

WHAT IS FEAR OF THE LORD

When I was a little kid in school we learned about sin, an offense against God or our neighbor. We learned that there were two types of sin: mortal sin and venial sin. Venial sin was a run-of-the-mill kind of sin. Telling lies. Being mean. Cheating in a game. Answering back. Disobeying parents or teachers. Venial sins were sins but lesser sins. Venial sins hurt other people or myself and were offensive to God. Mortal sins were death-dealing sins. Mortal sins were called mortal because they killed the life in our souls. They were sins that wounded us—mortally. Mortal sins were really serious sins. Killing somebody. Big time stealing. Being unfaithful in your marriage. Most sexual sins were viewed as mortal sins. Cursing God. Hating people. Purposely destroying another's name or reputation out of spite. Bad sins.

All sins could be confessed and forgiven. Even mortal sins. To know whether you were committing a mortal sin there were three things. Was it a really serious matter? Did you truly think about doing it ahead of time? Did you give full consent to doing the deed? Serious matter. Sufficient reflection. Full consent of the will. If you said yes to all three, then that sin was a mortal sin. A mortal sin not only could put you in hell for all eternity. It would put you in hell unless you repented of having committed it.

Hell was eternal fire that never stopped and you burned but were never destroyed. Just forever pain. Fear of hell was used a lot when I was a kid to get us to do all kinds of things and to get us not to do all kinds of things. Anything that was a mortal sin landed you in hell. Eating meat on Friday. Messing around sexually. There was a long list of potential mortal sins. Fear of hell became a strong motivator for a lot of us. Associated with the fear of hell was another fear. Fear of the Lord. Fear of the One who could put you in hell as part of your immediate judgment when you died.

There were many stories told to us of a God who did not want to be mean or nasty but whose sense of justice was inviolate. You did the crime. You would do the time. As the saying goes. God was to be feared. And one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the last of the seven was this: fear of the Lord. But now here I am in my 70's and I hear the passage about fear of the Lord and I say to myself: That's

not the God I know. That's not the God in whom I believe. What gives? What is: Fear of the Lord? Really?

First of all, fear of the Lord is not abject fear. Fear of the Lord is not fear that God will punish you for everything you do. Fear is probably not the right word. Revere. To revere the Lord. To have reverence for the Lord. Awe. To have awe as you kneel before the Lord. Fear of the Lord is an overwhelming feeling of awe and admiration in the presence of something truly sublime, something truly awesome, truly amazing. It is an overwhelming feeling of reverence before someone truly sublime, someone so very far beyond anyone here on earth. Fear of the Lord is the desire to want to abandon yourself into the wonderful, overwhelming goodness and beauty of God.

Fear of the Lord is awe and joy! Fear of the Lord is deep reverence caused by love. Fear of the Lord is the desire never to offend such a good God, such a loving Father, such a devoted Son, such a selfless Spirit. Fear of the Lord is the feeling that takes your breath away as you gaze on a beauty beyond description. Fear of the Lord is that feeling that God's grace is reliable and always available. Fear of the Lord is the assurance that God has never turned his back on you and will never turn his back on you or abandon you. And never will.

Which leads me to one final question. When does the average Catholic experience and feel this Fear of the Lord? Well, for me, it is here at Mass. At the moment of consecration. When Jesus comes. When I lift the host high above my head and allow the Lord to look out on you with such love and you have the opportunity to gaze upon the greatest gift the world has ever received—the incarnate Son of God. It is when I lift high the chalice of the Precious Blood. And the light shines and fills our souls and we open ourselves to this wonderful God who loved us enough to die for us.

Fear of the Lord does not last long. Just a matter of seconds. But the effect lasts. The effect abides. Deep reverence. We have been visited, fed and nourished, and loved by the invisible Triune God. I raise up our Eucharistic Lord and you gaze in awe and reverence and love at the simplicity and selflessness of the Living God. Fear of the Lord. A really good thing. It even puts an end to sin—our sin. Because we don't want to sin any more. We want to bask in the truth of his love—in awe.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.