



# Boston Catholic Journal

Nihil nisi Jesum

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Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

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## UNDERSTANDING THE ANGER OF GOD

### A Reflection on Compline

**A**t the beginning of [Compline in the Office of The Blessed Virgin Mary](#) we pray. **“Convert thou us, O God our Savior.”** (note the communal aspect; we are not just praying for ourselves, but for all Christians).

The response is:

**“And turn away Thine anger from us....”**

In this prayer we acknowledge our own guilt and we pray also in the name of all sinners fearing punishment from God, Who in fact abundantly gives His grace and mercy to the truly penitent, however held fast in the sinister web of sin from which

they struggle in vain to escape. Alone, they cannot. They know this. And God does, too. Acknowledging their guilt, as the Good Thief on the Cross they cry out, “Remember me when You come into Your Kingdom. Behold me, Lord, I am held fast by my sin. 'In justice I have been condemned', but in hope I yet cry out, Mercy, Lord, mercy! Do not turn away from me. Save me!”

It is the prayer of the guilty. Are there none among us?

We join, then, our hearts to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Mother of Compassion and pray for grace, remembering that a sinner, one guilty — and not one just — was the first to enter the Kingdom. “**My ways are not your ways**”, God has told us again and again.

**What, then, are we to say of anger particularly God's anger?** Is not anger one of the Seven Capital Sins? How can we, then, ascribe this to God Most Holy? We are perplexed by references to God's anger, most often dismissing them to the cultural peculiarities and obscure literal nuances of Jewish literature evident, most notably, in the Old Testament, where, we are told, God was simply misconstrued as a “God of wrath” — unlike His Son Who revealed Him in terms of love. But even in the Son we find, “**the wrath of the Lamb**” (Apoc. 6.16) in the Book of the Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation). What, then, are we to make of this seeming contradiction between the *God of Love* that we have come to understand in Jesus Christ, and the *God of wrath*? Is He the one, or the other? Is He both? Or is it the case that the notion of anger itself is an expression of love?

Remember man, remember woman, that His ways are not your ways.

## God is Love

To understand the passion of God's love, we must look carefully at our own. We are, after all, made in the image of God, and God is Love. What does love prompt in us? What does it motivate us toward? Let us look deeply into our own love first before we attempt to understand the love of God, which, we are told repeatedly, is “**a jealous love**”.

Who has not come to understand in a way that allows of no equivocation, the depth and intensity of the love of a spouse — once that love has been provoked to jealousy through being threatened by the competing love of another? In the face of this outrage, one begins to grasp the deep sense of ones value to the lover. Who has not experienced a profound and deeply humbling sense of irreplaceable worth, when the

jealous love of a lover expresses itself in anger, both at the beloved and the one provoking the jealousy? A completely righteous anger is stirred in the lover who perceives the possible loss of the beloved to another ... especially to another who would mistreat, use, and value far less the beloved who, to the lover, is of unsurpassable worth. Who would see his wife wrenched from his absolute love and devotion, throw off her dignity as wife and mother, and become in the eyes of the world, and eventually in her own eyes, a mere courtesan through the passing and passionate whim, the lies and deceits, of another? Who could withhold his anger? Who would not strike out, not in punishment, but in pain? Would we characterize, even dismiss, such a hapless man, in this paroxysm of jealousy and indignation, as simply an innately angry individual with a penchant for punishment? This is the Book of Hosea. If you really want to understand the nature of God's love and the essence of what we misconstrue as His "anger", read the Book of Hosea. Is there a more poignant account of the love of God for His people than what we encounter in these pages?

Let us take another tack: what father, upon seeing his son innocently responding to the wanton and perverse solicitation of another man, would not scold the child in a rage as towering in height as the love that provoked it, and strike out at once and without compunction at the one seducing his son from his of innocence?

What father, loving a child, would reason thus: "Well, such things are acceptable in these evil days, and any expression of anger on my part would not be deemed "correct", and what is more, I am liable to infringe on the liberty of that man, however salacious (albeit, in a day long gone) his intentions are, and however harmful they will be to my son. I will then restrain myself, hold to correctitude, and say nothing and do nothing that would compromise my esteem in the community." Do we not say as much in our reproach to God's anger?

How incredibly blind we are to the love of God! We despise His anger as unworthy of a perfect God, instead of seeing the perfect love of God within it!

## **Righteous Anger**

The Father in His righteous anger — which flows *from* and is *motivated by* love — unmistakably communicates to the child exactly where the line is drawn — beyond which only evil lies; His anger conveys nothing of malice; to the contrary, it is an indication of His watchful care — and above all else, His constant and ever vigilant love.

From the beginning — “anger” is first ascribed to God as early as Exodus 32.12 — man in his sinfulness and guilt invariably misunderstands, or better yet, misconstrues what he interprets as God's anger, likening it to his own which, more often than not, is unjust and proceeds from the sole desire to inflict punishment, not justly, to the end of correction that is motivated by love, *the constructive love which seeks the good of the beloved* — but gratuitously, as a pathological means to the satisfaction demanded by pride and exacted through fury, which is *disordered* anger, blind, and always *destructive*. There is a vital difference between the two. In fury, punishment is not motivated by love, and it is not expressed as a means to correction. It is not meted in a measure commensurable with the offense (and is therefore intrinsically unjust), and of itself seeks no coherent good — which is why it is understood as disordered. This is the unbridled anger of man, the anger that caused Cain to slay Able in the beginning. It is not the anger of God.

Who among us has not encountered a situation where gentle appeals to correction fall on deaf and unwilling ears? How often has God first said, “Come, let us reason”, and that failing, resorted to the means alone through which correction would be motivated?

Even after 40 years in the desert, Israel remained “a stiff-necked people”, just as we remain obdurate in our sins until some calamity befalls us that finally causes us to recognize that the way *we* have chosen — which was not *God's* way, and distinctly contrary to it — is precisely what brought calamity upon us ... and not God, Who relentlessly called us away from it. After how many appeals to a child not to touch a hot stove, does the child yet persist until, apart from our will, he has his way ... and to great sorrow? Who will call us to account? Only after he is afflicted does he see, understand, that our appeals were motivated not by malice, but by love, and that, after all, our wisdom exceeds his own? Sometimes, perhaps even often, affliction is the only way through which we begin to trust God — Who in all ways and in every place, seeks our good.

In our fallen state, even this too often fails. So Jesus Christ came to reveal his Father not as one eager to inflict punishment — but as LOVE. In Exodus we read, “God is a God of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in truth and love” (Exodus 34.6). And still Israel wandered in the desert for a generation.

In the Second Letter of St. Peter, we are told, “He is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins”.

When the human heart is cleansed from sin, when a heart is pure it does not fear punishment — it knows God as love (1 John 4.18). It comes to know God as “Abba”, as “Father” in the most meaningful and intimate way. It comes to understand that nothing proceeds from the hand of the Father but good, and precisely because it does not always comprehend, faith supplants understanding, and through that faith, trusts! The soul, that is to say, comes to a loving trust in God that it would never have acquired apart from that anvil of Righteous Anger... upon which it was forged by the love of God.

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