

Rev. Donato Infante III, STL
July 8, 2018

Today we hear St. Paul speak about the thorn in the flesh that kept him humble.

*That I, Paul, might not become too elated,
because of the abundance of the revelations,
a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan,
to beat me, to keep me from being too elated.
Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me,
but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness."*

You can find people who think that St. Paul struggled with chastity and that the thorn in the flesh refers to that struggle. I have not found many Biblical scholars who think that is what he is referring to. Further, the "angel of Satan" line seems to indicate that he is struggling with another person, the Greek word for angel meaning messenger. When I read this passage, which will probably remain a bit of a mystery until Christ comes again, I think of it this way: sometimes we encounter people who we find very hard to love. We make up all sorts of excuses as to why they don't deserve unconditional love. They are crazy. We tried loving them and they responded rudely. They keep hurting us. They have gossiped and spread lies about us. They are close-minded and mean to others. They don't deserve unconditional love.

Yet we know that Christ taught us that we don't love people just because they love us back, for even the pagans do that. We love people even when it is hard. Even when the only reward is in knowing that we are doing good. Please don't get me wrong: Christ is not saying we have to be their best friend or put ourselves in harm's way. On the other hand, he does ask us to love unconditionally. When we meet these people, we realize how limited our perspective truly is. We will say, "Well, I tried loving them, and it didn't work, so I'm off the hook." When I hear Paul speak of his thorn in the flesh, I think of a man who has someone hard to love and prays. "Lord, I cannot do this any longer. This person is persecuting me, making my life hard, and I cannot love him anymore. I see how limited my heart is. And yet I know you give me the grace to carry on."

The great modern-day spiritual writer Sister Ruth Burrows summarizes it well.

"Our Lord did not tell us we were to love only those whom we liked, but everyone without distinction. Unless we are constantly watchful and unless we have faced the truth about ourselves, we are bound to discriminate.

"It can easily happen that we pass for very kind people, ever ready to lend a hand or do a good turn, and in our own heart we may think we are. But there will be one or two left out of this benevolent radiance. We shall be courteous to them, for we must not spoil the image we have of ourselves as charitable persons, but we shall be critical, ready to

find fault in a discreet way, ready to use them as scapegoats. We shall find it hard to be fair in judgment where they are concerned. We shall come up with rational explanations of why we think as we do, but if we were really honest we would have to admit that in some way these people cut us down to size. In some way they challenge and threaten us. They may seem to undervalue us, perhaps are critical of us, and this makes us feel insecure. We don't like feeling like this so we must find some way of destroying these people—not literally but in so far as they have power over us. We pull them down in our estimation or keep them severely at a distance. Even the heathen can love those who love them, as our Lord says. His disciples must love their enemies and do them good. Few of us have enemies but we all have those who hurt us in one way or another and we can be refusing our love to these.

She continues, "Because we are good people we don't do outrageous things, and therefore our consciences are kept untroubled. We fail to see the great importance of these small acts of injustice, or attitudes of rejection which we hold. They are sin and come between us and God. To leave one person out of our love is proof positive—we need no other—that our love for others is not really pure, not the love of Jesus. Our own self will be involved in one way or another."

Challenging words indeed from one of the foremost spiritual masters of our time. May God bless you.