

March 9, 2008
Cheesefare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I wonder if Simon Peter's threefold denial of our Lord was more serious than the self-confidence and pride that brought him to that offense. It is not clear to me that "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!" was a more grievous transgression than "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be" (Mark 14:29,71). It scarcely obvious, that is to say, that Peter's denial was a worse sin than his boasting.

Indeed, the very opposite appears to be the case: One perceives a sense in which Peter's open denial of the Lord may be said to have *improved* his spiritual state, inasmuch as this more manifest sin led him to repentance. He became contrite that he denied, whereas he was not the least bit contrite for boasting, "I will not deny" (14:31). That boasting, in fact, he mistook for virtue; there was no danger of such a mistake in his open denial.

We should make the case, then, that sin *without* self-deception is an improvement over sin *with* self-deception. It is a better thing, in other words, to be a sinner and to *know* it than to be a sinner and *not* to know it. Thus, when Peter denied the Lord, he was better off, inasmuch as he no longer suffered from self-delusion. He had been very much self-deluded, on the other hand, when he imagined himself incapable of denying the Lord.

Close readers of Holy Scripture have made this observation before. For example, St. Augustine commented, "Peter, when he wept, was displeased with himself in a healthier way (*salubrius . . . sibi displicuit*) than he was pleased with himself (*sibi placuit*) when he was presumptuous." This was not just a case of pride going before the fall, remarked Augustine, because there was as much sin in the pride as there was in the fall.

Just as pride lies at the base of everything evil, humility underlies everything good. Augustine observed the irony that "there is something in humility that exalts the heart, and something in pride that debases it." Sin and repentance lend shape to the field in which we test the Gospel thesis: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). The secret of safety, therefore, lies in that spiritual quality that the Troparion of St. John Chrysostom calls "the heights of humility."

Indeed, Augustine goes further, discovering this root of pride even in Adam's "innocent" state in the Garden. Man would not have fallen for Satan's promise of equality with God if he did not secretly crave to be equal with God. That is to say, "the fall (*ruina*) that takes place in secret precedes the fall that takes place in the open."

What the devil's temptation effectively did, then, was to render manifest what was already Adam's real spiritual condition. Playfully juggling the words, Augustine remarked that Satan could not have deceived Adam (*non cepisset*), if Adam had not already begun (*coepisset*), in his heart, to take pleasure in himself. This inner pride, this self-satisfaction with his spiritual state, was the reason Adam succumbed in the hour of temptation.

On this point, moreover, the fallen Peter wins any comparison with the fallen Adam. Confronted with his sin, Peter at once broke into tears. It was not necessary for the Lord to reproach him; his own conscience accused him—that inner and louder rooster’s crow.

Adam, on the other hand, could not endure even to be questioned about his offense. As a sinner, said Augustine, Adam should have preferred to accuse himself rather than excuse himself (*accusatio potius quam excusatio*). But not a word of repentance escaped his lips, not a syllable of contrition.

Adam’s pride, consequently, was “worse and more damnable,” because it prevented his accepting the blame for his fall. Adam, far from repenting, promptly threw the blame on his wife—and, by implication, on God, because Eve was “the woman whom *You* gave me!”

Pride, then, the quiet, spiritual pleasure of self-satisfaction (*sibi homo placet*), is man’s deepest sin and the necessary condition for every other temptation. It comes from a person’s gazing at himself and not at God. This pride is so subtle (*in abdito*) that it was disguised even in Adam’s “unfallen” state! The tempting serpent, described in Holy Writ as most cunning, is able to sense when the soul has already succumbed to it. The essential thing, therefore, is to respond like Peter, not Adam (*The City of God* 14.13-14).

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