

Seeing into the Soul

IN FOURTEENTH CENTURY SIENA, one man challenged a rather self-important individual to join him in making a visit to the virgin Catherine. Not willing to turn down a challenge, the macho man agreed. When they arrived, the saintly virgin, Catherine of Siena, looked intently at him. Her holy gaze caused him to turn and run out the door. When apologies were offered for his friend's strange behavior, St. Catherine replied, "Not to worry. He is on his way to confession as we speak." She saw into the very depths of his soul, and made him aware of what was there.

We cannot arrive at perfect love of God without humility, and this most essential virtue is the fruit of self-knowledge. But of all knowledge, self-knowledge seems the most difficult to learn. Have you not wanted to look into your soul to catch a glimpse of your very self as you would look at the reflection of your face in a mirror? Thousands upon thousands flocked to see the saintly confessors Jean Marie Vianney and Padre Pio because these priests could see into their souls and reveal to them what was hidden inside. Others often see things in us that we cannot see. Yet, we readily deny the accuracy of their view or else find excuses as to why what they see must be wrong. What is needed, therefore, is a mirror that will enable us to see for ourselves what is going on in our own souls. Although such a mirror cannot be purchased and is only rarely found in saints like Padre Pio, it nevertheless can, with some courage and determination, be constructed with a little effort on our part and help from Divine Revelation.

A good place to start is His Majesty's Sermon on the Mount... *"why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye? Or how sayest thou to thy brother: Let me cast the mote out of thy eye; and behold a beam is in thy own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam in thy own eye, and then shalt thou see to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye"* (Matt 7:3-5). How can we discover this beam in our own eyes? We can start by thinking of the beam as being like an unhealthy fire that burns in our souls and produces much smoke to cloud our vision. Smoke is a product of fire. As we say, *where there is smoke, there is a fire*. Thus, if we can take note of the smoke, we can eventually find the fire and put it out, that is, remove the beam, using His Majesty's term.

Taking advantage of the smoke, however, will require some effort. A notebook should be used to



help us record various things about the appearance of the smoke. As St. John Climacus (d. 606) records in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, this is an ancient idea: "I paid special attention to the brother in charge of the refectory. I noticed that he had a small book hanging in his belt, and I learned that every day he noted down his thoughts (inward promptings, some of which may be demonic [temptations]) in it and showed them to the shepherd. I found out that many of the brothers did this ... on the instruction of the superior" (Step 4: Obedience). St. John Cassian (d. 435) offers something similar: "All the secret places of our heart, therefore, must be constantly scrutinized and the prints of whatever enters them must be investigated in the most careful way, lest perchance some spiritual beast, a lion or a dragon, pass through and secretly leave its dangerous traces; then, once our thoughts were neglected, access to the sanctuary of our heart would be offered to still others" (*Conferences*, XXII, 2).

Imitating these holy monks, over a span of a week or more, take careful note of the circumstances (of time, places and persons) when smoke appears in our daily life. The smoke to look for can be reduced to four categories: (i) distractions experienced during prayer; (ii) things that annoy us, sadden us, or cause fear and suspicions to arise; (iii) what gives us comfort or consolation when annoyed; (iv) things we say (e.g., complaints, murmurings, bad words, lying, etc). Let's consider each of these in turn with a little more detail.

Always fight distractions while in prayer, as this effort is pleasing to God and merits grace. It is important, however, to keep in mind that His Majesty could prevent these distractions if He so willed. Thus, He is allowing them to help us. He taught us: "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth that which is evil. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Luke 6:42). By praying we seek to draw closer to God. He wants this more than we do. Thus, He allows whatever is blocking closer union with Him to surface. As St. Teresa of Jesus writes: "He withdraws His favor a little. No more is necessary, for I would wager that we'd then soon get to know ourselves" (*Interior Castle*, 3:2, 2). In allowing the distractions, God is helping us to get to

know ourselves! Thus, fight the smoke of distractions *during* prayer, but *afterward*, take note of them for the sake of constructing the soul mirror.

About annoyances, St. Abba Dorotheus writes: "The reason for all disturbance, if we look to its roots, is that no one finds fault with himself. This is the source of all annoyance and distress. This is why we sometimes have no rest." St. Teresa of Jesus teaches: "whoever has humility and detachment can easily go out and fight with all hell together and against the whole world and all its occasions of sin." With this in mind, record the appearance of the smoke of annoyance, sadness, and fear by noting the time of day, with whom it occurred, and over what matters. It can also be helpful to write down all that bothers us about a person or a situation as well as all our fears and suspicions. Later we can cross out the person's name and ask ourselves: *what is it in me that causes this smoke to appear?*

When suffering an upset or moment of dejection, fallen man readily turns to something pleasurable to offset his pain. Some of these things are legitimate and even pleasing to God... such as going to confession, going for a healthy walk, speaking to one's spouse about a difficulty, and so on. Unfortunately, however, man readily turns to eating or drinking something out of due order, or to speaking about things to the wrong people. When things do not go as they ought for us, to *whom* or to *what* do we turn to find solace? When this smoke rises up, again register the circumstances of times, places, and persons in the notebook.

Finally, as His Majesty teaches in the Gospel, the tongue is a great betrayer of the fire smoldering in our souls: "*For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.*" This smoke is readily seen and is often clouding our minds. When anything pains or annoys us, it is a natural impulse to relieve our feelings by telling our griefs to others, partly from a hope of sympathy, partly because it is a great relief to express our vexation and sorrow in order to hear from our listener that we are not going crazy. Yet, such use of the tongue is rarely made without some smoke blackening the air. Thus, St. Augustine says: "the less men concentrate

on their own sins, the more interested they become in the sins of others. They seek to criticize, not to correct. Unable to excuse themselves, they are ready to accuse others." What do we complain about? What causes us to raise our voice, interrupt the speech of others, or meet with friends in order to vent our feelings? By noting these sorts of things, the fires causing the smoke can be found and put out.

After enough information is gathered in the notebook, we now have a body of knowledge to work with. To make the most of this acquired data in our effort to construct a soul mirror, let us now turn to consider His Majesty's parable of the Sower and the Seed: "*Hear ye: Behold, the sower went out to sow. And whilst he sowed, some fell by the way side... some fell upon stony ground... some fell among thorns... And some fell upon good ground...*"

His Majesty gave us the parable's literal interpretation, namely that each type of ground is a certain sort of person depending on how he responds to the seeds of God's graces. However, since man is a sort of micro-cosmos of the world around him, we can readily and safely consider a mystical interpretation, namely that our soul is the field wherein the seed is sown. As one Carmelite saint put it: "Since God planted the seeds of goodness in us, we can be certain that He is awaiting the fruits."

With our soul as the field, according to the parable, there must be four kinds of ground in us: the pathways, the stony ground, the thorny ground, and the good ground. Let's consider each type.

The **PATHWAYS** are nothing but our habitual sins. These sins can be big or little: either mortal or venial. In either case, the devils (the birds of the air) take advantage of these pathways to tempt us and to get us to fall over and over again. They do not have to work hard because these sins are *habitual*! Conversely, because they are so well trodden, we have to work extra hard at breaking up the compacted, stone-like earth of which the pathways are composed. Confession is only part of the answer since it removes the *guilt* but not the *habit* nor all the punishment due to our sins.



"Surely thou also art one of them; for even thy speech doth discover thee."

Recall from the parable how “the birds of the air” devour the seed spread on these pathways. Although the devil is very good at making us to desist in breaking up the pathways, we too play our part, namely we treat the graces of God with some contempt. How so? We look at bad things... read bad things... think on bad things... even when we know we should not, often saying to ourselves, “I will just go to confession...” We go to confession routinely without really being sorry for our sins, failing to conceive a horror for sin; and, consequently, we continue to sin again and again. See how the precious seeds of God’s graces are trampled underfoot by none other than ourselves? Thus, St. Teresa of Jesus: “For the love of God, take great care never to grow careless about venial sin, however small.” Do we know the pathways in our soul? By studying our notebook in the presence of God, they will present themselves.

The **STONES** or rocky ground can be taken as our faults (usually identified by the seven deadly sins) or character flaws. These are things that we have had a long time. They are not sins themselves but things we trip over to commit sin... things that incline us to sin. Normally, they are faults and flaws we grew-up with. Some were passed on to us by the example of our family, friends and relatives (e.g., uncouth speech and manners). Others we picked up on our own along the way. These stones need to be identified, pulled up and transformed into a beautiful Grotto for Our Lady.

How often does it happen that we reach a certain point in the spiritual life but then give up on holiness? Why? Among other reasons, there is this one: we get to the point of having to give up who we *think* we are. We say to ourselves, “If I do that, I will no longer be myself... I will no longer be me.” The problem is that we confuse our true self with our idiosyncrasies and character flaws, some of which we are rather proud of. Have we not heard people say: “I cannot help it, that is just the way I am”? Are we any different? Do we know what makes up the stony ground in our soul? These are readily found in the notebook, for those with eyes to see.

The **THORNY GROUND** represents our worldly attachments. How many of us are very much attached to things in our life and find ourselves working hard to preserve them, or still unsatisfied, strive to get more of the same? These may be food, they may be something material, even very small things as St. Therese confessed how attached she became to certain paint brushes. These things get in the way of God working in our life and choke off the good that God has planned for us.

Attachments are often discovered by our behavior... by our unwillingness to let go of things

or our sadness when they are gone or our upset when others use them or our fear that they may be lost. Fears, sadness, and suspicions help us locate this soil. Do we know the thorns in our soul? We should want them removed! As St. Teresa of Jesus said: “whoever has humility and detachment can easily go out and fight with all hell together and against the whole world and all its occasions of sin.” Reflecting on the body of knowledge contained in our notebook will help reveal what our attachments are.

And finally there is the **GOOD SOIL**. O how easily we exaggerate this part of our soul! We should take note how readily we seem to know this soil while remaining blind to the other types! Thus, the saying in morality: *a man is rarely a good judge in his own case*. On the other hand, ironically, everyone else seems to focus on the other kinds of soil in our souls while overlooking the good! In any case, this fertile and fruitful ground represents our virtues and talents, our good will and our strengths. We all possess them to a degree, but we must not be satisfied with the little we have, but ever long and strive to grow more and more fertile... by recovering more and more land: “*Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Would that our entire soul were this good soil! This is certainly possible as the Saints have shown us. The good soil needs to be cultivated. This can be done by prayerfully examining our notes to construct a mirror into the soul. With the help of this mirror we will be humbled as well as moved to make amends... ready to start afresh to make our whole soul a rich and fertile field by readily accepting each and every seed sown by His Majesty.

Thus, once the mirror begins to show the pathways, stony and thorny grounds, it is important to make daily concrete resolutions to overturn these unhealthy soils in some way. This requires that at least one examination of conscience be made during the day to see how we have fared, as well as a general examination at the day’s end. Because of forgetfulness and the fast-paced style of our lives, it is wise to use the same notebook to write down our resolutions and failures. This effort will also make our frequent confessions much easier and more fruitful. Finally, it is very Catholic that we have an intention for whom our struggle is offered. Welcome to the cross that is easy and the burden that is light. Let us now go and *fight the good fight!*



Schema for Seeing into the Soul



FIRST: take NOTE of the smoke of the soul over a span of a week or more, noting especially...

- distractions at prayer,
- fears,
- suspicions,
- annoyances & moments of anger,
- times of sadness,
- complaints,
- criticisms,
- moments of indulgence,
- seeking comforts out of due order, etc...

SECOND: with this body of knowledge, retire to consider prayerfully what they mean.

THIRD: patterns should present themselves such that the following appear...

- pathways—habitual sins,
- stony ground—faults and flaws,
- thorny ground—attachments,
- good soil—strengths and virtue.

*Congratulations... you have found the fire!
You have constructed a mirror into the soul.*

FOURTH: put out the fire by filling up the reservoir of the soul with grace ...

- through frequent meditation and forming concrete resolutions to overturn and transform the defective ground into good, rich soil (be sure to see the write-up, *LESS ME* and *My Battle Plan against Sin* for help),
- through the frequent and devout reception of the Sacraments,
- through acts of penance and mortification.

