**Chapter 7.4: Humility**

January 28, May 29, September 28

*Truly, we are forbidden to do our own will, for Scripture tells us: “Turn away from your desires” (Sir. 18:30). And in the Prayer too we ask God that his “will be done” in us (Matt. 6:10). We are rightly taught not to do our own will, since we dread what Scripture says: “There are ways which some men call right that in the end plunge into the depths of hell” (Prov. 16:25). Moreover, we fear what is said of those who ignore this: “They are corrupt and have become depraved in their desires” (Ps. 13[14]:1).*

*As for the desires of the body, we must believe that God is always with us, for “All my desires are known to you” (Ps. 37[38]:10), as the Prophet tells the Lord. We must then be on guard against any base desire, because death is stationed near the gateway of pleasure. For this reason Scripture warns us, “Pursue not your lusts” (Sir. 18:30).*

Central to humility is the ability to listen and respond to the good in life, a good that is not just about me. This obedience is about turning away from desire. In the Our Father we pray that the Divine Will be done ‘on earth as it is in heaven’. This is about participating with love on earth and not being controlled by desire.

The desire of the ego is to gratify, while the longing of the heart is to love. Loving is other-centred, while desiring is ego-centred. Desire is about self-gratification and indulgence, longing is about loving each other into wholeness. The human condition is a mix of longing and desire. What the rule and Christian spirituality are about is the graced transformation of desire into longing.

Living life at the extreme of desire and self-gratification is to live a kind of hell. It is to live a self-centred life in which the people around us are used (often subtlety, sometimes not so), for our own gratification and need. We may not even be aware that we are doing it.

It is no coincidence that among the gifts of the Holy Spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). This gift is not about having no fun or going through life as a control freak. Self-control is about the moderation of desire.

Desires could be described as disordered passion, while longing might be called passions ordered. Passions in themselves are good; they provide energy and purpose for life. However, when passion is fractured into desire, we can act impulsively out of hurt and pain; we can seek pleasure as a salve and the ‘next big thing’ as an answer to restlessness and emptiness.

The way of ordering passions into longing is the way of ascesis. Ascesis is from the Greek *askein*, meaning ‘to exercise’. The rule is a way of community as an exercise towards healthy, whole living. This means the turning away from desire, done together as practical living. Meditation compliments this ascesis of the rule with its own practical exercise: say your word, and return to it, from the beginning to the end of your meditation. In this way, as we meditate and live together desires are ordered.

Benedict gives mention to the desires of the body. Two of these are gluttony and lust. Our culture struggles with how to live with these. Overeating and undereating are both an excess. Lust could be seen as desiring without recourse to love. The rule repeats here that God, Divine Love, is with us in the ordering of all desire, including the desires of the body. We are not alone as we struggle. Grace is always moving and healing; sometimes hidden, sometimes gently consoling. We are never abandoned by God: the true love that we long for in and with each other.

Central to all of this is the humbling journey of attention into the depths of us and back into the awareness of who we are. It is on this journey that desire is clarified into the longing of the heart. As attention and the heart embrace, we are changed enough to experience the consolation that is the longing of the heart expressed together. And we discover that we no longer want that second piece of cake.

Instead, I tell you, be guided by the Spirit, and do not fulfil the desires of the flesh[[1]](#footnote-1). 17. The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh: they are opposed to one another, so that you may not do whatever you please. (Galatians 5:16-17, RNJB).

1. ‘…and you will no longer yield to self-indulgence.’ (NJB) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)