

Fear

Like every passion, fear, in order to be morally good, must be regulated by reason.

In Thomistic thought, a passion is that motion or modification that the recipient undergoes when acted on by some agent. In human nature, a passion is that motion which arises from the senses and can even affect the body when one imagines or thinks of good or evil. One such passion is fear which springs from the perceived threat of some present or future evil and whose power resides in the belief that one lacks the ability to overcome the evil. In simple terms, fear is an unsettling of soul – a mental disturbance that regards a present or future evil as irresistible and actually able to conquer good. It can be contrasted with hope, whose object is a future good, difficult but possible to attain.

St. Thomas enumerates the various manifestations of fear as: laziness, shamefacedness, shame, amazement, stupor and anxiety. The cause of fear may be intrinsic or extrinsic. The first three are intrinsic since they come from one's personal actions and may be defined as follows. Laziness is that response which shrinks from work for fear of effort. This is characterised by the third servant in the parable of the talents who, having hidden his talent, offered the excuse he was afraid. He was punished for being "wicked and lazy". Shamefacedness, a kind of embarrassment, is that fear that deters one from committing a disgraceful act. The parable of the steward who was afraid to beg illustrates that fear. Adam hid from God because of shame for having disobeyed. Amazement, stupor and anxiety are extrinsic since they have their origin in external factors far greater than one can overcome. Amazement is the fear that is felt when the threat is so great that one is unable to gauge its magnitude, whilst at the threat of an unprecedented evil one feels stupor even to the point of being cataleptic. Lastly, anxiety is the kind of fear produced by an unforeseen occurrence resulting from an unexpected event. Examples of these would be the resurrection of Our Lord from the dead, which was a source of amazement to the disciples, stupor to the guards at the tomb who were like dead men and, anxiety to those who were responsible for the crucifixion of the Lord.

Amazement and stupor paralyse the understanding just as laziness is the paralysis brought about by fear of exertion. This implies that amazement and stupor shrink from the difficulty of grappling with a great and unwonted occurrence just as laziness shrinks from undertaking physical toil. There is a subtle difference between stupor and amazement in that the one amazed shrinks from forming a judgment on what, at present, amazes him but, he would be willing to do so later. Stupor, however, places one in a seemingly permanent coma. Amazement, therefore, may be the beginning of philosophical research to which stupor is a hindrance since, the one overcome by stupor fears both to judge at present and to inquire into the future.

For our purpose, two different kinds of fear need to be considered. First, fear may be grave if it influences a steadfast person but slight if it affects only a person of weak will. In order for fear to be grave,

It must be grave in itself and not merely in the estimation of the person fearing

It must be based on a reasonable foundation

The threat must be possible of execution

The execution of the threat must be inevitable

Grave fear diminishes will power but does not necessarily remove it totally. This is exemplified by those of the disciples who, after their panic when Jesus was arrested, followed Him at a distance. Slight fear is not considered as even diminishing will power.

Second, reverential fear is that disposition one has towards one's parents or towards those in positions of authority and it springs primarily from one's reluctance to offend them. If such fear is used as a compelling force, then its justness or otherwise comes from the validity for which it was exercised.

It is important to recall that fear did not exist in human nature at the time of creation but rather, is one of the consequences of the sin of our first parents. In the state of original innocence, Adam lived with beasts without any fear and his relationship with God was also void of fear. Once he sinned, however, he became exceedingly afraid and hid himself among the trees. When God called him, he responded: "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself".

This fear arose not only from dread of punishment but also from shame for having disobeyed God. Human fear increased and became terror when Cain had to face the consequences of his act of fratricide: "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me". From the moment Cain laid violent hands on his brother, fear morphed itself into a hierarchy: dismay, fright, cowardice, dread, terror. Additionally, fear, arising from many sources and manifesting itself in multitudinous ways, has enthroned itself in the human psyche and, even more grievous, the devil uses it as a weapon to enslave and oppress us.

In acknowledging the reality and indeed the power of fear, Christ distinguished between the two kinds of fear to which we are subjected. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell, ... yes, I tell you, fear him!". Although threats to our body may provoke many degrees of fear, these fears can all be vanquished by a holy and reverential fear: "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death". Fear of God leads to awe and obedience to Him, that is, to keep His commandments, to love Him and to lead a life of repentance. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom".

In Christ's counsel that we should fear our Creator above all things is a simple reminder of the existence of a hierarchy of fears. In particular, since death, the greatest of the natural objects of fear, is inescapable, we should be even less afraid of losing all the things belonging to this world, that is, all material goods, all social and professional advantages, all titles and all dignities which, on our departure, must, in any case, be left behind. "God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'". Moreover, Our Lord merely confirmed what the heroes of the Maccabeus period had already believed, articulated and zealously practised. The great martyr Eleazar who was determined not to violate the ancestral laws by eating pig's flesh, vociferously rejected, his friends' ploy that he should only pretend to do so.

Such pretence is not worthy of our time of life," he said, "lest many of the young should suppose that Elea'zar in his ninetieth year has gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretence, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they should be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. For even if for the present I should avoid the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.

This narrative illustrates Eleazar's two major fears. First, was his inability to escape the hand of God and the second, the fear of setting a bad example which could mislead the young. Interestingly, we are told that "Those who a little before had acted toward him with good will now changed to ill will, because the words he had uttered were in their opinion sheer madness". This

supposed madness of Eleazar was also shared by the mother of the seven sons who exhorted each and every one of them to hold faithfully to God's laws and to accept a most cruel death rather than to abandon their "ancestral way of life," saying "Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers".

The zeal and clear-sightedness of the Maccabean martyrs should be a source of inspiration and encouragement for us, especially as we are currently confronted with resolute policies that threaten to undermine and to change our ancestral customs and traditional beliefs. We need to recall that, even when those advocating such change seem to have the support of authority, we are not facing anything new as the Preacher once declared "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun".

As disciples of Christ, as believers and more, as leaders aware of our responsibilities before God, we need to become "full of passionate intensity" for our convictions and, to proclaim, even "from the housetops", the unadulterated Gospel of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is time to cleave the deepening darkness with the light of truth.

In these times great fear is being generated by uncertainties. If, however, it is remembered that one is called to be united first and foremost to Christ and through Him to all those who belong to Him, then this fear will be greatly mitigated.

To further reduce our fear it is necessary that we face squarely the reality of our situation. That is, since ignorance is a cause of fear, we must both admit that there is a problem and identify the nature of the problem.

To conquer our fear we must first identify and overcome its various manifestations. We must, therefore, be zealous and ready to defend the Church first, by living its teachings uncompromisingly; second, by preaching its truths courageously from the housetops; and third, by being willing and ready, like the Maccabean martyrs, to die for it. Thus, fear's first manifestation, laziness, is overcome.

A consideration of the fact that we brought nothing into this world and can take nothing out should be sufficient for us to overcome shamefacedness, the second manifestation of fear. The loss of our jobs, positions, titles, family, friends, is of little import as long as we can remain faithful to Christ's Church which is the light He has placed on the lamp stand to give light to all in the house.

The Apostles' joyful resilience after suffering dishonour for the sake of the Name, illustrates that shame, fear's third manifestation, can be conquered when one realises there is absolutely nothing to fear in being ridiculed or, abused or, punished for doing what is right.

We are overwhelmed by a fear that is essentially extrinsic in as much as the unthinkable suddenly becomes possible. We gain encouragement from the Gospel story of the Apostles, who, while the Lord slept at the stern of the boat, were caught in a violent night storm on the Sea of Galilee and, though frightened, worked all the harder at baling the water. Far from being paralysed ourselves, we should, therefore, like them work even harder, all the time calling on the Lord, who sleeps in the barque of Peter: Lord, do you not care that we are going down? Thus, amazement and stupor, the fourth and fifth manifestation of fear are overcome.

The present situation in the Church and in the world is a consequence of our infidelities and sins as Our Lady had made abundantly clear one hundred years ago at Fatima. Our sins make us anxious, especially when we realise that we are once again responsible for crucifying Christ, albeit in His Mystical Body. Knowing, however, that God is always ready to forgive and to show mercy to a

repentant sinner, let us beat our breasts, saying, “Lord be merciful to us sinners” and we would have overcome anxiety, fear’s sixth manifestation.

At Baptism we became members of the Church Militant and, at Confirmation, soldiers of Christ; we, therefore, have been recruited and armed for deadly combat against the three implacable enemies of our souls: the world, the flesh and the devil. Recognising that “we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”, we fight, like the Apostles, taking the martyrs for our models and Christ Jesus, Himself as our reward. Since Our Lord has told us explicitly that we should not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, we can immediately dismiss those whose greatest injury to us is in the material order. Christ, however, does warn us about the soul killers, namely, the “many false prophets (who) will arise and lead many astray”, especially those prophets who “show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.” Further, since the world will speak approvingly of these false prophets, they will be readily believed by people who “will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths”. These then we should fear because they lead poor sinners to eternal damnation as much with a multiplicity of words and writings that dilute the rigor of the Gospel as with their deliberately ambiguous and confused affirmations.

Whilst it is true that we should be wary of those who, like Eleazar’s friends with their specious reasoning and counterfeit compassion, seem to have our best interests at heart, ultimately, however, it is the Creator of all, whose law is life, whom we should fear. God has told us to listen to His Son. The rigor of His Son’s Gospel, that is, those things that in the words of St Vincent of Lerins are believed “always, everywhere and by everybody”, is what will save souls. Any dilution of the rigor of Christ’s Gospel, whether in the name of modern scholarship or, in light of a new and more profound understanding or, out of mercy, not only reduces it to a human gospel but also, by proposing only a pharisaic righteousness, does great spiritual injury to souls.

The salvation of souls is the supreme law. This was the reason that one hundred years ago our most Blessed Lady came to Fatima and convinced three young children to embrace an austere lifestyle and to practise rigorous penances that the souls of poor sinners may not fall into hell. Encouraged by St John Paul II’s first words and confident in Her promise that “in the end My Immaculate Heart will triumph”, let us not be afraid. Rather, let us “Be strong!” We will not give in where we must not give in. We will fight, not hesitantly but, with courage; not in secret but, in public; not behind closed doors but, in the open. Audemus fidem nostram defendere! Non timemus! (We dare to defend our faith! We are not afraid!)