

TAKING ONE'S STEP FROM GOD

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Often on the lips of St. Vincent de Paul was an intriguing phrase: Take your step from God. By this he meant that we are to keep our eye on God and try to see what indications he is giving us. For He is giving them all the time. Perhaps then we might say in our impatience: Why is it only vague indications that He gives; why does He not make His Will plain to us so that we can do it?

Here lies a problem which is an anxious one for us. On the one hand God desires to signify His wish to us. On the other hand, He refrains from interfering with the operation of our personality; for it is one of His special ideas to respect that personality. He would prefer to see a word done by ourselves even in a fourth-rate way than to bring it to pass in a first-rate fashion by stepping in Himself and treating us like babies. Somewhere between these extremes will God's action lie.

Watching God

Unquestionably, God will respond to our advances by giving us inspirations and indications of His Will. He has necessarily to do so. Because, if thrown back absolutely on ourselves, we can do nothing. So we must make those advances to Him. In part this will be done by deliberate acts and by prayer, but *even more* by developing an attitude of watching Him. There is a phrase in Scripture which would explain this attitude exactly. It is the saying that we must be like the handmaid whose eyes are all the time on her mistress, seeking to anticipate her wishes. Our human tendency is to make up our minds strictly according to our own circumstances and notions, whereas the correct idea would be to throw the chief stress off ourselves and on to God; all the time waiting to take our step from Him; trying to see His signs and to accommodate ourselves to them.

This is a holy attitude which merits the grace of being shown His step. It is likewise a prayer which, if constant enough, amounts to contemplation.

This procedure entails a certain hesitation in making our decisions. And this presents us with a little problem. One of the things which we like to credit to ourselves is a strong-minded behaviour, i.e. that we know our own minds: that we can sum up situations perfectly and produce firm decisions quickly. Obviously this would represent a different policy from a holding back and a deferring to God in the effort to see what He wants. Would such a hesitation on our part be a weakness, an indecision?

Certainly not. It is only a prime fool who would rush into a decision without having all the facts. Any sensible person would seek to assemble all the materials for a decision before building that decision. In our Christian philosophy that fact of God's wishes is a vital ingredient, and indeed the foundation of all other ingredients. Therefore we must seek it, and that may mean waiting for it. Therefore that tendency to wait does not denote indecision, but rather a proper degree of judgment, of weighing up things, and of reluctance to plunge recklessly into a blind decision.

The Way to Decide

Very often it will be found that this action of turning to God brings *at once* the capacity to decide. I mean that until we looked in His direction, the mind was absorbed with the personal and the petty and saw only the signpost of selfishness. It would be a grievous thing if those things determined the issue. But the glance towards God took the eye off that signpost and balanced the position. We saw a higher signpost which made us realise that self was not the only thing that counted.

Sometimes that look towards God reveals a spiritual principle which would outweigh secondary aspects. On it we could base a decision right away, being sure that it is as the main road leading to our destination.

If our inspection of a position does not reveal that principle or definite signpost, it is well to

refrain from decision and action so long as we remain in doubt, and where the possibility exists of postponing. This suggestion has reference to the fact that commonly God only gives His lights when they are needed and not a long time ahead. His sense of economy enters in there. He is like a building contractor who would not place on a site far in advance of actual building all the materials for that building. Obviously this latter procedure would lead to deterioration and to pilfering.

But it is one of our weaknesses to worry about things far in advance and to want light then. Therefore we must restrain our impatience and believe that we will receive the needed help in time. So I repeat: As far as possible do not make final decisions until the proper time arrives.

How God Shows Himself

How does God show Himself? Sometimes in little ways that we have to be on the alert for. Sometimes in unquestionable ways. For instance the voice of duty can be positive enough. Likewise the call of charity. Likewise the advice of wise counsellors. These are things to which we are bound to attach great weight, for they can represent God speaking quite loudly.

It is not to be expected that His wish will appear on the skyline like a neon-sign. It would probably be better for us that it should not evidence itself in that way. For if it does, it will probably be a drastic and uncomfortable business, almost as if we have to pay dearly for being told so plainly. God's manifest signposts are such as the one He showed to St. Paul when, to the accompaniment of light shining from Heaven, He threw him from his horse and deprived him of sight; and a voice spoke shattering words to him. This multiplication of miracles was a neon-sign to tell Saul that he had become Paul; that the Jewish wolf had changed into the Christian lamb; that the arch-persecutor had yielded place to the great apostle of the Gentiles. But perhaps if he had been willing to follow gentler ways of conversion, he would have been spared that mental martyrdom, those days without sight, spent in such anguish of soul that he could neither eat nor drink.

A kindred event was the cannon ball which broke St. Ignatius' leg at Pamplona and put him to bed. Out of that bed he emerged with his dreams of military glory switched from Spain to Jesus and Mary. A rough way for a tough spirit!

In a lesser order it can be so with ourselves. We are charging along at great speed, full of ourselves and sure of our course. But in a second we find ourselves sprawling on the ground, hurt all over. We pull ourselves together and examine the position. We have run into a wall. This may not be a final matter. It may only be an obstacle placed by the devil in the way of God's plan. So we have to test it by trying to get over it or around it. In the end this may be possible, in which case - a sorer and wiser man - we pursue our interrupted road. Or, the searching around may disclose to us very profitable territory - better than what we had been aiming at.

On the other hand, it may have been God who stopped us, so that after much trying we find we cannot go on. That may represent a cruel hurt to our desires. To have to retire will impose a severe test on our faith. To wait meekly till God speaks again may need heroic patience, that virtue which combines in itself nearly all the other virtues. But Scripture promises that "the patient man shall sing victory," and some day the indication will come to us of God's further wishes. When in due time that new course is opened to us, we will find that it has been in various ways a blessing; that it has improved our original plan and perhaps saved us from disaster.

A Devil's Storm

I have mentioned the devil. He plays his large part in all human affairs. To say the contrary is the modern idea, which has turned his name into practically a funny word. But it would be a serious mistake thus to rule him out. The fact is that he has his own permitted part to play in man's ordeal of life. So when a drastic situation suddenly creates itself, it may be from the devil. In my own mind I have been accustomed to call a certain type of overwhelming situation a Devil's Storm. Usually this arises unexpectedly and pulls us into its vortex. It rages with such violence that it looks as if everything is going to be destroyed. The mind is possessed by panic, and flight or surrender are the only idea it produces.

But we must do the opposite. We must keep our wits together to the extent of just holding on -

as the sailor would to his life jacket. That life-jacket is the thought of God, the holding on to God. Be satisfied with that and refrain from making any other decision in such a turmoil where not a gleam of God's presence is to be discerned.

If that emergency is really a Devil's Storm, it does not last long. It may sound ridiculous to measure such a thing, but I give it a maximum duration of about a week. It subsides suddenly and there is calm. Despite its ferocity, the extra-ordinary sequel is found that no harm has been done. So when that storm has blown itself out, we may believe that our course lies right ahead, and restart where we had stopped.

Stilling The Storm

A historic episode conforming to those characteristics is that one described in the Gospel of Luke (7: 23-25): "When they were sailing, He slept. And there came down a storm of wind upon the lake, and the boat was filled, and they were in danger. And they came and awakened Him, saying: Master, we perish. But He arising rebuked the wind and the rage of the water; and it ceased, and there was a calm. And He said to them: Where is your faith? And they, being afraid, wondered, saying one to another: Who is this that He commandeth both the winds and the sea and they obey Him?"

Probably there was not a rope broken nor the smallest leak started in that craft! Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves, showing that for the moment they had been the ministers of a hostile force, temporary agents of the devil.

In the various foregoing ways, get the habit of surveying all situations, whether we are sure of them or not. If after that sort of preparation, we make our decision, it does not so greatly matter if our judgment was erroneous. The main fact therein was that our attitude was correct. It amounted to an act of Faith and it represented the essence of prayer. It was a waiting on God, and such is what He wants from us. Never does He leave it unrewarded.

But you may exclaim: "What do you mean by saying that it does not matter whether we decide an important matter rightly or wrongly?" I will try to explain.

At a Cross-Roads

We come to a crossroads. Any one of the ways which lie open before us could be the right one. It is of extreme importance that we pick it. But there is no indication given from God. Then let us take the one which our best reasonings point to. I think that we may be confident that if that choice is really wrong, it will redress itself. Perhaps after some journeying in that wrong direction, a side road is encountered. A signpost sends us along it, on to the road which should have been taken in the first instance.

Some good people are all the time demanding signs from God that they are on the proper path, and they complain sorrowfully that they are given no help. But the broad line is that God does not give unnecessary indication. If we are in the right course, He leaves things at that. So go ahead on that principle.

If the facts are that we have embarked on a course from right motives; that we are to some extent committed to it; and that it fits reasonably into the Christian map, we have enough to justify us in going ahead. Believe that sufficient indication will be afforded when the time comes for altering that course.

I have said that God will not give superfluous signs. Superfluous in what way? Well, He has provided in the Catholic system a broad highway which leads us on unerringly. At point of doubt we have appropriate methods of keeping right - what I have been describing as signposts. If we avail of them, we will continue right. Over and above them, God gives signs with what I might respectfully call "hesitation." For Faith is intended to be our mainspring, and He has to allow room for it to operate. If He shows Himself too much, He fetters Faith proportionately.

The Place of the Church

He delivers the details of that Faith through the Catholic Church. By it enough comes to point out the way. Only occasionally does He resort to emergency measures. A forcible example of this is given in the Gospel of St. Luke, i.e. in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. They died. The poor

man was transported to Heaven; the rich man was buried in Hell. And the rich man called out to Abraham: "I beseech thee that wouldst send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brethren. That he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torments." And Abraham said to him: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear those." The rich man said: "No, Father Abraham, but if one went to them from the dead, they will do penance." But Abraham said to him: "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they believe if one rise again from the dead." (16:27-31.)

The same idea would be applicable to the Catholic Church. If people will not hear it, neither would they in ordinary circumstances hear the voice of one risen from the dead. We may find ourselves reasoning otherwise. It may seem to us that in a particular vital instance something extra is required and we cannot understand why God does not give us that neon-sign. But where He does not, it is to be accepted as evidence that He is already giving sufficient for the present purposes of the case.

The Legion of Mary

Among the means which the Church employs to use, direct and help us is the Legion. It has its own system of guidance for us, a system which the present occupant of the See of Peter has asserted to be a most excellent one.¹ Yielding ourselves to it, we get many additional signposts for our journey. And such is fitting, because we have paid for them in work. In particular I point to the method known among us as symbolic action.

Symbolic action is almost equivalent to a road code. In a short formula it manages to summarise in an astonishing manner those numerous items of suggestion on which I have been venturing. On the one hand, it tells us that we are not to rush impetuously along half-darkness, or to take gigantic jumps into the apparently impossible. But on the other hand, it insists that we must not stand there helplessly, wringing our hands. It is right and proper that we should pause to think, but this should be only for the purpose of ministering to action, and not for the purpose of preventing action. As a matter of principle we must move on. So the formula tells us to divide up our problem into 39 instalments - remembering of course that there is a certain element of the humorous in specifying that number so precisely! Having done that imaginary division, we then set ourselves to fulfil each instalment methodically and hand in hand with Mary, our devoted Mother, whose good eyesight pierces the distance and takes stock of the possibilities.

All the time we must seek to keep pace with her, if needs be pausing to discern each new move that she makes. Each of her steps reconciles what to us are opposites, that is absolute prudence and supreme courage. Similarly, that accommodating to her of our march gives the due balance between the natural and the supernatural. As well, it recognises the claims of Mary's spiritual motherhood.

Here where we are talking in terms of roads and journeys, and where the idea of a guide naturally presents itself, I mention a title of Our Lady which is appropriate. It is a French one: Notre Dame de la Route. Translated literally this means Our Lady of the Road, but we could render it more freely and more effectively as: Mary who walks with us.

And this brings us back again to that image of the handmaid with her eyes fixed on the mistress. Note that this is used by De Montfort to exemplify his idea of our behaviour to Mary. The same image would reflect the Marianist method of devotion to her. The True Devotion is no more than a practice of this spirit of dependence, of watching, of taking our cue from God and Mary. That attentiveness to them should be our cast of mind at all times and in every situation.

¹ Pope John XXIII [Ed.]