

Cultivating Virtue

Self-Mastery with the Saints



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Translated from the Italian by
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“The object of all virtues is to bring us into union with God, in which alone is laid up all the happiness that can be enjoyed in this world. Now, in what does this union properly consist? In nothing save a perfect conformity and resemblance between our will and the will of God.”

—ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

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To Mary, Our Lady of Mercy, under the title of Queen of All Saints, this translation is affectionately dedicated in the hope that through her advocacy it may conduce to the growth of sanctity in numerous souls.



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Translator's Preface

In presenting this work for the first time in English dress, the translator would take the opportunity of drawing the attention of the devout American reader to one or two peculiarities in its structure, which have already won for it a wide recognition among readers of books of its class in Europe.

In the first place, the allotment of separate months to individual virtues agrees well with a practice of self-examination much recommended by many spiritual writers, who advise us to take different virtues in turn as the objects of special effort. Nothing certainly could be better fitted to assist us in the acquisition of a virtue than these selections from the writings of the most eminent masters of spiritual science which portray its beauties, declare its necessity or explain its various degrees and the methods of its attainment.

In the second place, the few words of exhortation or instruction which open the reading for each day are followed by the best of all commentaries—that of action. A great part of the book

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is composed of examples which, while they have the interest of anecdote, furnish at the same time the strongest proofs of the possibility of carrying out in real life precepts and principles which might otherwise seem too high and heavenly for our everyday existence.

In the hope then that these exotic flowers may flourish and blossom in many an American garden, they are offered to the lovers of spiritual excellence and beauty by

THE TRANSLATOR.



JANUARY

Perfection

*Be ye perfect as your Heavenly
Father is perfect.*—MATT. 5:48

1 Consider all the past as nothing, and say, like David:
Now I begin to love my God.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

It was in this manner that the Apostle St. Paul acted; though, after his conversion, he had become a vessel of election, filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ, yet, to persevere and advance in the heavenly way, he made use of this means, for he said in his Epistle to the Philippians: “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended. But one thing I do: forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth myself to those that are before, I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ Jesus.” [PHIL. 3:13–14].

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Thus the glorious St. Anthony went from day to day, stimulating himself to virtue. St. Anastasius said of him that he always looked upon himself as a beginner, as if every day were the first in which he was serving God, and as if in the past he had done nothing good and were but just setting foot in the way of the Lord and taking the first steps on the road to Heaven. And this was the very last admonition he left to his monks at his death: “My sons,” he said to them, “if you wish to advance in virtue and perfection, never give up the practice of considering each day that you are then beginning, and of conducting yourselves always as you did on the day you began.”

Thus also we find that St. Gregory, St. Bernard and St. Charles acted and advised others to act. To render clearer to all the necessity and utility of this method, they made use of two beautiful comparisons, saying that we must act in this like travelers who do not regard the road they have gone over, but, rather, what remains for them to traverse—and this they keep always before their eyes, even to their journey’s end; or, like merchants eager for riches who make no account of what they have hitherto acquired, nor of the fatigue they have borne, but put all their thought and care upon new acquisitions, and upon daily multiplying their possessions, as if in the past they had made no profit at all.

2 We must begin with a strong and constant resolution to give ourselves wholly to God, professing to Him, in a tender, loving manner, from the bottom of our hearts, that we intend to be His without any reserve, and then we must often go back and renew this same resolution.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES



One of the means for the acquisition of perfection which was chiefly inculcated and much practiced by St. Philip Neri was a frequent renewal of good resolutions.

St. Francis de Sales made from time to time a spiritual renovation, and always conceived in it new desires to serve God better.

St. John Berchmans, at his very entrance into religion, planted in his heart a strong resolution to become a Saint, and then he not only remained constant in all the practices and resolutions which he took up for this end, but he went on daily gaining new vigor to his spiritual advantage.

When a holy religious was giving the Exercises at Torre di Specchi in Rome, a nun called Sr. Marie Bonaventura, who was living a very relaxed life, did not wish to be present. By many entreaties she was finally induced to attend. The first meditation, on the end of man, enkindled such fervor in her heart that the Father had scarcely finished when she called him to her, and said: "Father, I mean to be a Saint, and quickly." She then withdrew to her cell, and, writing the same words on a scrap of paper, fastened them to the foot of her crucifix. From this moment, she applied herself with so much earnestness to the practice of perfection that a memoir of her was written at her death, which occurred eleven months later.

3 The Lord chiefly desires of us that we should be completely perfect, that we may be wholly one with Him. Let us aim, therefore, at whatever we need to reach this

—ST. TERESA

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Father Peter Faber, a companion of St. Ignatius and highly esteemed by St. Francis de Sales, often dwelt on the thought that God greatly desires our advancement. And so he endeavored to grow constantly, and not to let a day pass without some progress in virtue, so that he gradually rose to great perfection and a high reputation for sanctity.

St. Pachomius and St. Anthony, by studying the virtues of others, stimulated themselves to attain similar excellence.

The Venerable Sister Mary Villani had the following vision. On the Feast of St. Francis, for whom she had a particular devotion, this Saint appeared to her and led her to a lofty place, more beautiful than any she had ever seen. To reach it, one was obliged to ascend four very high terraces, which signified, as the Saint revealed to her, the four degrees of perfection. With great difficulty she ascended, by his help, the first terrace; and he explained to her that this was the first state of perfection, called purity of conscience, which borders on angelic purity. In it the soul becomes like that of a little child, enjoys a pure and holy tranquility, never thinks evil of others, nor interests itself in what does not belong to its own position. Thence he brought her up to the second terrace, telling her that whoever had arrived at purity of conscience becomes capable of prayer and of true love, which is the inseparable fruit of prayer. Here he enumerated to her the properties of true love, which is pure, simple, unselfish and founded upon the truth of God, who can give Himself only to souls already possessed of purity. Then he raised her to the third terrace, that of the cross and mortification, adding that from purity and love the soul passes on to taking up the cross courageously and to being itself crucified, and that to arrive at this state one must acquire four



cardinal virtues. These are: a true mortification of all vices and of every earthly affection; a perfect poverty of spirit, which tramples underfoot all temporal goods; a living death, by which the soul dies to itself and to all affections of sense, and lives in a total annihilation and transformation into its crucified Lord, so as to be able to say: “I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me.” [Gal. 2:20] The soul that has gained this state seems to have conquered the world, and bears sufferings and crosses as if it could no longer feel them. The fourth terrace, he said, typified the state of real and perfect union.

4 I hear nothing talked of but perfection; yet I see it practiced only by few. Everyone forms his own ideal of it. Some place it in simplicity of attire; some in austerity; some in almsgiving; some in frequent reception of the Sacraments; this one, in prayer; that one, in passive contemplation; and another, in the gifts called gratuitous. But, by a general mistake, they take the effects for the cause, and the means for the end. For my part, I know of no other perfection than loving God with all the heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Whoever imagines any other kind of perfection deceives himself, for the whole accumulation of virtues without this is but a heap of stones. And if we do not immediately and perfectly enjoy this treasure of holy love, the fault is in us. We are too slow and ungenerous with God, and do not give ourselves up entirely to Him, as the Saints did.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES



Who does not see that the perfection of this Saint must have been of a true and very sublime character, when his love for God and his neighbor was so great and so pure? The same may be said also of St. Vincent de Paul and many others.

St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was truly admirable in both of these points. As we shall hereafter see, she was so much inflamed with the love of God that she could not bear the excessive ardor of this divine fire, and was obliged to cool her glowing bosom with linen cloths soaked in water; and she carried the love of her neighbor so far as to desire and procure others' good in preference to her own.

5 All perfection is founded upon only two principles, by means of which, with due attention to the daily actions suited to our state, we shall certainly arrive at the summit and fullness of it. The first principle is a very low esteem for all created things, but, above all, for ourselves. This low esteem should show itself, in practice, by renouncing ourselves and all creatures; in our hearts, by a firm resolution; and in our lives, in such ways as may be suitable, especially by manifesting contentment and cheerfulness when the Lord takes from us any good. The second principle is a very high esteem of God, which may be easily acquired by the light of faith, as He is Omnipotent, the Supreme Good and our End; as also because He has loved us so much, and is ever present with us, and guides us in all things, both as to nature and grace, and, in particular, has called us and leads us by a special vocation



to a lofty perfection. From this esteem there must certainly arise in us a great submission of will, and of every power and faculty, to His greater glory, without any mingling of our own interest, though it be ever so holy. At the same time, there will be great conformity with the Divine Will, which will be the actual measure of all our designs, affections, and works. In this manner, the soul arrives at union—not, indeed, at the mystic union of raptures, elevations of the spirit, and vehement affections; but the solid, real, and practical union of a will thoroughly conformed to the Divine Will by the perfect love which works out all things in God and for God without special lights. Of this, all are capable; and all, with certainty, though not without crosses, can arrive at it.

—FR. ACHILLE GAGLIARDI

It was always the principal study of St. Vincent de Paul to establish and perfect himself in these two principles. Therefore, as his profound humility made him believe himself incapable of great things, he thought only of fulfilling faithfully towards God the obligations of a true and perfect Christian. And since he knew, by heavenly illuminations, that all Christian perfection depends upon a good use of these two principles, he aimed at them alone and sought above all to penetrate them well and to fix them in his soul, that they might serve as an unerring rule and guide for all his actions. And the plan succeeded well. For God, who exalts the humble, did not think it enough to guide him by this means to that Christian perfection which he had prescribed



to himself, but willed to exalt him to a sanctity equally solid and eminent, and which may truly be called singular, as, in fact, there are certainly few persons who without the help of extraordinary and mystic lights, under the guidance only of the lights of ordinary grace, have reached so lofty a sanctity as has this servant of God.

6 Perfection consists in one thing alone, which is doing the will of God. For, according to Our Lord's words, it suffices for perfection to deny self, to take up the cross and to follow Him. Now, who denies himself and takes up his cross and follows Christ better than he who seeks not to do his own will, but always that of God? Behold, now, how little is needed to become a Saint! Nothing more than to acquire the habit of willing, on every occasion, what God wills.

—ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

More than in anything else the Saint just quoted showed the purity and solidity of his virtue, in always aiming to follow and obey the will of God. This was the great principle on which all his resolutions were founded, and by which he faithfully and firmly carried them into practice, trampling underfoot his own interest, and preferring the Divine Will and the glory and service of God to anything else, without exception.

The Lord said of David that he was a man after His own heart, and the foundation for such high praise is given in these words: “for in all things he will do My will.”



St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was so much attached to this practice that she often said that she would never determine upon anything, however trivial, such as going from one room to another, if she thought it not in conformity with the Divine Will, nor would she omit to do anything she believed in conformity with it. And she added that if it came into her mind while she was in the midst of an action that such an act was contrary to the will of God, she would abandon it on the instant, though to do so might cost her life.

Taulerus relates of a certain holy and learned man that when his friends entreated him, on his deathbed, to leave them some good precept, he said: "The sum and substance of all instruction is to take all that comes as from the hand of God, and to wish for nothing different, but to do in all things His Divine Will."

The Venerable Seraphina of God had so great a love for the Divine Will that she often entreated her director to manifest it to her, saying, "Counsel me, Father, as to what I am to do, and do not let me do anything of myself, that I may please the Divine Majesty. For to see God ever so little displeased would be worse than the loss of a thousand worlds." One day there came to her so great a desire to do nothing according to her own will, but only according to that of God, that with the consent of her director, she made a vow to that effect.

7 A servant of God signifies one who has a great charity towards his neighbor, and an inviolable resolution to follow in everything the Divine Will; who bears with



his own deficiencies, and patiently supports the imperfections of others.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

The whole life of this Saint, as well as of St. Vincent de Paul, was but a faithful and continual exercise of these virtues, on the occasions which every day presented themselves. In this way they both became great servants of God.

In the Lives of the Fathers of the West, it is told of St. Fin-tan that he was daily visited by an angel, but that once the visit was omitted for several days. When the Saint had the happiness of seeing him again, he asked the angel why he had been so long deprived of his most sweet companionship. “Because,” replied the angel, “I had to be present at the death of Motua, who was a great servant of God, and better than yourself, for he did what you have not done. This man never spoke a harsh word to anyone present, nor an unkind word of anyone absent. He never complained of heat or cold, nor of anything else, whatever it might be, or however it might happen; but always conformed himself to the will of God, in whose hands are all things.”

When St. Gertrude was one day mourning over a little fault into which she was accustomed to fall at times, she earnestly entreated the Lord to free her from it. But He said to her, with great sweetness: “Would you wish that I should be deprived of a great honor and you yourself of a great reward? Know that every time one perceives a fault of his own and resolves to avoid it for the future, he gains a great reward; and as often as he keeps himself from falling into it again for My sake, he does



Me as much honor as a valiant soldier does his king, when he fights manfully against his enemies and conquers them.”

8 To be perfect in one’s vocation is nothing else than to perform the duties and offices to which one is obliged, solely for the honor and love of God, referring all to His glory. Whoever works in this manner may be called perfect in his state, a man according to the heart and will of God.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

In the Lives of the Holy Fathers it is narrated of the Abbot Paphnutius, who was highly celebrated for sanctity, that one day he expressed a desire to know from the Lord whether he had any merit in His eyes. He received the reply that he had gained equal merit with a certain nobleman, whose name was given. The Saint immediately visited this gentleman, by whom he was kindly treated and hospitably entertained. When the repast was over, the Abbot begged of his host to tell him what was his manner of life. The Baron excused himself by saying that he did not possess any virtue, but after many entreaties, he said that he was very careful to entertain pilgrims, and provide them with whatever might be necessary for their journey; that he never despised the poor, but helped them in their need as much as he could; that he had justice administered equitably, and always gave honest decisions, never swerving from right through fear or favor; that he never oppressed his subjects; that he allowed anyone to become his tenant, and expected from no one more than what was justly his due; that no one could



complain of ever having received harm or damage from his family or cattle; that he had never offended or slandered anyone, but treated all with respect, helped all as far as he was able and endeavored to keep all in peace and harmony. On hearing this the holy Abbot was greatly edified, and understood that true perfection consisted not in great deeds, but in fulfilling our duties.

In San Cesario in the province of Lecce there lived in the time of St. Joseph da Cupertino a nun who had a great reputation for sanctity. One day, when the Saint happened to visit the house of the Marquis of that place, he was asked his opinion of this report in regard to the nun. He answered, "You have a real saint here among you, who is not known"; and he named a poor widow, of whom not a word had ever been said. The Marquis inquired as to what were her good qualities, and found that she remained always shut up in her poor little home, with some of her daughters, and that they worked constantly to support themselves and were never seen abroad but once a day, which was very early in the morning when they were going to church to hear Mass.

9 Although in entering religion and taking care not to offend God, we may appear to have done everything, ah! how often certain worms remain, which do not allow themselves to be perceived until they have gnawed away our virtues! Such worms are self-love, self-esteem, harsh judgments of others, though in trifles, and a great want of charity towards our neighbor. But if, indeed, by dragging on, we satisfy our obligations,



we do not do it with that perfection which God would expect of us.

—ST. TERESA

To one of these worms, self-esteem, Monseigneur de Palafox attributed his own relaxation after his conversion and his narrow escape from eternal ruin. “For,” said he, “though I was humble, had I, therefore, a right to believe that I was truly humble? and though I desired and intended to be good, ought I, therefore, to presume that I was truly good? This hidden pride obliged the Divine Goodness to overwhelm me, in order that I might see that I was not good, but bad, weak, miserable, full of pride, sensuality and unfaithfulness, and a prodigal scorner of the gifts of grace.”

It is told in the Lives of the Fathers that two of them had received the gift of beholding mutually the grace which was in the heart of the other. One of them, leaving his cell early one Friday morning, found a monk who was eating at the hour contrary to their custom. He judged him to be in fault, and reproved him. When he returned home, his companion did not see in him the usual sign of grace, and asked him what he had done. But when the other remembered nothing, he added, “Think whether you may not have said some idle word.” Then he remembered his rash judgment, and related what had happened. For this fault they both fasted two whole weeks, at the end of which the usual sign appeared in the brother who had been culpable.

10 Observe that perfection is not acquired by sitting with our arms folded, but it is necessary to work in earnest,



in order to conquer ourselves and to bring ourselves to live, not according to our inclinations and passions, but according to reason, our Rule, and obedience. The thing is hard, it cannot be denied, but necessary. With practice, however, it becomes easy and pleasing.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

Plutarch relates of Lycurgus that he once took two puppies of the same litter and trained up one in the kitchen and the other to hunting. When they were grown (one day when he was going to address the people), he took them into the forum, where he threw down some fish bones and at the same time let loose a hare. The first immediately began to gnaw the bones, while the other set off in pursuit of the hare. Then Lycurgus commanded silence, and turning to the people, said: “Do you see this? These two dogs are of the same breed, yet they are not inclined to the same thing, but each to that which he has been accustomed to. So true is it that habit ends in overcoming even the most violent inclinations of nature.”

It is written of St. Ignatius Loyola, that through the continual struggle which he had made to mortify himself and to bear contradictions patiently, he had arrived at such a point as to appear to have no longer any inclination. The same thing has also been noticed in many others.

11 All the science of the Saints is included in these two things: To do, and to suffer. And whoever has done these two things best, has made himself most saintly.

—ST. FRANCIS DE SALES