



“Let it be done unto me...”

The Annunciation, by Pedro Berruguete, c. 14th century

One of the images from Scripture that is applied to the Blessed Virgin is that of a garden enclosed. She is full of beauty and wonder and has been untouched and is protected from any contagion from the outside. Within this garden enclosed there is nothing but beauty and goodness and light. There is no shadow of deceit or falsehood. In our walk of faith we need to spend time in this garden in order to refresh and uplift our souls. Our devotion to the Blessed Mother cannot be limited to reciting certain prayers; we need to enter into a living communion with Our Mother as a source of life. The more time we spend in this garden, the more we will be enchanted by it and the virtues which adorn it will become attractive to us and we will desire them for ourselves.

When we contemplate what we know of the Blessed Mother from Sacred Scripture we get a glimpse of

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the perfection and beauty of this garden. I would like to consider and unfold just one manifestation of her greatness, namely, the perfection of her response to St. Gabriel at the Annunciation, “Let it be done unto me

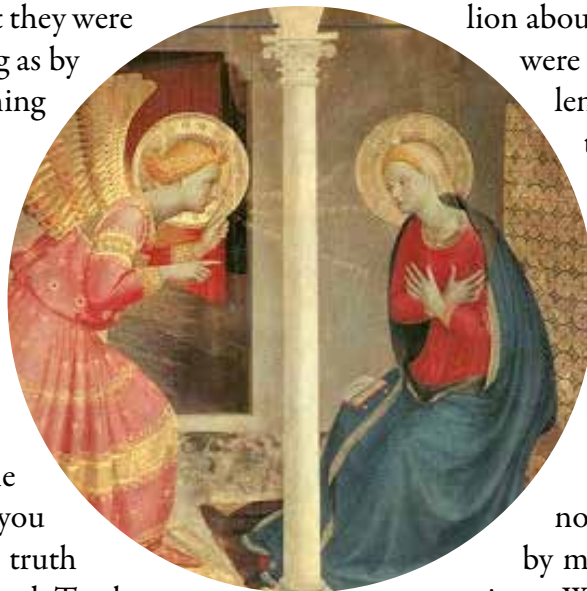
according to your word.” This free response expresses deep humility and trust. Mary realizes that what is most important is not what she herself can do, but what God can do in her if she co-operates and disposes herself to receive the gift of God.

As some good modern philosophers like Josef Pieper have observed, the modern era has almost completely lost the sense of the importance of a spirit of receptivity, a spirit of opening oneself up to God in order to receive His gifts. In the Western world, we live in an age where man’s perfection is seen as something that he realizes above all by what he, himself, can accomplish; by what he can achieve through his own efforts and

exertions. In this view, the perfection of man comes from something within himself, from the powers that he possesses by nature. It is a philosophy of life that, in many ways, exalts the practical over the speculative. Yet even in the realm of the speculative, when it comes to the world of thoughts and ideas, what is held up as an ideal is what man can, by his own efforts, accomplish and come to know. What he might receive from outside himself, from another, by way of illumination or inspiration is ignored. This way of looking at human nature is very much at odds with a Catholic understanding of man. It is one of the obstacles that modern culture puts in the way of men coming to the acceptance of the Faith, since Faith is not something that we invent or come up with ourselves, but rather is something we receive and accept only as a gift. In the Catholic understanding of things, what ultimately perfects us is not something that we *do* but rather something that we *receive* as an unmerited gift. The Blessed Mother and the great saints became what they were not so much by doing something as by receiving something and becoming channels of God's life.

Along similar lines, modern culture can put an obstacle in the way in which we are oriented toward the use of our freedom. The New Testament makes much of the notion of Christian freedom. Our Lord says: "You will come to know the truth and the truth will make you free." (Jn. 8:32) That means that truth itself has freedom as its goal, its end. Truth is for the sake of freedom. St. Paul tells us, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Cor. 3:17) And in another place: "For freedom, Christ has set us free." (Gal. 5:1) But when it comes to the exercise of the freedom we possess, we normally think in terms of the things we can actually do, of the things which are in our power to accomplish. That is, we think in terms of the options we have to choose from. Obviously, that is

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an important part of our use of freedom. God wants us to use our freedom to accomplish something. He calls us to fight for justice and right; He calls us to protect and defend other people; He calls us to sacrifice ourselves and our time for other people. But there is another way to exercise our freedom that is just as important and decisive for our interior life as our use of freedom to *do* things and that is the freedom we have to *accept* the many things in life that we *don't* choose; the ability we have to accept the things that we *can't* change.[†]

When it comes to various things about ourselves and our past, or about our circumstances in life or about other people that are a source of suffering to us, we are free to adopt an attitude of acceptance or an attitude of rebellion. The inner disposition that we do adopt in this regard will have a major impact on our interior life. We can easily go down the years full of an interior attitude of resentment and discontent or even rebellion about things in ourselves that we wish were different. We can be full of sullen discontent about circumstances that we can't change or about sufferings caused by other people. But we are also free to cultivate a different interior attitude towards these things, an attitude of acceptance, an attitude of consent rather than rebellion.

This attitude of acceptance is not simply something to be achieved by means of some psychological technique. When we exercise our freedom to accept the things that we can't change, we are accepting and affirming reality as it is, not as we would wish it to be or as we think it should be. We are letting God be God and accepting the way He has chosen to order the world and our lives. We are, in fact, exercising the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity which acknowledge God's loving providence over us and our lives down to the smallest details. St. Paul tells

us that “in everything God works for good with those who love him.” (Rm. 8:28) In the end, this ability to accept what we can’t change in a spirit of surrender is itself a grace to be prayed for and received from God. Our greatest “accomplishments” in this life are not the things that come from our own power and efforts, but the gifts we receive from God.

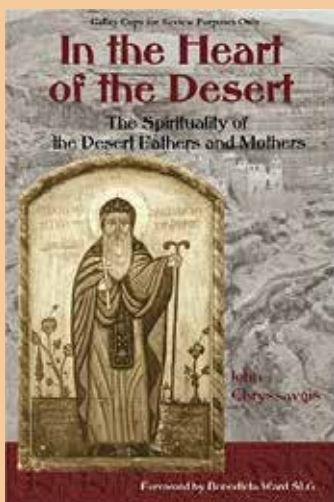
So we can ask for the grace to cultivate that interior attitude that was in the Blessed Virgin Mary, the attitude of “let it be done unto me.” As long as we rely on our own efforts and our own power there is not much that we can accomplish, but if we learn to rely on the power of God, He can work marvels in us.



The Desert Fathers on Encountering God

When we think about the early monks of the Egyptian, Palestinian or Syrian deserts, too often we tend to concentrate on their super-human ascetical practices. Somehow the imagination is easily caught up with amazing feats like living on the top of a column or eating only one scanty meal every three or four days. So it might surprise us to learn that the Desert Fathers and Mothers did not put a great deal of stress on their asceticism, but regarded it as a necessary means to an end; the goal being complete love of God. Hence everything else was a means of detaching the heart from the things of this world in order to give it wholly to God.

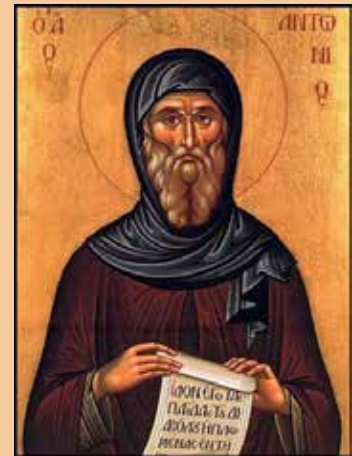
Regarding the importance of detachment, the 6th Century monk, Abba Zosimas once said: “In time, through neglect, we lose even the little fervor that we suppose that we have in our ascetic renunciation. We become attached to useless,



insignificant and entirely worthless matters, substituting these for the love of God and neighbor, appropriating material things as if they were our own or as if we had not received them from God. ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’

And if you received it, then why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’” (1 Cor 4:7)

Yet we should not get the impression that only after a long and arduous struggle to detach their hearts did the Desert Fathers and



Mothers finally hope to encounter God. As Fr. John Chryssavgis in his book, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* points out: “We are to look for God not at the end, *but in the very middle of the struggle.*” He continues, “If God is right there, in the middle of our struggle, then our aim is to stay there. We are to remain in the cell, to stay on the road, not to forego the journey or forget the darkness. It is all too easy for us to overlook the importance of struggle, preferring instead to secure peace and rest, or presuming to reach the stage of love prematurely ... Yet, struggling means living. It is a way of fully living life and not merely observing it.” Indeed, without struggle, we cannot make progress. “Abba Poemen said of Abba John the Dwarf that he prayed to God to take his passions away from him so that he might become free from care. He went and told an old man about this: ‘I find myself in peace, without an enemy,’ he said. The old man said to him: ‘Go, beseech God to stir up

warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have. For, it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.' So he besought God, and when the warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but he said: 'Lord, give me strength for the fight.'"

Mysteriously, it is in the midst of *struggle* that we make progress in the love of God and neighbor. We make progress in the love of God because we realize His great mercy towards us and, by struggling against sins and vices, have ample opportunities to show our love for Him; in love of neighbor because, having come to know our own weaknesses, we have compassion on our brother or sister's weaknesses as well. As Fr. Chryssavgis explains, "When you know and embrace your frailties, then you can learn to love yourself; then you learn to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these' (Mark 12:30-31)"

In the end, it is love that matters. "Abba Amoun of Nitria came to see Abba Antony and asked him: 'Since my rule is stricter than yours, then how is it that your name is better known among people than mine is?' Abba Antony replied: 'It is because I love God more than you do.'"

"A secular man of devout life came to see Abba

Poemen. Now it happened that there were other brothers with the old man, asking to hear a word from him. The old man said to the faithful secular visitor: 'Say a word to the brothers.' When he insisted, the secular man said: 'Please excuse me, Abba; I myself have come here to learn.' But he was still urged on by the old man. So he said: 'I am a secular man. I sell vegetables and do business. I take bundles to pieces, and make smaller ones. I buy cheap and sell expensive. What is more, I do not know how to speak of the Scriptures. So I shall tell you a parable. A man said to his friends: "I want to go and see the emperor; come with me." The friend said to him: "I will go with you half the way." Then he said to another friend: "Come and go with me to see the emperor." The second friend replied: "I will take you as far as the emperor's palace." He said to a third friend: "Come with me to the emperor." That friend said: "I will come and take you to the palace; and I will stay and speak in order to help you gain access to the emperor." The brothers asked him what was the point of the parable. He responded: 'The first friend is asceticism; it leads the way. The second friend is chastity; it takes us to the gate of heaven. But the third is love; this confidently gains us access to and presents us to God our King.' The brothers withdrew edified."