

The Gift of Simplicity

Heart | Mind | Body | Soul

BROTHER VICTOR-ANTOINE
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Introduction

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts
of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

1 PETER 2:9

All plenty which is not my God is poverty to me.

SAINT AUGUSTINE

When asked to write this book, I was rather hesitant. It is not easy or simple to write about embracing Gospel simplicity as a way of life. In writing about such a subtle reality as simplicity, one must avoid all that is superfluous and superficial, all that is intrinsically opposed to the beautiful reality of simplicity.

In trying to find the place of simplicity among those disciplines that foster the spiritual life, I discovered and became absolutely convinced of the all-encompassing role it plays in the concrete Christian experience of any true and sincere disciple of Christ. Simplicity opens up the path for assimilating and integrating into our daily lives all the teachings of Christ. The Holy Spirit, the Master who orchestrates and motivates our own personal spiritual lives, inspires us through simplicity to become more and more like Jesus each day. From the Holy Spirit we learn that to be found in Christ—or to be in Christ—we must be Christ-like. That is to say, we must become humble imitators of the Master. After all, Jesus clearly taught that the disciple is not greater than the Master. The best we can do to please him is to become more and more like him over time.

If anyone in history ever typified and exemplified simplicity itself, that someone was Jesus. He invited his disciples and all of his followers to join in the example of his own life. Jesus taught by word and deed how to live the lesson of Gospel simplicity with perfect trust in God and in the joy that belongs to God's children. The more we discover Jesus as a person, the more clearly we perceive the call to embrace simplicity in all its aspects as a way of life. From the Gospels, we get the straightforward understanding of how Jesus lived and breathed simplicity into every moment of his life.

During the silent moments of prayer and meditation on the Gospel texts, the Holy Spirit shows us, with a clarity that only he can conjure, that Jesus our Master honored the Father in heaven and served the brethren on earth with a transparent simplicity of life. Jesus made his earthly journey toward God, avoiding all worldly duplicity, traveling lightly, cultivating at all times that simplicity that unified his life and pointed all his earthly efforts to God alone. Ever since he left us that vivid example of simple living, it has become one of the signs by which we recognize a true follower of Christ.

For the sake of clarity and better comprehension of the role of simplicity in striving to live according to the Gospel, I divide this book into four parts:

1. Aspects of Simplicity
2. Simplicity and the Spiritual Life
3. Simplicity in Everyday Life
4. Simplicity and the Saints

Ultimately, these aspects and nuances of simplicity become integrated and unified in our own concrete spiritual life. The call to live out the Gospel daily is a radical one, and it embraces the paradox of having to embrace true simplicity while living in a very complex world. Thank God the Holy Spirit helps untangle the complexities of our time and guides us in the ways of inward simplicity.

The different chapters of this book, each a basic essay or reflection on a particular theme, show how the reality of simplicity weaves into every aspect of radical Gospel-living. The last essays in Part IV portray the integration of simplicity into the lives of the Mother of God and certain saints, especially those who spring from the monastic desert tradition. At all times, both in the Bible and in the monastic tradition, the desert exemplifies the place where radical simplicity is put into daily practice. Jesus invites his disciples to follow him into the desert, where simplicity is the daily bread of the disciple. In the process of discovering the transforming power of simplicity as an authentic pattern of Christian living, the disciple is given a taste of the Lord's promise: "Come to me.... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30).

BROTHER VICTOR-ANTOINE

APRIL 20, 2008

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Simplicity of the Heart

*Our hearts are made for You, O Lord,
and in You alone they can find rest.*

SAINT AUGUSTINE

We rarely hear anyone these days speak about “simplicity of heart.” In fact, it seems an almost farfetched notion, an archaic concept that is not applicable to our times when opposite values are exalted. Yet the concept is very alive in the Scriptures, particularly in the Gospels, where it is often connected with other virtues taught by Jesus, such as humility, poverty of spirit, single-mindedness, meekness, and even the gift of wisdom.

To gain insight into the importance the first Christians attached to simplicity, we must explore the Book of Acts: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46–47). We know from this account that those first Christians routinely embraced the gift and practice of simplicity of heart.

Today there is no doubt that they were impregnated with this gift of simplicity on that very first Pentecost by the infusion of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They chose to continue practicing and living the gift of simplicity as the Master had taught and lived it. They remembered the Lord’s teaching when he said: “Blessed are the pure in heart...” (Matthew 5:8), which could have easily been translated: “Blessed are those of simple heart....” When Jesus said,

“Blessed are the pure of heart,” he implied a much broader meaning for the word “pure.” He suggested a wholesomeness, a single-minded orientation towards God and neighbor—an uncluttered heart, free to seek God’s pleasure in all things. This simplicity of heart allows us to remain centered in God alone. For these people, not surprisingly, he promised: “...they shall see God.”

The desert monks and nuns of Egypt, like the first Christians, had a profound intuition regarding the pivotal role “simplicity of heart” would play in their spiritual lives. They cultivated this interior attitude in many fashions, depending on their personalities, vocations, culture, and the formation they had received as disciples. Invariably, all of them understood the crucial necessity of keeping a single-minded heart in order to one day achieve the vision of God. They deeply treasured this *simplicitate cordis* that allowed them to remain humble, inwardly harmonious, and constantly in prayer as they sought to behold God’s face. Abba Poemen, for instance, never stopped reminding his disciples of the unique role the heart played in their daily spiritual lives by saying: “Teach your heart to guard that which your tongue teaches.”

Today we conceive of the heart as the seat of all human emotions. However, the prophets and the entire biblical tradition, including Jesus himself, considered the heart to be center of the human person, its very source of life. The heart is invited to love God above all things. The heart is inclined to obey or disobey God’s commandments, for it is in the depths of the human heart that God inscribes his law and commandments. The heart is the very center of each human being; thus we learn that in each human heart, God wishes to establish his most intimate dwelling.

The desert monks emphasized among their disciples the uniqueness and special role of the heart in their spiritual lives. For them,

the heart is the place where God reveals himself to us, where he relates and converses with each of us intimately. It is in the depths of our hearts that this relationship with God is established, grows, and achieves its purpose. As we welcome God's presence into the depths of our hearts, we are able to give ourselves to him wholly in love. With true simplicity of heart, we look at him and also sense his gaze upon us. We embrace and are embraced by him. The human heart, created by God, will recognize and accept that it is made for him alone.

It is our daily task as Christians to aim and seek this humble simplicity of heart. The Lord extends us his grace, and Christ is there to purify us of our sins and forgive our daily shortcomings. Through constant prayer and good works, we also make recourse to the Holy Spirit, begging him to descend into our hearts and make his permanent dwelling there. It is through the Holy Spirit, the author of all gifts, that the humble gift of simplicity shall be bestowed and implanted in our hearts. It is him, in his wisdom, who shall seal the gift deeply within us, creating in the depths of our hearts the living sign of his eternal presence.

Lord,

*If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.*

As for what others do, by the word of your lips

I have avoided the ways of the violent.

My steps have held fast to your paths;

my feet have not slipped.

PSALM 17:3–5