

I imagine our elders thought we were disrespectful when we were young.

—They say the younger generation doesn't produce such characters as in the old days. All the same, I think we were tamer. We used to read the minor spiritual classics.

Now they prefer the Bible.

—Perhaps that's it.



THE PRINCIPAL MEANS OF PERFECTION

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I. THE SACRAMENTS

THE principal practices which lead to perfection are the sacraments when we approach them with the necessary preparation; yet, curiously enough, this is the very truth which is most neglected. The sacraments give graces which result in the production within us of the effects proper to them: confession brings great purity of heart, Holy Communion close union with God and spiritual fervour in all our actions. . . . The more you approach the sacraments, the more graces you will receive to share in their effects. But the effects of these sacraments, namely purity of heart and spiritual fervour, are themselves the best preparation we can make to receive them.

A soul which before Holy Communion was in darkness, weak and languishing, but after it becomes enlightened, fervent and strong cannot doubt of the fruit of its communion, because the sacraments' effect is to give their proper sacramental grace. Hence after a good confession the soul receives much light on its interior dispositions, humble and loving contrition, and peace of a quiet conscience. After a good communion the soul experiences a taste for God and receives new strength to spend itself in God's service.

II. THE USE OF PENANCES

The right measure to observe in the use of penances is to do less than will alter one's health, but more than what permits rebellious nature to make its presence felt too keenly. When great perfection

is attained, a great deal of penance may be readily undertaken, and even heroic penances like those of the saints may be practised by God's special favour. The most harmful penances are those which prevent sleep, but to the most perfect God also grants the favour of sleeping little. The *measure* of penance differs according to people's temperament and conditions of life, and according to their age, time and needs.

III. VIRTUES

(a) Faith

As faith is the most excellent participation in uncreated Wisdom (except only the Beatific Vision), we must not base it on natural reason or our own human discoveries. Such reasonings can be useful for overcoming our repugnance and contradiction, removing our stupidity and preparing our mind to believe, but not to be the foundation of what we believe by faith, because faith includes God's whole authority: its foundation is both his infinite sovereign wisdom, which makes it impossible for him to be deceived, and his infinite fidelity which makes it impossible for him to deceive us.

Some people tremble at the perception of the truths of faith and do not want to think about them at all, although they do not doubt them. They flee from the thought of them because they are not accustomed to them. This is a great mistake, and at their death the devil will attack them at their weakest point.

Faith perfects the knowledge which brings the will to action. As faith resides partly in the will, according to St Thomas' teaching, it gives facility to all the virtues: faith's knowledge about temperance, for instance, will make me perform an act of temperance more easily than will the consideration of the soundness of temperance, and at the same time faith will make my act supernatural.

We should therefore try to found our lives on faith more and more. We should always walk in its light and substitute it for human reasonings on all kinds of subjects, and make it the light and the principle of all our actions. An act of the will based on faith is worth more than ten feelings of spiritual sweetness.

When God wills to become perfect master of a soul, he begins by winning the understanding through the gift to it of wonderful faith. Then he proceeds to the will, the memory, the imagination,

the sensitive appetites, and wins over these faculties also little by little. Then he passes to the senses and the movements of the body, and thus he comes to possess completely both the interior and the exterior. ¶All this comes about through faith, which contains all virtues eminently (as the theologians say), and is the first motive power of their action. This is why we should make the exercise of faith habitual, and take it as our guide in all our actions.

It is most disastrous that some religious, often the majority, are guided only by human reason and natural prudence; they make hardly any use of faith except merely negatively by not acting against it. They devote themselves only to perfecting their reason and common sense without taking any trouble to grow in faith. This is just like a man taking great pains about the education of his slave while neglecting that of his son.

Nothing shows better the blindness and weakness of reason unaided by faith in matters of moral perfection than the trivial progress it made among all nations before the Incarnation. The Romans seem to have been the wisest and most perfect of all unbelievers: Holy Scripture attributes their success and power to their wisdom and patience, and St Augustine thought that God gave them a world-wide empire in reward for their virtue. Nevertheless, what was their wisdom and where did it lead them? How much vanity and corruption there was even in their most pure and solid virtue!

(b) *Trust in God*

One of the ways by which we most dishonour God is by our lack of trust in him. This fault arises because we do not consider enough what we have been given at the Incarnation, and what God made man has done for men. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,*¹ and as he did not spare his only Son but delivered him up for us all, what will he not give us after giving us him?²

If a king's son wished to die in order to expiate the crime of a vassal he loved, or if a king wished to give his son's life for a favourite, we would regard it rightly as most wonderful goodness and mercy; but that this son should wish to die and the father

¹ John iii, 16.

² Cf. Rom. viii, 32.

to give his son's life for their mortal enemy is an excess of goodness and mercy which we cannot conceive. Nevertheless this is what God has done: he gave his Son to mankind which was his enemy, not only to save it but also to raise it almost to the level of his divine nature. This is what the Son of God has done; although he could have saved mankind by a word, a tear or a sigh, he willed instead to merit the grace of salvation for us by the poor, industrious life he actually led and the cruel and shameful death he actually suffered.

Shall we still not trust in such mercy after this? Shall we not hope that this Redeemer, who is so full of goodness and redeemed us at the price of his own blood, shall deliver us from all our sins and imperfections?

Distrust is very displeasing to God, especially in souls which he has favoured with special graces. Moses did not enter the promised land because of lack of trust in God; he died within sight of what had been so often promised and so ardently desired, but he remained outside it and his prayers did not make God relent.

We do God an injustice when we say: 'When shall I be detached, or have the grace of interior prayer?' As though God were poor or niggardly in his gifts, and had not himself undertaken the care of our perfection. Let us only follow his will, co-operate with his graces and cultivate purity of heart; then we can be certain he will not fail us.

Many will never attain high perfection because they do not trust enough; strong, unchanging hope, founded on God's infinite mercy and goodness and on the infinite merits of Jesus Christ, is absolutely necessary. *Thou alone, Lord, art the support of my hope.*³

We must hope for and expect great things from God because our Lord's merits belong to us. It is a great honour to God to hope for much from him; the more we hope from him, the more we honour him.

³ Psalm iv, 10.

