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“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit”: Lukewarmness

Lukewarmness is a disease of the heart, by which the things of God become distasteful to us, and we may even convince ourselves that life, true life, is elsewhere.

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One of the first and most famous theophanies recorded in the Bible is when the angel of the Lord appears to Moses on Mount Horeb as a great

flame of fire within a bush. “Moses looked: the bush was burning but was not consumed. And Moses said, ‘I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned’” (*Ex 3:2-3*). God is Love, an ever-new flame of love that does not diminish over time, leaving behind only a smoldering stick. His love burns eternally, giving warmth and light to those who allow themselves to be embraced by it. Thus, God says to Moses, “I am who I am” (*Ex 3:14*). He is Love, a faithful and ever-living love. And by creating us in his image (cf. *Gen 1:27*), He has destined us for such a love: our hearts are not capable of living with less. Our love can only be a burning love that renews and grows over time.

Perhaps we have had the experience of returning to a house where we used to live, a place where we loved and gave and received affection. Returning, we find it empty and

abandoned, maybe even in ruins. A nostalgic pain pierces our hearts as we think about how happy we were there. Something similar happens when our loves grow cold and fade away. It is a sorrowful thing to see a love full of warmth turn to ashes, when it once held the promise of eternal joy, which was everything to us. What a pity! A famous writer expressed it well: “How terrible it is when you say ‘I love you’ and the person at the other end shouts back ‘What?’”^[1] This is a perfect description of lukewarmness, which is when a precious love which once gladdened the heart and filled our lives with light, is consumed nearly to the point of going out. It is love that has not withstood the passage of time.

Death in slow motion

To cool down, one must have been previously ignited, in love. That’s

why lukewarmness is not a risk for someone who has only just given their heart: their love is still too elemental, too naive. Lukewarmness, however, is a real danger for any love that has been burning for a while. It's not a sudden death but a disease that progresses almost imperceptibly: death in slow motion, like the so-called "white death" of mountaineers, a fatal mixture of cold and fatigue, where the body gradually loses its reactivity and eventually succumbs to a sweet but lethal sleep.

Reflection on lukewarmness arose very early in the history of the Church. In the third and fourth centuries, Origen and Evagrius Ponticus spoke of *acedia*, a state of disgust and laziness of the soul that does not appear in the early hours of the day of life but when the sun has already traveled a good distance and shines high in the sky. Thus, inspired

by Psalm 91, they spoke of the “noonday demon.”^[2] Acedia (*akedia*) literally means neglect, indifference. Although over time some authors distinguished it from lukewarmness (*tepiditas*), both terms refer to the same spiritual panorama: a “cooling off of charity, which gets muddied by neglect and laziness,”^[3] a carelessness that undermines dedication because “*ipsa caritas vacare non potest*; love cannot be idle;”^[4] it does not take vacations.

Blessed Álvaro once wrote especially energetic lines about the dangerous advance of lukewarmness: “The will of the lukewarm person finds its capacity to see goodness blurred, while it is on the lookout for anything that flatters its own ego. In such a state, the dregs and rottenness of selfishness and pride accumulate in the soul. As these settle, they give a progressively carnal flavour to the person's behaviour. If this evil is not

stopped in its tracks, the most abject desires, tainted by those festering sediments of lukewarmness, become progressively stronger. The desire for compensations arises. Irritability appears when faced with the slightest demand or sacrifice. Complaints are made for no real reason. Conversation becomes empty or self-centred (...). Failures in mortification and sobriety appear. The senses awaken, with violent starts. Charity grows cold and the apostolic zeal which enables one to talk about God, with real conviction, is lost.”^[5]

This is the path of lukewarmness. Gradually, sadness enters the soul and darkens everything: what once filled our hearts now means nothing to us, and we begin to reason in worldly terms. Lukewarmness distorts the soul’s senses, causing us to weary of the things of God; we even start to convince ourselves that

true life lies elsewhere. Based on his own experience, St. Augustine wrote: “I found it no marvel that bread which is distasteful to an unhealthy palate is pleasant to a healthy one; and that the light, which is painful to sore eyes, is delightful to sound ones.”^[6] —

How does one reach this state? How can a vibrant love grow so cold? We might say that it begins with a disenchantment with life, perhaps due to certain disappointments and difficulties, which lead the person to lose the candor and fervor of their early steps. The turning point may pass relatively unnoticed, but it penetrates the soul. The person begins to cut back on time for God because the plan of life feels like an accumulation of obligations; he stops dreaming and striving for the apostolic mission, perhaps due to the hostility of the environment, or discouragement at seeing few fruits.

“We all know from experience that sometimes a task does not bring the satisfaction we seek, results are few and changes are slow, and we are tempted to grow weary. Yet lowering our arms momentarily out of weariness is not the same as lowering them for good, overcome by chronic discontent and by a listlessness that parches the soul.”^[7]

This type of discontent gradually cools the heart “by abandonment, by apathy, by indifference at the moment of the daily examination of one's conduct. Today we leave out this, tomorrow we don't give importance to that, we omit a mortification for no reason at all, we consent to a lack of sincerity..., and so we become more and more used to things that displease God, and fail to convert them, by means of the examination, into material for our struggle. Never forget it, that is how one embarks on the path of lukewarmness. Through the fissures

of a careless examination of conscience there enters a coldness that ends up freezing the soul.”^[8]

God knocks at the doors of our hearts

In the opening verses of the Apocalypse, there are lines that may surprise with their severity: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (*Rev* 3:15-16). The following lines, perhaps less familiar, help to understand what God means by these striking words: “For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,’ not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (*Rev* 3:17-18). The accumulation of these descriptors, which might give the impression of harshness towards the lukewarm, actually allows us a

glimpse of God's heart. The Lord speaks sternly to help them understand their situation, similar to the man in the Gospel parable who, after a bountiful harvest, said to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (*Lk 12:19*). His mistake was that he stored up treasures for himself instead of being "rich toward God" (*Lk 12:21*). He fails to realize that he is focused on himself and thus headed for ruin.

Following the stern words in Revelation are others filled with paternal concern, showing how God not only does not despair of us but does everything possible to change our hearts: "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those

whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (*Rev 3:18-20*). God wants to lift us out of this lamentable state; He knocks at the door of our soul because He wants us to return to intimacy with Him... but He needs us to do our part, to take the steps to rekindle our love once more.

Preventing and healing lukewarmness

“Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil our vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom” (*Song 2:15*). Lukewarmness takes hold in the soul when sensitivity toward God is lost, when trust turns into negligence. We may not be able to offer the Lord flawless perfection, but we can be thoughtful and

attentive toward Him. Contrition is part of this thoughtfulness, when we realize we have treated Him poorly or lacked affection. We must pay attention to the small things and awaken contrition for our resistance to love, such as skipping or delaying prayer due to busyness, arriving late for dinner due to prioritizing our own matters, delaying a service out of laziness, or showing a sour face to someone... Acts of contrition, even for these things, ignite the soul and allow us to start anew. “To start anew? Yes, to start anew. In my case (and I imagine the same thing happens to you), I start anew every day, every hour, every time I make an act of contrition, I start anew.”^[9] —

Earlier, we mentioned the need to cultivate an attitude of examination, which entails sincerity with God and with ourselves.^[10] — This gives rise to sincerity with those who accompany us on our journey towards God; a

sincerity full of docility, allowing ourselves to be challenged, thus keeping our love alive. “Sincerity and lukewarmness are enemies, and they exclude each other. Therefore, whoever is sincere finds the strength to fight and to avoid the extremely dangerous path of lukewarmness.”^[11] —

Our love for God also stays youthful and is renewed when we share it with others. “When a coal fails to kindle a fire, it’s a sign that it’s cooling down, almost entirely turned to ashes,” Saint Josemaría once said.

^[12] — Indeed, when our hearts don’t burn with the desire for others to approach God and even to walk our path with us, it is a sign that we may have fallen asleep. But there is a cure that reawakens us: “Forget about yourself... May your ambition be to live for your brothers alone, for souls, for the Church; in one word, for God.”^[13] —

Magnanimity is another great antidote against lukewarmness. It means dedicating what is best and most precious of our lives to the Lord. Saint John tells us that while Jesus was in Bethany, Mary “took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (*Jn* 12:1-3). The finest perfume, our greatest treasure, our best time, should be for the Lord. In contrast, when we find ourselves making critical calculations, like Judas judging everything spent on Jesus as a waste, it is a bad sign: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (*Jn* 12:5). Later, Judas would sell the Master for the price of a slave... (cf. *Mt* 26:15). Sacrifices, victories, and mortifications – great or small – ignite us within and help us avoid the danger of lukewarmness. They remind our

hearts that, despite all their fragility, they are capable of great love: “Make me like snow, Lord, / for human joys, / like clay for your hands, / like fire for your love.”^[14] —

All these remedies can be summed up in Saint Paul’s moving words: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (cf. *Eph* 4:30). The Holy Spirit, who does not rest in his efforts to form Jesus in us, needs us to be prompt and docile to his inspirations. Under his wings, our lives will acquire that sense of mission which has nothing to do with lukewarm calculation or mediocrity. On the contrary, it turns our lives into adventures: “Those who choose to model their entire life on Jesus no longer choose their own places; they go where they are sent, in ready response to the one who calls. They do not even choose their own times. The house where they live does not belong to them, because the Church and the world are the open spaces of

their mission. Their wealth is to put the Lord in the midst of their lives and to seek nothing else for themselves (...). Finding their happiness in the Lord, they are not content with a life of mediocrity, but burn with the desire to bear witness and reach out to others. They love to take risks and to set out, not limited to trails already blazed, but open and faithful to the paths pointed out by the Spirit. Rather than just getting by, they rejoice to evangelize.”^[15] —

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There is no taint of lukewarmness in our Mother's life. If the fire that makes the bush burn symbolizes God's presence, the bush itself represents the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary, shining without being consumed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Fire of Divine Love: “You burned like the bush that was shown to Moses, yet did not burn

out. Melted in the fire, you drew strength from that same fire, remaining forever ardent.”^[16] We ask her to help us keep the love of God always burning; may love for Holy Mary ignite our hearts with a “living flame.”^[17] _____

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^[1] J. D. Salinger, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters & Seymour: An Introduction*, Edhasa, Barcelona, 1986, p. 80.

^[2] Cfr. E. Boland, “Tiédeur,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 15, c. 918. Cf. Ps 91 (90):6: “Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flieth by day; nor of the pestilence that spreadeth in darkness, nor of the scourge that wasteth in the daytime.”

^[3] F. Ocariz, *In the Light of the Gospel*, Scepter, New York, 2021, pg. 68.

[4] St. Agustín, *In Psalmum 31*
enarratio 5.

[5] Bl. Álvaro, pastoral letter, 9-I-1980,
no. 31 (*Family Letters II*, no. 275; AGP,
library, P17).

[6] St. Augustine, *Confessions VII*,
Chapter 16 no. 22.

[7] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*,
no. 277.

[8] Bl. Álvaro, Pastoral letter, 8-
XII-1976, no. 8 (*Family Letters II*, no.
116; AGP, library, P17).

[9] St. Josemaría, *In Dialogue with the*
Lord, no. 29.

[10] Cfr. St. Josemaría, *Letter 1*, no. 34.

[11] St. Josemaría, *Instruction 8-*
XII-1941, note 122.

[12] St. Josemaría, quoted in *Crónica*,
1973, pgs. 640-641 (AGP, library, P01).

[13] San Josemaría, *Furrow*, n. 630.

[14] E. de Champourcin, *Presencia a oscuras*, Rialp, Madrid, 1952, pg. 21 (our translation).

[15] Pope Francisco, Homily, 30-VII-2016.

[16] Cfr. St. Amadeus of Lausanne, *Homilies in Praise of Blessed Mary* (Sources Chrétiennes, 72), III, 313-317.

[17] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, n. 492.

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