

THE FIRST MEDITATION:
On Our Creation

My great and good Creator, how great is my debt to you since you were moved to draw me out of nothing and by your mercy make me what I am!¹

Place yourself in the presence of God.

Ask him to inspire you.

God created humanity not out of need but out of goodness and love. God is the cause and completion of all things, the beginning and end, point and purpose: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rv 22:13). This fact exerts itself powerfully on the existence of every created being, including yours. A sincere, honest awareness of God’s real power draws us into harmony with the truth of our being, with the meaning of our existence. Rather than bargaining, competing, or fighting with God, embracing a deep

awareness of God's power can open us to the most effective form of collaboration in the world: cooperation with the will of God.

Throughout time, the desire to leave our mark has driven generation after generation to not only accept a prideful worldview but it has empowered the self-love that has divided human from human and humans from God since the beginning. When we really stop to look into the depths of our lives, what do we generally find at the center of our hearts? Typically, ourselves. Our many choices, plans, and goals so frequently swirl around our own desires. Knowingly or not, we enthrone ourselves, and in the tiny kingdom of our soul this enthronement gives little room for much else. We want everything just so, on our terms. Even in our marriages and families, the quintessential place of selflessness, a bit of reflection always reveals selfishness, pride, and self-service. With ourselves at the center, we work to store up riches and gain the honor of humanistic peers, rather than, in obedience to the Word, working to, "store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal" (Mt 6:20).

Consider this: God created us and gave us an ability to accomplish the greatest things in life: love, charity, generosity. By the nature God has given us, we are capable of eternal communion with the Creator, the One who made *everything* possible in the first place, who is perfect and surpassing delight. The God of all goodness willed us gratuitously into being. Nothing impedes God's freedom, and because God created us in his image and likeness, we share in that freedom. Our freedom is so profound

that we can freely choose for or against God. We can embrace or spurn the gift of real treasure, eternal life! The terrible authority given to the human person by God's gratuity is that each person is ultimately free to choose an eternity with God or an eternity without him. We gradually shape that eternal choice by the way we freely spend each and every day.

THE LACK OF PEACE TODAY

Consider the time before our existence. For ages on end, we were nothing. Only by God's goodness did we come into being. A simple prayer: "Without you, I am nothing. You are my cause, my criterion, my guide, my destiny. Oh Lord my God, thank you for life. Thank you for my life!" How rarely do we say this or something similar! How rarely do we make this humbling but simple act of thanksgiving! Were it on our lips daily, we would think much less of ourselves and much more of God and how to please him by our lives.

A spirit of entitlement quite often characterizes our present age: "I deserve this," or "I have to have that," or "If I want to do this, I will," and so on. As a result, we are quick to miss the significance of the gifts we are given and the fact that each one is a unique blessing. The fundamental gifts of God—life, faith, family, friendships, love, and so on—are the foundation of our whole existence. Unfortunately, before we even appreciate these we begin to look around, to compare and compete, rarely content with what we have, always wanting more. Rather than appreciating the blessings given to us by God, we very quickly

think, “My life could be better. And here’s how it could be better. And here’s who has to change, what I need, and where we need to go for it to start getting better.” We believe we are entitled to happiness on our own terms and at whatever cost.

Too easily, we let ourselves obsess about an unattainable horizon of perfection, an idea we create by cobbling together all the “greatest hits” of things we see in others. As we do so, we implicitly tell God (and ourselves) that what we have is simply not enough. We misunderstand the value of our present state, and in turn, we fail to see the goodness of the process by which God is leading us into the future.

THE SCULPTURE

Imagine God as a sculptor. Each person is a unique, unfinished work of art. If we admit this image, inevitably questions arise about what it would take to complete and beautify the work. We can see how easily we impose our own ideas on the process of completion. Frequently, we set about in a frantic haste to embellish, to hasten toward finality, to add our own finishing touches and to adorn ourselves as we see best. We want to be attractive to behold. We want to stand out from the crowd, to attract interest and the notice of others. We convince ourselves that this will somehow make us happy. We seek jewels and adornments, but we seek them not for the sake of beauty. We want to have, and have more, to let others know we have more, so that rather than our wishing we had better lives, they can look at us and wish their lives were better.

When we slip into this mode, we miss the fundamentals. Of much greater importance is to see the foundation—the sculpture itself—and to see it as unfinished. In prayer, we must work to recognize that a loving master sculptor has crafted each human person uniquely. By design, no two works of this sculptor are ever the same. Rather than chasing after embellishments, a better starting point lies in two related questions: “How can I best adorn the face of creation?” and “How can I best reflect the genius of the sculptor and thereby shine the splendor of God into the hearts of all those who come into my life?” Perhaps not the first questions that come to mind, but they bring us into harmony with the mind of the Almighty.

OUR ORIGIN OF GOODNESS

Our fundamental goodness does not come from ourselves, from what we do or gain. It comes from a more basic source—from who we are, from whom we came, and to whom we can freely give glory by the way we live our lives. To maintain the imagery, the sculptor knows better than the sculpture exactly how it reaches its most beautiful fullness. Left to ourselves—and this is a great and saddening mystery—we misunderstand the subtleties and unique beauties of our own lives. As a result, we tarnish or destroy them by trying to adorn ourselves according to what we think the world would like best.

The frenzied pursuit of riches and embellishments often leads us to ignore the original goodness of the sculpture itself. The race to look the best and be the most impressive has put

us in opposition with one another, which leads us to division, competition, and eventually deep sadness. We are inherently unhappy with ourselves and are so often unable to believe we are beautiful, lovable, or good unless we have such-and-such and have it better than so-and-so. As we grapple with our freedom, the urgency of competition and the ticking clock of life bring us to a constant panic. Caught in the swirl, everybody is chasing happiness, few are finding it, and nobody can define it.

The pursuit of superficial embellishments and the love of riches, honor, prestige, and popularity have so caught our common eye and bewitched us as to lead us to say something we do not actually mean. Often indirectly but sometimes even directly, we tell our Creator that we are dissatisfied with the direction of the work. Often, we act as though we can and will improve upon it and do so without God's help.

As with all images, that of a sculpture breaks down. We are not simply passive artistic compositions. We are in fact completely involved in how our lives unfold, precisely because of our freedom. Therefore, we must find a balance, and therein lies marvelous and often vastly untapped potential: the sculptor wants us to be actively involved in the process of completion, and only God fully sees and understands the beauty and the complexity of each piece in its present state in view of the finished product.

Take a moment to ponder an important possibility: it could be the case that each of us is in just the right place—right here, right now, as we are. We easily miss the fact that in this place, the

present moment, we can really and creatively encounter God. If God wants to encounter us here and now, he wants to take us somewhere even more beautiful. Without considering this possibility, we will always miss the joy of being in harmony with God in the present, our hands in his as he guides the process of refining and perfecting.

Worldly horizons and material dreams will always lead the creature to wrestle God's work from his loving fingers. In the race for acquisition and perfection according to the terms of the world, we chip and mar what was becoming beautiful; the haste and frenzy of comparison and competition leads to scars, gouges, and broken edges. Without the involvement of the sculptor, the original vision for the finished sculpture is never fully realized. With that comes inevitable, inherent frustration.

The solution is not as complex as we might think. In prayer, we simply acknowledge God's identity, our own identity, and our respective roles. We strive to recognize and acknowledge the real relationship we have with God. God is God, the source of being, the Creator of all things, the Divine Artist. We are the work of his hands, a creation of love meant to become constantly more wonderful because of love, through love, in love.

Whenever we forget this, we inevitably return to our tiny kingdoms, impossible to maintain. When we remember it, we unite ourselves within to the genius of God. In such union we come before the fount of true peace. God brings order and works masterful harmony as true King and Lord.

THE THREAT OF INDEPENDENCE

All of this revolves around that basic and fallen human tendency to depend too much on ourselves and to believe that too much depends on us. As we look at the course of our lives, we can easily fool ourselves into believing two separate lies. In one direction, we can convince ourselves we need no work or self-improvement; we thus fall into complacency and false confidence. In another direction, we can slip into believing we are solely responsible for all of the work of improvement; we thus become our own solo projects.

Without a humble spirit, without docility and an openness to God, we will always think too much of ourselves with regard to “finishing the project.” This mindset and its many thousands of variants must die from within. If it does not, the natural tendency will be a drift away from the peace of order and harmony. God is the God of unity and beauty; the exclusion of God always brings chaos.

Whenever we choose to work alone, we make the confident proclamation, “I’m fine, I know the way.” The periphery of vision is narrow, sight is short, and the virtues always flagging without the light of the One who sees all and who is Light itself.

THE START OF HEALING

It is therefore vital to admit something very important and likely very difficult. Before God, in our hearts, with a humble and perhaps embarrassed smile, we must acknowledge that left to

ourselves, we so often lose the way. When we can admit that, suddenly we will notice that in the history of our rambling on the lost way, often our own faults or failings have misled us. Thus a follow-up question arises: If by our own faults and failings we so quickly get lost, and we do not like being lost, then why do we so hastily hide them? Imagine if we could turn that habit on its head and train ourselves to become quick to point out our own faults, even in laughter rather than accusation?

Ignorance and denial of our own limitations will, without fail, act like a chain on our forward progress. From the beginning, hiding our failings from ourselves and from God has never worked. Simply remember Adam and Eve, hiding, ashamed at their prideful resistance to God's plan for their good in the garden of Eden (see Gn 3).

FOCUS FOR THE DAY'S PRAYER

In quiet reflection, name your own limitations. Admit them—as many as you can recognize. Then, with a deep breath, hold them up to God's gaze and simply ask for help. Hear God say to you, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Then you can say with St. Paul, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor 11:30). At first it sounds foolish. Consider this: if you were not weak, you would not need God; because you are weak, God can work in you. This means, surprisingly, that the places in your life most attractive to God are the places of greatest weakness, because in those places he can most easily undertake the

work of making you whole. God sets the terms and timelines for healing and wholeness, but nothing can begin until you show the sickness to the Divine Physician.

Submit, by thanksgiving, praise, and even begging, to God. This day's task: to become humble before God. See his goodness as Creator. See how God has blessed you abundantly in giving you a nature capable of believing, of hoping, and of loving. Acknowledge, throughout this day, that without allowing God a free hand in your life, you will continue to go astray. Admit that every time you go astray you impede the perfection of his handiwork.

Only God knows every detail, and his grace and guidance will lead you to discover the way to reuniting and reordering all that falls apart. It begins with seeing his goodness and trusting in him. Pray today: "Oh God, I trust in you." God alone knows, in every tiny detail, the purpose for which he dreamed you into being: "You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb" (Ps 139:13). He is the only one who knows how to keep undoing whatever mess you make. Only God can guide you to yourself, to your freedom, and thus to your destiny.

Oh my God, loving Creator, I offer myself to you, in spite of all my pride and foolishness. I do so acknowledging you as my creator, my guide, my destiny. I hold my whole life, my whole being, up to you. I surrender

to you despite my constant attempts to control, reshape, and embellish. I thank you for creating me, for redeeming me, and for putting up with me. I thank you for always allowing me to throw my hands in the air and, either through tears or laughter, to see that I am small and childish. I leap into your arms, childlike, trusting you to guide me past all that I put in my own way. I love you, Lord, Father, Creator. Be with me. Amen.