FALLING IN LOVE WITH GOD

Richard Boileau

To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek him is the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement.[1]

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG ADULT it occurred to me that falling in love—though a romantic idea—was a poor foundation for an authentic and enduring relationship. It was the expression itself that bothered me: I associated the image of falling with loss of control over selfish desires and naïve impulses. Instead, I thought that it would be better to speak of growing in love, as a young tree grows in the constant pursuit of light. Certainly, intentional movement towards the light of Christ is a privileged way for Christians to enter into the love of God. It is not, however, the only path, and may not even be the most fruitful. Falling—even downfall—seems to be the way to taste the sweetest expression of God's love, namely divine mercy.

Mercy and Redemption

Personal experience of God's mercy is always profound. It is felt through the body and mind as well as the heart. To understand this, it may be helpful to consider the meaning of the word 'mercy'. In the Old Testament, 'mercy' translates three Hebrew terms. The first refers to a covenant that implies action on both parts; the second to a nurturing womb; the third to grace or favour that does not imply mutuality.[2] So divine mercy is a powerful combination of intimate relationship, deep healing and a gift that is freely given, simply because of who God is and who we are.

[1] Raphael Simon, *The Glory of Thy People: The Story of a Conversion* (New Hope: Remnant of Israel, 1985), xiii. This quotation is often attributed to St Augustine.
[2] Julia Upton, 'Mercy', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993), 653–654.

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The Samaritan Woman at the Well*, by Carracci*

The most direct evidence of God's mercy is the words and deeds of Jesus. We can think, among other situations, of his interactions with the Samaritan woman and with Lazarus. The woman whom Jesus met at Jacob's Well moved him to compassion because her sin created an anguishing separation between herself and God, and also between herself and those who ostracized her. The family that grieved over the death of Lazarus appealed to his mercy as the burden of their loss seemed unbearable.

> In this way, in Christ and through Christ, God also becomes especially visible in His mercy; that is to say, there is emphasized that attribute of the divinity which the Old Testament, using various concepts and terms, already defined as 'mercy'. Christ confers on the whole of the Old Testament tradition about God's mercy a definitive meaning. Not only does He speak of it and explain it by the use of comparisons and parables, but above all He Himself makes it incarnate and personifies it. He Himself, in a certain sense, is mercy. To the person who sees it in Him—and finds it in Him—God becomes 'visible' in a particular way as the Father who is rich in mercy.[3]

[3] John Paul II, *Dives in misericordia*, 30 November 1980, n. 2, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia_en.html.

In its broadest sense, the ultimate expression of God's mercy is the redemption of sinful humanity through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The classic response is one of gratitude and joy. It is not too much of a stretch, however, to suggest that persons who have sinned find consolation and even joy in redemptive acts of their own. It may be said that they are participating in Christ's mystical drama.

This principle constantly fascinates us. Many works of fiction that explore the popular understanding of 'redemption' come to mind: books such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and films such as *Babette's Feast*, *Hummingbird* (the US release of which is actually called *Redemption*) and *Rain Man*. In all cases, there is an 'epiphany' followed by a fundamental change in outlook. There is also a corresponding increase in vitality, and a desire to align subsequent actions with the new insight. In faith, we know that this consolation is made possible because of participation in God's gift of mercy in Christ.

> This truth of our faith does not exclude but demands the participation of each and every human being in Christ's sacrifice in collaboration with the Redeemer … no human being could carry out the work of redemption by offering a substitutive sacrifice 'for the sins of the whole world' (cf. 1 John 2:2). But it is also true that each one is called upon to participate in Christ's sacrifice and to collaborate with him in the work of redemption carried out by him. The Apostle Paul says so explicitly: 'I have been crucified with Christ'.[4]

In two passages in Luke's Gospel descent or downfall results in a redemptive encounter with pure grace. In the first, we find two criminals condemned to die with Jesus. One, we are told, mocked Jesus. The other, with confidence that Jesus is the messiah, said with great simplicity, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Luke 23:42). In the second passage, the parable of the Prodigal Son, we meet a young man at what may be the worst and best moments of his life.

In a reflection on God's mercy, Timothy Radcliffe observed that:

> God forgives us before we have even sinned, and Jesus promises to bring this thief into Paradise before he himself has even risen from

[4] John Paul II, 'The Redemptive Value of Christ's Sacrifice', general audience, 26 October 1988, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19881026en.html.

> the dead. This is because God lives in the today of eternity. God's eternity breaks into our lives now.[5]

The so-called good thief sensed this in an almost childlike way. He confessed his total dependence on God. As it turns out, this understanding of life as being totally dependent on God is the turning point of the spiritual journey. Thomas Merton said,

> The whole Christian life is a life in which the further a person progresses, the more he or she has to depend directly on God. The more we progress, the less we are self-sufficient. The more we progress, the poorer we get so that the person who has progressed the most is totally poor and depends directly on God.[6]

The question raised by this story and others is whether we can be truly authentic without seeing ourselves through a relationship with Jesus. According to Thomas Del Prete, 'Two of the strongest psychological attributes of the false self are its "fear of death and the need for self-affirmation"'.[7] This describes well the behaviour of the thief who mocked and denied Jesus as Saviour. The good thief, on the other hand, is freed from the illusion of stoic self-reliance. Already we get a sense that underlying our problem of selfishness is a misguided struggle for authenticity that often has disastrous results.

Merton was clear in his message that the true self can only be discovered in the light of God's love. Falling away from stubborn self-reliance is the most direct way of finding the truth about our self, what Merton called 'the mature personal identity, the creative fruit of an authentic and lucid search, the "self" that is found after other partial and exterior selves have been discarded as masks'.[8]

Masks are active or passive shields against harm to wounded parts of our psyche. We persist in using them because they serve a purpose. We could not survive with our gaping wounds always exposed to the world. But these same defences also divert attention from important issues and

[5] Timothy Radcliffe, *Seven Last Words* (Toronto: Novalis, 2004), 25.
[6] Thomas Merton, *Monastic Spirituality: Citeaux* (Kansas City, Mo: Credence Cassettes, 1994), tape AA2083.
[7] Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, Al: Religious Education, 1990), 35, quoting Thomas Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 18.
[8] Thomas Merton, 'Learning to Live', in *Love and Living* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 4.

prevent our healing. As masks are not easily discarded, dysfunctional ones may sometimes only be abandoned once they have been torn away by setbacks or disasters.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son there are two sons, somewhat recalling the two thieves at the crucifixion. One demands his inheritance even before his father's death, in order to squander it in selfish ways. Ignoring the fact that this is his father's fortune, he imagines himself now to be self-sufficient. His focus is entirely on himself, on the inheritance that he sees as due to him, on his passions and his pleasures. When he runs out of money, out of ideas, out of confidence in that sense of self-sufficiency that is really an illusion, the profligate son returns to his father's house.

As Luke tells us, 'while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (15:20). Then, without evidently paying much attention to his son's tepid words of remorse, he ordered his servants 'to bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet' (15:22). He ordered as well that the fattened calf be slaughtered in order to celebrate his son's return with a feast. He rejoiced in the fact that he had now found his son who had been lost in the darkness of sin. It was not so much that the son had returned but that the father had found him.

Henri Nouwen asks,

> I wonder whether I have sufficiently realised that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by him?' The question is not 'How am I to know God?' but 'How am I to let myself be known to God?' And, finally, the question is not 'How am I to love God?' but 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?' God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.[9]

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to falling in love with God is the feeling of inadequacy or unworthiness. Why would God seek me? Could I face God? Even the knowledge that God is benevolent and merciful may not be sufficient to quell our inner fears. Anxiety often persists in limiting the

[9] Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 100.

heart's receptivity to God's love and, as a consequence, its willingness to shed inauthenticity. This is why we need good spiritual guides to help us to overcome hesitation, regret and shame in order to receive the gift of healing.

It would be unreasonable to imagine that the good thief and the prodigal son were rotten to the core. They surely had many wonderful qualities, but the stories that Luke tell are about their errors and their eventual realisation that they have made bad decisions. Luke wants to show us that God does not look upon us with the cruel, self-righteous judgment of most people. Rather, he shows the face of an infinitely merciful God, incarnated in the sacred body of a man hanging in agony from a cross precisely in order to utter these words, 'Today, you will be with me in paradise'.

It is not easy to entrust oneself to God's mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must!

> 'Oh, I am a great sinner!' 'All the better! Go to Jesus: he likes you to tell him these things!' He forgets, he has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, he kisses you, he embraces you and he simply says to you: 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more' (John 8: 11).[10]

The extent of God's mercy seems almost incredible both to the sinner and to the person whose self-righteousness marginalises the sinner. This gratuitous mercy seems to violate all the rules of justice that we learn in society. This is why we find it so difficult to accept God's love. It seems too good to be true. To accept love on God's terms seems to be one of the most difficult phases of religious conversion. It requires confidence that unconditional love is not just a theological idea but also something that can be experienced.

The Truth in the Darkness

God's mercy is a downward movement of compassion and grace. On the one hand, God invites us to meet God's 'condescension' with an upward reach of filial love as Christ did. On the other, God invites us to descend, ourselves, into the darkness where truth is hidden from the human light of sensory knowledge and finite consciousness. Among the many images used in Christian literature to signify our own downward movement in

[10] Pope Francis' homily, 17 March 2013, available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130317_omelia-santa-anna_en.html.

search of truth in the darkness of spiritual night is the notion of retreat for the purpose of purification. Two important proponents of this approach are Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and John of the Cross. What these two share in particular is an insightful mix of mystical and theological understanding.

According to Bonaventure, purification is the first of three classical ways to God that are hierarchical but not sequential, require their own exercises and culminate in Christian perfection. Each way fulfils a particular role; and the three ways, followed more or less simultaneously, lead to interior order and loving union with God. Thus the three ways are not successive stages of spiritual development, but parallel approaches to action at every stage. In *The Triple Way*, for example, Bonaventure shows how meditation can be organized to achieve purification, illumination and union; he then shows how the same ends can be achieved by the exercises of prayer and contemplation.[11]

John of the Cross is best known for his poem and commentary *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and for *The Dark Night*. The very titles of these works form a curious application of the insight by which we can draw closer to God through affliction, bringing together the word 'ascent' with darkness, which we typically associate with descent and apophatic theology. The implicit message is that descent can be a movement of spiritual progress leading to an ascent to illumination and union with God. His other works tend to follow a similar pattern. As St Paul exclaims, 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' (Romans 11:33)

St Bonaventure, *by Paolo Morando*

[11] Ernest E. Larkin, 'The Three Spiritual Ways', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1967), volume 14, 835–836.

> Yet the soul wants to enter this … incomprehensibility of judgements and ways because she is dying with the desire to penetrate them deeply. Knowledge of them is an inestimable delight surpassing understanding …. Hence the soul ardently wishes to be engulfed in these judgements and know them from further within. And, in exchange, it will be a singular comfort and happiness for her to enter all the afflictions and trials of the world, and everything that might be a means to this, however, difficult and painful, even the anguish and agony of death, all in order to see herself further within her God.[12]

In everyday life, we use various expressions to signify downward movements that are either unintentional or intentional. Unintentional ones include falling down because of our own weakness or being knocked down by external force. The movement can also be intentional, as in the case of bowing down, reaching down or climbing down. Each is potentially fruitful, provided that our approach to it is based on sound spiritual and psychological principles.

Richard Rohr describes some suffering as necessary:

> Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone, as Isaiah calls it; or to state it in our language here, you will and you must 'lose' at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.[13]

Being *knocked down*, by others or by tragic events, while entirely undesirable, can contain an invitation to recognise and confess vulnerability. Brené Brown, a research professor in social work at the University of Houston, claims that we go out of our way to block awareness of our own vulnerability and that this instinct harms us in the long run. It deprives us of joy because emotions cannot be numbed selectively. She concludes that frank awareness of this vulnerability is the key to authenticity and honesty in relationships. She had to be knocked down by depression to gain that insight.[14] We too often need some external force, sometimes a brutal one, to break unhealthy patterns.

[12] John of the Cross, 'The Spiritual Canticle', in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington DC: ICS, 1979), 548–549.
[13] Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 65–66.
[14] For a broader discussion of 'being knocked down' by failure, illness and ageing, see Richard Boileau, 'Falling with Grace to Grace', *Human Development*, 34/2 (Summer 2013), 3–7.

Intimacy with God is only possible by *bowing down*, which is the movement that expresses humility, 'the foundation of all virtue', according to Aquinas.[15] Humility puts us in right relationship with God, but also with others. We are at our best when we acknowledge that we are not equal to God but that others are equal to us. We are most fruitful when we operate in ample gratitude for the gifts that have been bestowed on us and in the modest acceptance of our limitations.

The effort to overcome resistance in order freely to fall in love with God uses a muscle that we exercise through service to others, by *reaching down* to touch the poverty in ourselves. From this movement is born compassion for others, who we discover to be healers. It is an odd thing how God calls us to be channels of the particular blessings of which we are ourselves very much in need. These heal us on the way to helping others.

Climbing down is a phrase that I associate with Carl Jung. Every compilation of famous quotations includes this: 'In my case Pilgrim's Progress consisted in my having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am'.[16] The allusions to *Pilgrim's Progress*, the clod of earth and 'I am' are interesting. He was in effect confessing that growth in consciousness and awareness of truth was for him a downward movement, a deepening that was probably more often uncomfortable than not.

Because falling in love is like the dark night of the soul, Ron Rolheiser uses the expression in relation to the active night of the senses as a metaphor for conversion where a person's indifference is overcome.[17] I suggest that the expression applies even more literally to the period prior to the dark night of the spirit when—by healthy abandonment in the face of disillusionment and aridity—a person shifts from being in love with the experience itself to loving the one behind the experience, namely God, and accepts that God—like Love, which is God's nature—is an unfathomable, uncontrollable mystery. Falling that is accepted as a gift rather than rejected as a curse leads eventually to hope and joy that are grounded in truth about ourselves and the world around us.

Falling in love is like the dark night of the soul

[15] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.2, q.161 art. 5.
[16] C. G. *Jung: Letters*, volume 1, selected and edited by Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 19n.
[17] Ron Rolheiser, 'John and Human Development: "The Dark Night of the Soul … A Contemporary Interpretation" ', available at http://ronrolheiser.com/me/uploads/2014/02/joc_human_dev.pdf, accessed 17 March 2014.

Falling in Love with God

If God is all in all, God is present in the light, revealed as truth and love, and in the darkness, where God's mercy is a warm light that cannot be diminished by the darkness. Once it has been felt in the deepest recesses of our being, the unconditional quality of God's love elicits a response, at first timid, that later grows with almost reckless intensity. God's surprising mercy seems to justify the unbridled falling in love that many saints came to experience even, perhaps especially, when they felt unworthy.

The negative aspects of life must never result in negative attitudes, nor must they be dismissed without searching for the treasure that is hidden within them, especially once we learn that falling down, climbing down, reaching down and bowing down can lead to a greater capacity for loving authentically, having been freed of the falseness that creeps surreptitiously into our psyche over time.

We would do well to reflect on our faith in God's love and mercy. How strong is it? Do we really believe that, despite our bad choices, God is constantly looking for us while we are still far off, and when we let ourselves been seen in truth, in our particular poverty, God is filled with compassion. He runs to us, embraces us and kisses us. Do we believe that, without paying much attention to our timid confession, God adorns us with wondrous blessings and orders the angels to prepare a sumptuous feast? God rejoices in all God's children who were once lost in the darkness of sin and have been found. This is for God—as it is for us—a source of deep joy.

I no longer view the expression 'falling in love' with the uneasiness that I once did. While discernment and light remain positive values, a willingness to embrace the shadows of life as well as the obvious pleasures has opened my heart to unimagined delights, some bittersweet and others indescribably delicious. If only in fleeting moments, I have discovered, as many of us have, that trusting in God's mercy and falling freely into the arms of unconditional love leads indeed to life's greatest joy.

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