

Love & Fear



BY DENNIS M. DOYLE

I am not of the trendy school of thought that says all fear is bad. The Scriptures in several places tell us, "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Yet it says in 1 John 4:18 that "perfect love casts out fear." I think that fear has its place in this world, where we do not, as yet, know perfect love. Thomas Aquinas taught that there are different types of fear. The fear of punishment will not remain with the blessed in Heaven. But the fear of offending God and others, which is a healthy fear, will remain.¹

Just as fear of physical harm can keep us alert to possible dangers, so fear of offending God can aid in our spiritual journey. The Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto described the fundamental religious experience as being that of the "holy," an overpowering mystery that elicits dread, awe, majesty, urgency, and fascination.² God is not a familiar pal whose back we feel free to smack. God is one who holds our attention, one whose enormity and otherness can make us quake in our boots. Watch out for God. God will change you. If you encounter God, your life will never be the same.

My teachers in grade school did me a favor by introducing me to this God. And I must say that if I knew I was going to meet God in the next five minutes, I would be more than a little awestruck. A problem arises not when someone is taught a basic, healthy fear of God, but when fear becomes ingrained as the primary means of relating to God.

It is possible for fear to become the ruling emotion in a person's life. There are people who live by what they fear others will think. Such is the case with the speaker in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, whose introverted life is ruled by his insecurities:

Shall I part my hair behind?
Do I dare to eat a peach?
I will wear white flannel trousers
And walk along the beach.
I can hear the mermaids singing each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.

There are other ways to live a life ruled by fear. Some people fear that they are worthless and, therefore, will not really try to communicate who they are to others. Some fear loneliness or abandonment, and so they remain in relationships in which they are abused. Some fear they will not be successful, and so they lie and cheat and deceive others for money. Alcoholics and compulsive gamblers live in such fear that they often cannot admit to themselves that they have a problem. Some people live with a deep-seated fear of God. **Fear has many companions. Anger, resentment, self-pity, jealousy, self-righteousness, and ingratitude can often be found associating with fear. A life of fear is a terrible way to go.**

The Christian God, the Father about whom Jesus taught, is a God who can inspire fear in the hearts of the wicked. Ultimately, though, the God about whom Jesus taught is a God who loves and accepts. This is not a God who wants to make sure that a large enough quota of people goes to hell. God





numbers and treasures the very hair on our heads. God is like the father of the prodigal son; he hurries out to forgive his son before his son even reaches his home (Lk 15:11–32). God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3:16–17).

And yet, this God challenges us to grow. Jesus never said to his disciples, “Don’t change a thing. I love you just the way you are.” God is not a rubber stamp; God is one who calls us to stretch and at times to groan. I think of a saying I saw on a poster: “Just because I love you unconditionally does not mean that I have given up all hope for your improvement.”

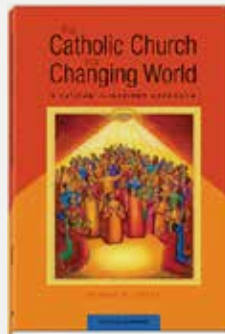
Faith, hope, and love are the Christian remedies against fear and its companions. Faith gives us the trust that opens us to a worldview based on the goodness of God. Hope enables us to take the risks of honesty and humility in reaching out to others for help and support. Love opens us up to care for others in a way that takes us out of our problems and heals us. Paul says, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

Endnotes Cited in This Article

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II, Q. 19, A. 11.
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

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