A Beautiful Habitat

August 29th, 2021

In our times, we regularly obsess about the purity of our air, water and food. The heart is the habitat that God would dwell in. Why then should we not be concerned about the purity of our hearts and our faith, if our intention is to receive God, to do good and to love as God would have us love? The word purity can evoke horrible historical and cultural associations that relate to the abuse of the idea and have nothing to do with purity whatsoever. Such ideas are the essence of impurity. Throughout history, however, from east to west, purity and purification have often been associated with great undertakings and with healing. In the sciences, purity and cleanliness are essential for laboratories and testing. Without purification, you would not have modern medicine of any kind. And as I have already said, we want our environment to be pure, to be free of invasive things that upset or degrade the ecosystem. In a similar manner, we should want our hearts to be good, healthy habitats—places of purity. To this end, James says in our reading today: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Godliness is founded upon charity and purity, and we cannot grow in charity if we do not grow in purity. Caring for widows and orphans and remaining unstained by the world—it is a strange sort of summary of faith, and one that we are perhaps uncomfortable discussing these days. And yet, Jesus himself said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). This is not just an eschatological or apocalyptic statement. It is true that the pure in heart will see God in the blessed, eternal afterlife, but it is also true that the pure in heart see God—in a manner of speaking—in this life. They see Him at work everywhere, every day. They do not love the world in its negative definition. They love the world in its positive definition. They have the heart that sings, “This is my Father’s world.” They suffer, struggle with sin, and face the same brokenness and confusion that everyone else faces, but their purity of heart and lifestyle make room in their hearts to receive God and every good and perfect gift from God. In our daily lives, we would never underestimate the damage that impurities in our water and food could cause. Our lives these past two years have been a never-ending obsession with the cleanliness of our hands, the purity of the air we breathe. It was necessary. And yet, we often underestimate the damage that comes from the impurity of the world. James has already said: “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21). The impurity of the world hinders our ability to see God at work in the world; it hinders our ability to receive the word of God that saves us. In the gospel, Jesus says: “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:20-23). The grave mistake of modern theologians was to dismiss purity as puritanical, simplistic, legalistic, lacking in compassion or irrelevant. And that is a tragic misstep, and it has brought tragic consequences—consequences that every one of you struggle through every day. The deterioration of our society, the aggressive polarization between competing narratives, and the general alienation and exhaustion everyone is feeling comes from our reluctance, our ambivalence, and our nonchalance regarding purity of heart. All of the things Jesus speaks of are the things that enslave us and make us very selfish and self-centered. And the selfish heart is a heart in despair. It is a heart that cannot find freedom and joy. It has no Sabbath. And because it cannot find freedom, joy, and rest, it cannot communicate in a peaceful or rational way.

It is hard to speak of purity without charity or charity without purity because they interlock. One might compare it to the water cycle, perhaps—evaporation and condensation, rainfall and cloud-formation. Charity and purity flow into each other and feed each other. The apostle Peter says: “The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:7-11). Charity is not just a cause or a project. It is the way of the heart. It is a spiritual discipline and a lifestyle. True charity is a transcendence of self. When our priorities in life involve ourselves, our obsessions or our causes, the first, but not the only, victim is ourselves, our obsessions or our causes. In the pursuit of ourselves, we lose ourselves; we disappear. I know a priest who used to work with people struggling with various addictions. One of the key components of their therapy was charity work. Not writing checks but personally serving others. Through transcending themselves, through thinking about something or someone other than themselves, these people found freedom from the conditions that had enslaved them—and they ended up discovering the ability to find their true selves and love themselves. One needs a Sabbath from oneself in order to be oneself. Ecclesiastes says: “Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back…Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap” (Ecclesiastes 11:1-4). There is a certain openness, or letting go in charity. It is not observing the wind, it is becoming like the wind (John 3:8).

Though Jesus speaks of the inner origin of impurity, the wording James uses suggests an external source of impurity as well. This echoes what John says in his first epistle: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever” (1 John 1:15-17). None of us live in a vacuum, and what comes out of our hearts can be influenced by what goes into them. You cannot love the world if you love the world. In other words, if you love the world in a lustful and idolatrous way that feeds your selfish desires, you will end up not loving the earth, its people, yourself and this life that God has destined for redemption. A tree cannot produce its food without sunshine, carbon dioxide and chlorophyll. There are a number of ways to kill plants and trees without ever using an herbicide or an axe. One way is to cut off their water, their air, or their access to light. Throughout history, notorious volcanoes have caused considerable damage to agriculture—the effects of Krakatoa and Mount Asama were both local and global—they caused lower temperatures, crop failures and famines as far away as Europe by blocking out the sun or contaminating the air. The only living thing found on the island of one of the volcanoes after one such eruption was a single spider. In a very strange footnote of history, an astronomer has observed that the “lurid” reds in the background of Edvard Munch’s *Scream* were influenced by the particulate or smoke in the skies of Norway that came from Krakatoa’s eruption in 1883. It’s about 14,000 km from Krakatoa to Oslo. Just as Munch’s screamer is the picture of despair, we become that picture when we allow the smoke and darkness of the world to choke out our light and destroy our purity. In our own province, we have experienced impure air from wildfires for several years. It is not an abstract or hypothetical thought.

There are a number of ways to speak of the impurities of the world. The most minimal approach is to say that whatever teaches you to hate God, hate yourself, or hate your neighbour is an impurity that should not be allowed into your heart. Another way of thinking about it is the two narratives—the narrative of the City of God and the narrative of the City of Man (cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*) as we read in St. Augustine. Allegorically, this is one of the main thrusts of Dante’s monumental work, *The Divine Comedy.* It is present in the writings of St. John of the Cross as well. The world—when we speak of its negative meaning—has a narrative, and it is not the narrative of Paradise, it is not the narrative of ascending Mount Carmel; it is not the narrative of God. One narrative leads us to a greater appreciation of truth, goodness and beauty in God; the other aims to elevate humanity, yet only ends up degrading humanity and enslaving us. That is still a big vague, however, and while evil can work in obvious ways, scripture says that the Enemy is subtle, or crafty, coming to us as an angel of light, coming as a wolf in sheep’s clothing (Genesis 3:1, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15, Matthew 7:15). There are times in history when evil and good get thoroughly confused (Isaiah 5:20). This is why Jesus warned us to be “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16), and the apostle John wrote: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Our age of postmodernism and the mass production of information has created a nightmare for rational thinking, and we can yo-yo between utter complacency and utter paranoia, hyperrationality and irrationality—neither of which is healthy. I would say that becoming a discerning, reasoning person is one of the greatest challenges today. In our time, we are trying to navigate a world that is struggling with information overload, data decay, disappearing history, groupthink, newspeak, conspiracy theories, mass produced propaganda, corruption in academia, yellow journalism, fake news, fake fact-checking, unhinged bias, censorship. Human lives get chewed up in the machinery. I do not have any answers as to how to navigate all of that—that is a work in progress we will all have to contribute to. We need to be innocent, but not naïve—innocent as doves but wise as serpents, to watch out for the wolves in sheep’s clothing, to test the spirits to see if they are from God. Be mindful of what is entering your heart and what is coming out of it. The greatest lie the world wants to tell you today is that there is no redemption for humanity (cf. Romans 8). You are too good for redemption. You are too evil for redemption. You do not need redemption. You are not worthy of redemption. You cannot find redemption. You cannot define redemption. You cannot communicate redemption. You will not find the God of redemption. Others are too good for redemption. Others are too evil for redemption. Others do not need redemption. Others are not worthy of redemption. Others cannot find redemption. There is no God of redemption and there is no redemption. Etc., etc. The great lie is that there is no redemption, and if there is no redemption, there is no narrative. And if there is no narrative, there are no characters who need good characteristics. The great lies are that we do not need these characteristics, the gifts of redemption and sanctification; we do not need reverence, gratitude, discipline, mercy, patience, perseverance, ambition, or hard work—in short, all the ways that love and purity are made manifest. Our great confusion today is a result of the impurities of the world having free rein over our lives and denying us the hope of grace and redemption. Darkness feeds on darkness; impurity grows from impurity. That is what breaks down communication, our ability to love, our ability to reason, and our ability to seek our *summum bonum*, our ultimate good, which is in God. Whatever teaches you to hate God, hate yourself, or hate your neighbour is an impurity that should not be allowed into your heart. The narrative of the world is a poison pen letter. The narrative of God is a love letter.

I believe there is a way forward. Though writing thousands of years ago, James is still relevant for our polarized and decaying world, writing: “My beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” (James 1:19-25). A pure and charitable heart slows down and considers the terrain; it looks to see what God wants in the situation; it looks for the need in others; it looks for what its own habitat needs. It wants to help and not hurt, to bring calm rather than anger, to do what it intends and be blessed in the work. A pure heart comes from receiving God and God’s grace—it is only God’s grace that will wash us and purify us and help us forward: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (James 1:17-18). The apostle Paul says that love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5). I would assume, then, that love keeps a record of what is right. Whether we are looking into history, into current events, into the words of our enemies, into our neighbour’s eyes, or into the mirror, let us keep a record of rights, let us keep a record of gifts—for God is giving constantly. Consider the good that God has done through you; consider the good that God is doing through your enemies; gather and cherish that good.

Like a modern ark, the Svalbard Global Seed Bank stores agricultural treasures we might need some day. In a similar way, let us store all that is pure, all that is charitable, all the records of what is right, all the gifts of God. Let us be the modern ark of goodness. And God’s gifts will transform us into salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). Salt and light are symbols both of charity and purity. And we need the salt and the light to battle our outer demons, our inner demons, and to wrestle against the darkness and overcome it. Be generous with your salt and light; store your salt and light; and be open to receiving salt and light and all the good gifts from above. Become a beautiful habitat for God, full of purity and charity, and the habitat around you will likewise become beautiful.