and inert the soul is towards anything spiritual. This is the state of good pagans, of Jews faithful to the Law, and of Christians who lead blameless lives, but do not think about their inner life and its relation to God. Yet they do not feel an ache like yours, because, unlike you, they know nothing of the effects of grace. Since from time to time it falls to their lot to experience a kind of spiritual consolation—natural, not grace-given—they remain at peace.

What keeps grace in the soul more than anything else? Humility. What makes it withdraw more than anything else? Feelings of pride, a high opinion of oneself, self-reliance. Grace departs as soon as it senses this evil stench of inner pride.

The whole of your letter manifests the joyful state of your soul. You rejoice in God’s mercy towards you, and at the same time you are afraid. It would appear that you have learnt from experience the truth that one must “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling” (Ps. 2:11). You must keep both these two things and hold them together inseparably in order not to allow joy to lead to negligence, nor fear to quench your joy. It follows that you must hold yourself in extreme reverence before God,

regarding Him as the Father who is most merciful and watches over us with loving care, but who is at the same time strict without any indulgence.

It is only natural that you should feel a sense of fear that all this joy may leave you again. Under the influence of this fear, you are anxious and ready to find a way of keeping your joy. But do you expect to succeed in this by yourself? Because of this one thought alone, all that you have gained may be taken away again. Make every effort on your own side to preserve this joy, but entrust the actual task of safeguarding it into the hands of the Lord. If you do not strive, God will not safeguard it for you. But if you put your hopes on your own efforts and struggles, God will withdraw, seeing that you regard His aid as superfluous, and you will be met by the same difficulties you encountered originally. Work until you are ready to fall, force yourself to the utmost degree, but still expect the actual safeguarding to be in the hands of God alone. You must not relax either your work and efforts, or your hope in God alone. Let one strengthen the other—and then both together will form a strong defense.

Humility

Keep both eyes open. This is the measure of humility: if a man is humble, he never thinks that he has been treated worse than he deserves. He stands so low in his own estimation that no one, however hard they try, can think more poorly of him than he thinks of himself. This is the whole secret of the matter.

The Lord sometimes leaves in us some defects of character in order that we should learn humility. For without them we would immediately soar above the clouds in our own estimation and would place our throne there. And herein lies perdition.

There is no need for me to repeat to you that the invincible weapon against all our enemies is humility. It is not easily acquired. We can think ourselves humble without having a trace of true humility. And we cannot make ourselves humble merely by thinking about it. The best, or rather, the only sure way to humility is by obedience and the surrender of our own will. Without this it is possible to develop a satanic pride in ourselves, while being humble in words and bodily postures. I beg you to pay attention to this point and, in all fear, examine the order of your life. Does it include obedience and surrender of your will? Out of all the things you do, how many are done contrary to your own will, your own ideas and reflections? Do you do anything unwillingly, simply because you are ordered, through sheer

obedience? Please examine it all thoroughly and tell me. If there is nothing of this type of obedience, the kind of life you lead will not bring you to humility. No matter how much you may humble yourself in thought, without deeds leading to self-abasement, humility will not come. So you must think carefully how to arrange for this.