

Absence of Criticism

God has a plan for us: he wants us to love him above all else and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is not easy to love because, by nature, love is an absolute and does not accept half measures. Love demands that we go to the limits of our strength, into the depths of our being to find there the qualities, gifts, talents and energies that are its usual expressions. Without searching for the richness constituted by our personality, we will never reach true and authentic love.

Love goes beyond the impulses of passion, sexual drives or the volcanic sentiments of sudden, emotional affection. True love is God within us welcoming or visiting God in the other.

By birth each of us becomes an image and likeness of God. (cf. Gn 1:26) By baptism and faith all become children of God. Therefore God has predisposed, established and regulated within us all the powers necessary to love. We also have additional capacities which God distributes to those whom he has chosen to be his children, along with Jesus whom he considers "the firstborn". All these powers, sown in profusion in the human being, become instruments of love. Our strengths are

innumerable and extraordinary; they make us marvel in the eyes of God.

To accomplish the plan of God is to live the best of ourselves each day. To live the best of ourselves is to carry out God's plan for us. God is both Love and the Sower of Love as well as its Great Distributor. Paul of Tarsis tells his disciple Timothy: "*He saved us and called us to a holy life not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began.*" (2 Tim 1:9)

Our vocation on earth is to live love; it is to allow others to speak to us of love; it is to welcome love and to spread it to those around us. Love has *three levels of perfection*:

The first is to treat others as we treat ourselves, to love one another as we love ourselves. (cf. Jn 13:34) "*Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.*" (Mt 7:12)

The second level is to love others as Jesus loved us. (cf. Jn 15:12) "*My little children, I will not leave you orphans... I will send you the Paraclete, the Consoler.*" (Jn 14:18; 16:7) The summit of love is to give our lives for those we love. (cf. Jn 15:13) That is what Jesus did for us to procure salvation for us.

The third level is to love one another as the Father loves the Son. "*This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*" (Mt 17:5)

God established a plan of love in which he does not tolerate weakness. He wants us to reach for the heights; there are no risks to take, there are no wasted efforts. The great risk that can stop us from attaining this love is *destructive criticism* which

makes us destroyers. Destroyers are incapable of profound love; they lose sight of God's plan and seek imitations of love wherever they see it be it in emotivity, or in the dissoluteness of their passions. We see them running from deception to deception, their mouths twisted in bitterness..

Let us endeavor to describe *destructive criticism*, and the damage it causes, and try to find out how God wants each of us to behave toward our neighbor. We must know the definition of destructive criticism if we want to avoid it in order to protect our love of God and neighbor, and to consider the presence of God as the most important means of remaining faithful to our Christian vocation.

1. Definition of Criticism

We can give many different meanings to the word *criticism*. The dictionary gives this meaning to *constructive criticism*: it is the study of a principle or a fact in order to make a judgement, an appreciation from the aesthetic or philosophical point of view. We also say that it is an intellectual or moral judgement, the study of the positive values of someone. In reality this criticism is an objective, positive appreciation of a person, their works, or their actions. This type of criticism is praiseworthy and beneficial; we should all encourage it and exercise it.

On the other hand, *destructive criticism* is completely different. It is a cancer that devours a reputation right down to its roots, like the larva of

certain butterflies which at times destroy the pine forests of Quebec. Up to the present, no one has managed to describe adequately the intensity or immensity of the damage caused. Or could destructive criticism be "the roaring lion seeking to devour?" (cf. 1 Pt 5:8-9)

This criticism is an unfavorable judgement made about someone without a reason, without a motive, without the right. It is the manifestation of discontent in regard to someone, absent or present, but whose identity is usually known. It is an unfavorable judgement made about someone when we look at their negative side.

In *destructive criticism* we emphasize a scandal, be it a calumny or a rash judgement. This criticism is caused by an impulse of pride, a wounded susceptibility, an uncontrolled sensuality or a poorly restrained aggressiveness. This type of criticism has existed since the beginning of time. All of us have experienced it during the course of our lives, either by criticizing or by being the target of criticism.

In his first book of *The Imitation of Christ* (paragraph 16), Thomas a Kempis gives ordinary Christians some wise advice to help make life in society supportable.

"What we cannot correct in ourselves or others we must support with patience until the Lord changes things... Strive to patiently support the faults and infirmities of others whatever they may be because you also give others many things to endure. If you are not able to become what you would like to be, how can you change others

according to your desires?... If you are incapable of changing yourself, how can you pretend to change others?"

Thomas a Kempis invites us to stop dreaming and to be realistic; in paragraph 14 he had already written:

"By judging others, we tire ourselves uselessly; we more often err and commit many faults, but by examining ourselves and judging ourselves we can bring forth much fruit."

In the face of criticism, we must either be or change the topic of conversation as if not understood anything. We must avoid caught up in such an explosive subject of love of neighbor is to refuse to respond to criticism by silence

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In the face of criticism, we must either be silent or change the topic of conversation as if we had not understood anything. We must avoid getting caught up in such an explosive subject. A good sign of love of neighbor is to refuse to criticize; it is to respond to criticism by silence or by bringing out a true quality of the person being talked about.

Often we criticize because we are jealous or frustrated, as when we are waiting for others to consult us and they do not. It also happens that we project our own state of soul onto others. In criticism there is no love; the criticizer is left to himself, he obeys his evil tendencies. Criticism becomes a mania.

Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was particularly jealous of Moses who had married a Midianite woman. She was jealous of her brother because he received special favors from God who spoke to him regularly face to face. She imagined that she had the same rights as her brother but that through his egoism he put obstacles in her way.

Aaron, who was quite impressionable, was won over to her way of thinking. The situation became more serious; discontent and misunderstanding grew. Moses did not seem to be affected by the situation, therefore God himself defended his servant. The Lord intervened and censured their pride. Miriam was struck down with leprosy and it was only after seven days of intercession that Moses obtained the healing of his sister. Miriam understood; peace returned. (cf. Nm 12) Miriam had criticized because she was frustrated.

History has already judged Hitler as one of the most cruel dictators of modern times. He is described as a modest, shy, silent man, turned in on himself, morose, taciturn, sensitive and susceptible. In 1914, he joined the German army and became part of a regiment destined to fight in Flanders where he had a number of tours of duty. His personality was strongly marked by his military life in the trenches. In Flanders he received his first baptism of fire: he was wounded in the thigh, was momentarily blinded and was intoxicated by gas.

It was in Flanders that he first came into contact with the Jews. It is said that his furious and irrational hatred for the Jews could have originated from a banal, seemingly unimportant incident. Hitler had a certain admiration for Hugo Gutmann, a Jewish ordinance officer, who obtained for him an important military citation: the Iron Cross, First Class. Corporal Hitler received this citation for his courage. Grateful to the officer, he accepted to deliver a package to a Jewish family in Nuremberg while he was on a week's leave there. But the

officer's family did not welcome him properly; they made him wait; they answered him with indifference, they accepted the package distractedly and, to fill his cup to overflowing, they gave him a miserly tip of one mark for his troubles. Hitler passed through various interior states: he was literally torn apart, humiliated. He was no longer capable of finding any positive qualities in Jewish people and twenty years later when he became the head of his country, he sacrificed thousands of Jews in the crematory ovens. Hitler, frustrated, became inhuman. (*History for All*, no. 193)

When we allow criticism to take over, we no longer bear witness to God but to our frustrations. We must put as much care into concentrating on the presence of God as a technician in a laboratory places on his test-tubes. The life of someone may depend on it.

If we take on the compulsion of criticizing, others will not be duped, they will not believe in the vigor of our witness. They will say: "How did you get caught up in this affair? Is that what it means to be a Christian?" Gandhi used to say: "*I admire Christ*,"

I love him, but I have no confidence in Christians." He judged by those he had seen in England in the course of his university studies.

Everyone knows that the *presence of God*, protected by an *absence of criticism*, is the basic element of the spiritual life and that the absence of criticism is a strong expression of Christian asceticism. All expect us to take on our responsibilities. Without a serious commitment to think of God, to be grafted

onto him, to listen to his word and put it into practice, Christianity becomes a kind of social club which has no effect on our lives; it is incapable of leading us out of boredom or tepidity.

Those who speak well of others are seen as warm-hearted people who have common sense. If we recognize that we have joy, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and agreeableness in our hearts, we will not allow ourselves to become discouraged neither by evil nor by the aberrations or rigorous judgements of others. We will find enough indulgence in our hearts not to blast out condemnations. We will be able to distinguish between the evil to be rejected, and the authors of evil who need our mercy and our friendship.

Goodness is surely the most visible manifestation of the presence of God. The day we are no longer tempted to judge others unfavorably or harshly, our relationships with them will become marvelous. The *absence of criticism* fortifies the presence of God, educates us to patience, augments the spiritual forces within us, permits us to welcome our neighbor with simplicity, stimulates our heart, weans our imagination, pacifies our passions, calms emotivity, suffocates our instincts for revenge, liberates us from selfishness and pettiness, and preserves intimacy with God.

When we let ourselves go and criticize destructively, we become our own worst enemy. We neglect the Lord, withdraw into ourselves, manifest a certain disrespect for others and become the plaything of our passions. We deliver ourselves into the hands of our evil tendencies and lose control of our

emotivity. Being that love is ignored, it no longer directs our attitudes and our sentiments.

To *criticize* is to affirm a certain superiority over others, to give ourselves a diploma of competence, to assume, perhaps unconsciously, the place of God. To judge is an attribute belonging to God and not to us. Let us learn not to meddle in the affairs of others. Let us have confidence in God and not be afraid for he has a solution to every problem; in every discussion the last word belongs to him. By judging we do not facilitate his task; we only hurt ourselves and others.

To speak of the *presence of God* is to speak of intimacy with God. We can easily think of God, say beautiful things about him yet still be far from him, far from his will. We find many such examples in the Gospels. The first person to announce to the people that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, was one possessed by a devil. (cf. Mk 1:23-24)

St. Mark's Gospel speaks of certain Pharisees, critics, who want to find fault with Jesus. The Pharisees detest him, they speak of him every time his name comes to mind. A small group of them get together, criticize him, elaborate plans, and set traps to catch him in an error. Without realizing it they are being illogical and stupid. They send a group of colleagues to speak with Jesus. It is a setup. The delegates ask a question but first of all they prepare the ground. Able in psychology, endowed with good intelligence, they have picked out the good qualities in Jesus. Thus they say to him: "*Master, we know you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone's opinion. You do not*

regard a person's status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."

All these affirmations are true, yet even though they are standing close to Jesus they are not in his presence because they do not have faith in him. They hate him, dispute him and desire his death. Malice and hatred have sealed their hearts, and their knowledge of him serves only to hide their cunning and their bad faith. They ask a question: "*Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?*" If Jesus says yes, we must pay the tax, we are under the authority of the Romans, then the Pharisees will denounce him to the Israelites as a renegade who has delivered himself to the Romans, the colonizers of the country. This first affirmation will have all the Israelites on his back. If, on the other hand, Jesus says no, do not pay, the cost of living is very high, Caesar always has too much money to oppress us then the Pharisees will hasten to denounce him as a zealot, an anarchist, a separatist and the Romans will deal harshly with him. They are happy with their well-thought-out plan. They are certain of the efficacy of their trap. They are already rubbing their hands together in triumph. They believe that they have foreseen everything.

Jesus probes hearts and minds; he unmasks their slyness and hypocrisy. He responds with a question that appears inoffensive and harmless: "*Bring me a denarius to look at.... Whose image and inscription is this?*" They replied to him: "*Caesar's.*" "*Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*" They were utterly amazed at him. They

went away not daring to make another attempt. (cf. Mk 12:13-17)

In order for the presence of God to be transforming it must mobilize our hearts. When we accept the Lord he comes to dwell in us; he is as much at home in our hearts as he was when he went to the house of Lazarus and of Zaccheus. All our faculties are tuned in to Jesus ready to put themselves at his service. Under this affectionate awareness, our whole being feels itself transformed and transfigured. God is certain that, like Mary Magdalene, we too will understand the language of love.

2. The Damaging Effects of Criticism

Why not take the time to consider some of the damaging effects of destructive criticism? We must reflect at length on this subject because very few people strive to combat criticism, even though everyone knows the damage it causes. It is difficult to believe that we ourselves are effected by this scourge. We have the impression that this subject is useful only for others. Obviously, we admit that at times we may accidentally fall into criticism. Still, everyone does it so we tell ourselves that we are not worse than others and put our conscience to rest.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to revive our intelligence, our wisdom, our knowledge, our counsel, our piety, our strength, our fear of the Lord so that we may work for our own spiritual evolution.

I point out here numerous damaging effects of *destructive criticism*. The list is necessarily incomplete; you can add your own personal experiences to it. Destructive criticism can turn an easy duty into a difficult task. It stops us from discovering positive values in ourselves and in others. It causes us to become disgusted with certain people that we could help. It weakens or destroys courage. It renders us vulnerable, excites our passions, smother the voice of remorse. It causes the loss of self-control and makes us more emotional, aggressive, morose, less pious, drawing us away from prayer. It slows down the positive evolution of our personality and upsets or disturbs our degree of concentration. It makes us an easier prey to mental or moral fatigue and blocks simplicity in our relationship with God. It diminishes or destroys our inclination and attraction to place ourselves in the presence of God. It renders the criticizer contemptible in the eyes of those who listen. Friends become nervous wondering if they'll be the next victims. The criticizer never bothers to ask pardon and is surprised by the reaction of his victims.

Holy Scripture uses stronger tones than we would dare to use in describing the damage caused by the tongue. It often uses a direct and picturesque style such as St. James does in chapter 3 verses 2-13 of his letter.

"With it [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God." (Jas 3:9)

"From the perverse tongue flows forth lies, guile, duplicity, scandal, calumny." (Ps 10:7) "The tongue is a serpent." (Ps 140:4) "It is a sharpened razor." (Ps 52:4) "It is a sharp sword." (Ps 57:5) "It is a murderous arrow." (Jer 9:7)

Destructive criticism often monopolizes the spirit, overexcites the nerves, causes anxiety, and creates tensions that become difficult to bear.

Criticism originates in self-love. It can be personified as a devil who stands at the door of the heart sowing trouble, changing the current of our positive thoughts and throwing confusion into our imagination which has a marked tendency for exaggeration and dramatization. When the devil does not succeed in introducing himself into the heart of a person, he disturbs them, he takes away their joy and peace and they become so anemic that the presence of God no longer interests them.

There is an incompatibility of nature between the presence of God and destructive criticism. They cannot live under the same roof: when one is present the other disappears. They are like light and darkness. As the light approaches, darkness moves away. As destructive criticism approaches, the presence of God leaves.

We must be conscious enough to accept these realities not as an interesting theory but as a way of life. If we criticize, we so weaken our presence of God that it is incapable of stimulating our capacity to love and to be transformed. The habit of criticizing does not take away our spiritual language but it

destroys fervor, the taste for perfection and the desire for intimate union with God.

Let us learn to aim at the essential. In a relationship the essential is always sensitivity, comprehension, a gift of self to the person who is near us. Let us ignore matters of little importance, not wasting time with accidentals, details, appearances, compulsions, with little irritating defects. Let us look beyond the misadventures that happen along the way. Let us endeavor to go right to the heart of God and our neighbors to reach the richness of their being.

If we were able to grasp all the disastrous subtleties of destructive criticism, all the damage produced both in the criticizer and in the victim — often a person who is absent and does not have the chance to beg for mercy — we would change our behavior and strive wholeheartedly to live an affectionate presence of God.

Let us examine ourselves seriously, it is possible that we have more than just a simple tendency to criticize. Perhaps we say things that are disagreeable and harmful. We may not yet have an uncontrollable habit, but if we are often taciturn, morose, and dejected, if our attitude expresses pessimism and our face always appears to be frowning at people or events, we should ask ourselves: Are we in harmony with God who asks us to have a preferential love for him and an unconditional love for others? Do we want to succeed in playing our part in the divine plan? Then let us keep an eye on destructive criticism and keep a strict control over it.

Monsignor Charles Eugene Mathieu was secretary general of the Canadian Bishops for ten years. He was a special person gifted with the heart of an apostle and a communicative piety. For some years, through the creation of a movement called *Pax Vobis* (Peace be with you) he endeavored to establish a network of communications — radio and television — throughout Canada which would be uniquely Christian. During his lifetime he was often a helpless witness to bitter criticisms. He saw so many persons whose reputations were wounded and broken that he worked to be the herald of charity and peace. In the rules that laid out the good functioning of his organization, he wrote: "Each member, lay, religious or cleric, will work to carry out with discretion and tact, but above all by their own example, a daily, tenacious war against all that risks destroying, directly or indirectly, publicly or privately, the unity, credibility and good morale of the members of the Church and of the team *Pax Vobis*. Among other things, we will vigorously combat the least lack of fraternal charity, authoritative pronouncements, virtual excommunications, the all-too-easy accusations, the frequent gossiping, the negative rumors, and news that is uselessly depressing, the detestable, chronic denigration of all that others do elsewhere or in a different manner; all types of manipulation, intrigue, and sectarianism, whatever good intentions are involved."

The list is long, Monsignor wanted it to be complete and this proscription in favor of charity leaves no room for exceptions. Those who do not

pay attention to it will be sent away from the team, whatever their rank, their dignity, their talents. Here is the price of charity, to get rid of criticism, no matter what form it takes.

Criticism is a wound that paralyzes associations. Those who give in to this excess, diminish their reputations in the sight of those who have listened. We are led to pity and sometimes to a repugnance for those who criticize.

We must not only avoid criticism but also fight energetically against certain formulas used by many people today. These formulas are the ingenuity of the devil and we naively borrow them because we do not have enough mettle to keep quiet. Here are formulas that we should banish without pity: I shouldn't tell you this but... I do not want to lack charity, but... I do not want to be indiscreet, but... I think that it is my duty to tell you... I admit that this person has good qualities, but...

Why not react generously against these phrases which bear a diabolical subtlety. We must consider the "but" as an invitation made to the devil to pour his poison into the conversation. Why not adopt the philosophy of the Alcoholics Anonymous? Why not attack this gangrene, this criticism, by promising for each 24 hours a sobriety in our words, meetings, conversations and our way of treating our neighbor. This promise must be renewed every 24 hours, keeping in mind that the Gospel affirms that each day has its own sufferings. The cross imposed by the absence of criticism is proportionate to what we can lift up and carry in a day. To protect ourselves, we might have to remain far

from certain critics, avoiding them like we avoid smokers when we have a horror of smoking or of lung cancer.

3. Advantages of the Absence of Criticism

The objective of the presence of God is to keep us in our true place in God's plan. The absence of criticism helps us to preserve this place without difficulty. We often say that the term *absence of criticism* and the other term *absence of complaint* are too negative to be interesting. Do not judge too hastily: the realities contained in these terms are truly positive.

To gain a better understanding, let us personalize the term *absence of criticism*. Let us say that the term indicates a person; let's call this person our guardian angel, the watchman, the bodyguard of the presence of God. In effect, the *absence of criticism* is an angel that marches at our side to protect our relationship with God, like the angel who directed Moses. The *absence of criticism* is the bodyguard who is always present, never tired, who stands like a watchman to survey the presence of God so that it will be strong and avoid the attacks of criticism.

What happens within me when I am careful to avoid criticism? I sense that the call of the Lord is stronger, I recognize that the presence of God is easier to live on a deeper level. The Holy Spirit is closer, I can grasp him better with the eyes of my heart; my life with God is more serious. I have the