

The Spirit of Nature and the Spirit of Grace. The Grace of Attraction¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
Paris, Thursday, August 2, 1860

Those who have not done a life review lately could do it; those who do not need it may replace it with a review of their interior life. When you come to see me for direction in the morning you have to talk about two things: how you feel, your state of life, and share about what you are doing, and if you have any particular grace or natural feelings in order to help the director see what should be done. Resurrection comes only at the end. In all this, there are decisive moments to be observed. Whatever we might do or say, we must wait for them. The aim of the retreat is to repair your defects: penances done badly, venial sins that you will have to expiate in purgatory. You must see these things, and improve your conduct.

My Sisters, today we shall talk about the spirit that should move you and various other spirits. I will try to complete what I said about the attraction of grace, since I did not have time to finish. Right away, I am informing² you that it is a difficult subject.[...] It is not something palpable and accessible to the senses. We shall examine the movements of the soul. I will not talk about the movements of the evil spirit – spare me that. I will not talk about them, since everyone knows they are bad, and that their goal is something evil. Whether they come from the devil or from our evil nature, we will not talk about them.

Two types of spirits can move us: the spirit of nature, and the spirit of grace. It is a matter of proper discernment (cf. 1 Cor 12:10; Gal 5:17). If we act according to the natural spirit, our deeds will not go beyond the natural; they will not glorify God, but remain on the level of sinful human nature. If we act according to the spirit of grace, then our deeds will be spiritualized, and our motivation will be for the glory of God. Everyone experiences these two spirits. Therefore, if I am dependant on my senses, on my miserable body, with my freedom of choice and life, I am following the principal of nature, and not of grace. There are some natural movements that are very hard to discern. They appear to be a grace, however they are natural. They seem to be simple things, but we don't know immediately where they come from. My good Sisters, I would like to give you a good guide to help you distinguish them and to guide you on such occasions.

Nature acts for itself, while grace acts for God. Nature spoils our motives: the effect follows the cause; the goal follows its own principle. God is the goal of grace, and that's the difference. Nature tends toward freedom. We seek to get rid of a task, to be relieved in order to be free to do whatever we want. That is nature. On the contrary, grace renders us submissive to God. We fear freedom, because a state of simple and pure freedom is dangerous – nature usually wins out, and God is the loser.

An action is made up of three things: the intention, the action, and the success.

The intention. Nature will find a way to work for itself, either naturally or spiritually; or for its own glory or self-interest, under the appearance of good. No one wants something really bad. It comes from the devil and is to be rejected. Nature imitates and mimics the works of God. This is what happens for

¹ Number 238. *L'esprit de la nature et l'esprit de la grâce. La grâce d'attrait.*

² Guillot and (S7bis) start with this paragraph, but modified at the beginning as follows: Today we shall talk about the spirit that should move you and all types of spirits. I am informing you...

something natural, and even for something religious. We practice virtue for itself, - not for the service of God – to have peace of mind. Since to feel remorse at all times is uncomfortable, such is nature: always working on good deeds, but for itself. I really want to serve God, but I want to be satisfied.

People say they experience the love of God and his gentleness if they don't feel it, they become unhappy. They are at the service of God only to be rewarded, for their own benefit. If they make a sacrifice, it is to get rid of it. Annoyed, they give it a good shot and work hard. No doubt, something good is happening, but nature is saying: I shall make that sacrifice, only to be free, to have peace. There is a duty to fulfill, and nature says: Be quick; let us finish it, then I will be free to do whatever I want. It is always nature, the ego; I will be free. We have some work to do and nature becomes agitated; I want to finish it right away, to be at peace. I want to get rid of it. This happens constantly – it is self-love. Note well how our selfish human nature deals with what is good, with piety and sacrifices. See how clever it is: I do extraordinary things that could make a great saint out of me.

Nature tries to get rid of any duty that is a bother, since we simply want freedom. Until freedom is obtained, nature grieves sadly, like one in jail. Sometimes you admire natural accomplishments but you are mistaken. So much external devotion is only a bubble, while deep inside it is only self-love. Reflect on how your poor nature can use God selfishly: your Communion and adorations at his feet are for your own satisfaction. You are there as in paradise, and you have found the secret of bringing self-love into this paradise. The Good Lord knows it: Poor child! You come to me in order to receive some consolation, the manna of the desert. Then he withdraws the consolation of his grace, because you have introduced corruption.

Nature spoils everything; see how ugly it can be. Some may imagine that a person is pious, generous, devoted and perfect! But she directs toward herself that beautiful flower that should rise straight towards the sky. It folds back on itself, like a circle curved inwards. A worm has entered into good fruit, nothing is left inside. That's what nature does to the intention; that's how far it can go. **But when will I know that I am moved by nature?** Check yourself and see if you have a fever; notice, when you do something, if it is for the Good Lord and for his glory. **How do you feel when you are doing some good deed?** As I said, nature wants to get rid of it, looking for success above all. **Grace does not seek success, but cares for nothing else but the will of God.**

After working, nature wants to harvest. After sowing, it wants consolations; praise good reputation. Without these, nature gets discouraged and depressed. I failed my Communion, my meditation, my prayer; I can do nothing; I'm stupid. I'm losing my time because nothing touches me and consoles me as before. Now, you have spoiled everything. In the past, you did not behave like this. The devil knows it very well. He always catches us in a vicious circle of self-love. The devil will not propose mortal sin to you, not even venial sin. He knows that you have a delicate conscience, and that he could never lead you into sin. Therefore, he leads you to perform a good deed, and he says: I will get in there; I will introduce self-love – she will think that she worked hard, but she will get nothing – I will get the profit. That's what is happening. Pious souls should suspect their "good" nature when it is doing something good for the love of God. If you don't experience this, you aren't from this planet. Whoever has a bit of feeling, knows what I am saying. And how do we learn this? We know it by our miserable experience. You must understand this as much as, and even better than I.

Another illusion consists in imagining that every urge to act is from God, when it really comes from nature. Let's move, and do so rapidly; there is much to do. Life becomes disorderly. This is the work of nature. Do we resist? How often I caught myself doing things generously, things that were necessary, and out of duty, and doing them very well. But, I was mistaken: it was nature. Why? I could see that I was out of breath, and I wanted to finish everything. Ordinarily, we don't like to do what is required; we prefer our own will. If you are told to do something, it is costly, and if it is a long-term job: What a nasty

chore! **This is the spirit of nature: we want to be independent**, and we shake off the yoke, unwilling to do the will of God, and even less to do the will of a saint.

Nature is sensual even regarding spiritual matters. Nature finds a way to rest while working, to satisfy self in mortification. It's true. Nature feeds itself while fasting, while doing penance and while being humiliated. For my ego, I will get something out of this: if it is not by penance, it will be for my satisfaction, that something-or-other called self-love. Should we be surprised if it destroys what was done by grace? In spite of ourselves, that miserable self-love moves us away from the service and love of God. It places us apart from God, and his glory. We crown ourselves with the vulnerability of our motivations. The more a person tries to be spiritual, the more she becomes sensitive: this is only natural. We should be very sensitive, following grace with frequent mortification. But, nature says: Another sacrifice – here is the Good Lord still asking something of me. Nature never sympathizes with grace: water and fire; light and darkness cannot be united – it's impossible.

The person wants to belong to God once and for all, and says to nature: Today I will allow you only what is necessary to live; no sensuality and false freedom: I condemn you to death. Nature seeing herself condemned, bows its head. But in the long-run, it raises its head to tear up everything and even finds itself in its death. Many pious persons are untouchable like smoking mountains, not surprisingly. Everything is costly to them; while doing one sacrifice they already see others. As we do God's will, we become self-satisfied. To be in the dark constantly with Jesus crucified is difficult; nature will get only what is just and required. Nature reacts miserably and shouts, naturally. What should you do? Let her scream and say: no mercy; I will let you die in order to give you supernatural life. Maybe you will understand your weaknesses through that reaction.

When does the Spirit of God animate us? This is easier to notice: grace goes toward its donor, as nature tends toward nature. Grace normally points to its author and paralyzes self-love, since God is its goal. These are the two characteristics of nature and of grace.

Here is the application: You will know a movement of grace whenever it leads you to be recollected in God; nature does not recollect us, but expands and scatters us on things and persons, being afraid of God. Every time you are recollected in God, this is one of the most certain signs that it comes from God. What should you do? Since it is a grace of recollection, remain in silence with that grace, and let it lead you into an act of virtue.

The proof of a grace of attraction is that it begins with a grace of recollection. Others are passing graces, giving you a light, a good inspiration – this is an actual grace, but not a state. A grace that recollects you is a grace of attraction, or will become so. Take care not to become scattered. In creation, the silence of nature is not disturbed; in the formation of grace, there is also silence: God is being incarnated within us. Keep this in mind. Other graces which do not involve recollection, are subject to discernment, either a temptation to be rejected or a duty to fulfill – these are passing graces, being offered to us. A grace of attraction is not an auxiliary grace for service, but a royal grace of the incarnation of our Lord within us; be aware of its character of holiness. How many times have you unknowingly impeded a grace of attraction?

The devil knows that nature is afraid of recollection. Action seems better than contemplation. When the grace of attraction was unable to enter, it went away. How silly! A grace of attraction does more in fifteen minutes than another grace would do in a hundred years, and we pay more attention to a little passing grace. We are guilty, not out of malice, but for lack of attention! If we had been more attentive, grace would not have gone away.

The grace of attraction works through recollection and gentleness – that is its second characteristic. As it is meant to lead to perfection, whether it is a grace of joy or sorrow, it includes duties and sacrifices.

This is the Good Lord's gift. Beginning with the gentleness of joy, the soul is delighted. The goal of that gentleness is to unite us with God through love. We promise everything that was beyond us in a state of sacrifice alone. Because you are so good, I offer this sacrifice: you would never have done this otherwise. Because God is so good, we don't want to let him down.

There are two kinds of consolation: the consolation of detachment and the consolation of the senses: the latter misleads us. The consolation of detachment raises us to the goodness of God. Here is someone who turns towards God, and is happy as if she were already in heaven. She seems to be beyond body, passions and temptations; these are happy moments when everything is beautiful and easy! She gives herself freely and her donation is accepted; God made the first steps, through strength and consolation. But if the soul falls back on itself, and sleeps as did the three apostles on Mount Tabor, that is no longer a grace of attraction. The apostles spoiled it. Ah! Poor ones! *It is wonderful for us to be here!* (cf. Mt 17:4) They should have said: **You are so good!** From a celestial consolation, it becomes earthly consolation, beastly. What causes that consolation to become like that? Because you have turned in on yourself, you feel good. God is good to me! Beware! When you become self-centered, you are introducing a worm, a cloud. But you might say: This is natural. Leave nature where it is, and go where you should go – towards God. The celestial consolation frees us from the senses, and is generous.

The grace of attraction has three characteristics: it is a grace of recollection, strength and consolation. God comes in with goodness, and ends with strength. Sensual sweetness ends up by centering on oneself and on self-love, while the other, contemplating God and his goodness, tends towards self-giving. St. Paul says: *Who are you?* (Acts 9:5) Jesus Christ speaks to him and he is in the light: *What do you want?* I am ready for whatever you want. That is the true character of an attraction. Notice St. Peter and the apostles in the Cenacle who all say: *Lord, I am ready to die for you,* (cf. Mt 26:35). There was a grace of attraction, but nature took control along with sensual consolation. They became afraid in the garden of Olives and ran away. (cf. Mt 26:56) **The grace of attraction is always linked with dedication,** making self-immolation easy. Otherwise God would not be able to unite himself to us. We must give our natural life in exchange for spiritual life; self-love, for the love of God. Briefly, it is both a tomb and a resurrection.

The grace of attraction, has a particular trait: the object of that attraction. Ordinarily an attraction is not to a virtue, but to a state; virtue is not the goal of an attraction. Sometimes I was mistaken, not in the definition but in its application. What is a virtue? A sacrifice. It is only a sacrifice, but consolation is needed. These two things are not found in virtue. However, you reply: You told us that St. Francis de Sales was gentle; and St. Vincent de Paul was charitable. It is true, but virtue cannot be a center – an attraction is a center. **What is a virtue?** It is a repeated action, not every action.

An attraction of grace finds its life and perfection only in Jesus Christ. Necessarily, the object of an attraction must be a mystery of Jesus Christ. We contemplate Jesus Christ in a virtue in order to honor one of his mysteries, one of his states characterized by a certain kind of life. For example, an attraction is given to honor the hidden life of our Lord, his life of solitude and prayer. I feel attracted because Jesus Christ said: *I am the way, the truth and the life* (Jn 4:6). Grace has nuanced it: One who has penance for his grace of attraction will make the wounds of our Lord his center; and for another, it is prayer. These particular aspects offer an ensemble of very great virtues.

How will I know my attraction? At those times there is a longing, while praising the goodness of God. That is the attraction; but that is not all. We have to see whether that attraction strengthens the soul, and where that strength is grounded – if it is grounded on grace, rather than on nature and self. That's what I meant when I said this is a difficult subject; but I am talking to spiritual souls who should be familiar with this information. But, it is always tedious to treat difficult matters: explanations are needed. Examine yourself regarding your grace of attraction, and on your passing graces. When you begin to act under the

inspiration of grace, that's sufficient. You just need to hold on to that good movement, doing nothing to stifle it. Let it evolve by itself.

Take courage! We are already on the third day. During retreats, recollection is not the main thing. It's time to work – sow and harvest at the same time. In the past, you were more recollected. Now, everything is presented for your consideration: nature, grace, and the inner world. Some of these things are new. Since you are not always so spiritual, if you look for nourishment you are mistaken, that will come in due time. The apostles did not practice right away all the words of our Lord, but they put them into practice when the time came. All you have to do is to follow the conferences. Don't try to do everything; work on only one thing, the one suited to you, the one that touches you, and the one that is like a light passing by in front of you. If you want to use all the thoughts you will get tired. Each soul has her own food, take it, and restrict yourself – God will develop it later. **This advice is very important.** You could become agitated and worried: then again self-love would come in to spoil God's grace. May God protect you!

Points for reflection:

Having given 5 instructions on the attraction of grace in 1859, Father Eymard takes up the subject again in 1860. The principles that he gives are intended to help us to know ourselves better, and to recognize the action of God.

