

A Treatise on Perfection

A Treatise
on
Perfection

Saintly Counsel on Obtaining Salvation

**Cardinal Armand Jean du Plessis,
Duke of Richelieu**

Translated by
Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

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*“I entreated, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.
And I valued her more highly than scepters and thrones.
Compared to her, I considered riches to be as nothing
and no priceless jewel to be her equal. . . .
Yes, I loved her more than the light itself!”*

—Wisdom 7:7–10

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Translator's Introduction



The name of Cardinal Richelieu will perhaps call to mind for most people the somewhat Machiavellian character in Alexander Dumas's beloved novel *The Three Musketeers*, or one of the various cinematic adaptations of that literary masterpiece. Alternatively, students of secular history may think of the skillful politician and accomplished statesman who exercised a guiding and even dominant influence over the political affairs of France, and indeed all of Europe, during the early seventeenth century. Yet the real Cardinal Richelieu (or more correctly and completely, Cardinal Armand Jean du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu) was, despite the multifaceted and complex nature of the work and activities in which he was involved, first and foremost a devout man of God, a dedicated priest, and an erudite scholar. It is true that prevailing circumstances compelled him to apply his abundant talents, wisdom, and industry to affairs of state and diplomacy rather than purely to the service of the Church. Yet this was the result of the inescapable necessities and the pressing needs of the time. As a politician, Richelieu was motivated by a genuine dedication to the common good and the flourishing of a genuinely Catholic state, more so than any other personal ambition or agenda.

RICHELIEU'S EARLY YEARS

Armand Jean du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu, was born in 1585 to an ancient and noble family as the youngest son in a family consisting of three sons and two daughters. In terms of wealth and status, his hereditary estate was of a mediocre and even somewhat lowly order amongst the nobility of France. At that time, Richelieu itself was merely a tiny and virtually unknown rural hamlet in central France. However, the house of Richelieu did have within its sphere of influence the bishopric of Luçon and enjoyed, by royal privilege, the right to nominate to the monarch a candidate to occupy that episcopal seat. The king would, in turn, propose this nominee to the pope. For all practical purposes, however, this meant that the Richelieu family could effectively choose the person to serve as bishop of Luçon.

It was the original intention of the family that one of Armand's brothers, Alphonse, the second eldest son, should serve as bishop, while the eldest son would assume control of the patrimonial estate. However, when Alphonse (who is recorded as a man of the most distinguished sanctity and learning) renounced the world to become a Carthusian monk, the responsibility fell upon Armand by default. Until then, he had intended to pursue a career as an army officer—or, more accurately, his family had determined that it was fitting for him to pursue a military career, and he had acquiesced to their determination. Now, they determined that he would serve the Church.

ASCENSION TO THE
EPISCOPATE AND POLITICAL POWER

It is clear that young Armand turned to his theological studies with real fervor and talent, perhaps sensing in them a field more suited to his vocation, propensities, and inclination than military

life. An industrious and gifted student, he had obtained his doctorate with the highest possible distinction by the age of twenty. Indeed, while still a child, he had already displayed a precocious aptitude for the Latin language and philosophy. These skills he readily and fruitfully applied to the mastery of Sacred Scripture, theology, and canon and civil law, as well as the writings of the Church Fathers. At the age of twenty-two, he was ordained as bishop of Luçon by Pope Paul V. According to some sources, the pontiff was persuaded to ordain him before the canonically required minimum age (then twenty-three) on account of the impressive scope and depth of his learning, as well as his wondrous oratorical fluency in the Latin language.

Richelieu distinguished himself in the episcopal office by the effectiveness of his preaching, the competence of his administration, and his indefatigable zeal in his pastoral duties. When he assumed the bishopric, the Diocese of Luçon was in a dire state of deterioration, disorder, and decay due to a history of poor governance and both political and doctrinal uncertainty. Richelieu achieved a radical revitalization of the diocese, including the restoration of clerical discipline, the establishment of a seminary, the restoration of the cathedral and parish churches, and the nourishing of the faith life of both the laity and clergy through an extensive program of catechesis and pastoral visitations.

In 1614, he was selected to attend the Estates-General (a kind of parliament or consultative assembly by which the nobility, clergy, and commoners could advise and petition the king) as the representative of the clergy in the Poitou region. At this assembly, he displayed such eloquence, wisdom, and intelligence that he was immediately appointed to the service of the palace, who recognized the immense potential value of the talents of such a gifted youngster to the Crown.

Richelieu steadily rose to greater prominence and responsibility in the court. In 1622, he was raised to the dignity of cardinal, and he became prime minister of France in 1624. For the next eighteen years, he continued in this role—in effect, the most powerful man in France—until struck with a grave illness (possibly tuberculosis) in his fifty-seventh year. As his condition worsened, churches throughout the nation held prayer vigils before the Blessed Sacrament for the recovery of their beloved protector and patron. Despite the fervent intercession of such a multitude, Richelieu died in 1642. On his deathbed, he is said to have repeated incessantly the words of the psalm, “*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum,*”¹ as he returned his immortal soul to his Creator and his body slept the sleep of earthly death.

RICHELIEU’S LEGACY, POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL

Despite the complexity and instability of the political conditions at the time of Richelieu’s ascendancy, he was universally admired for his competence, wisdom, and astuteness. When Peter the Great, czar of Russia, visited the monument to the illustrious cardinal in Paris, he is reported to have exclaimed, “O great man! I would give to you half of my kingdom, to learn from you how to govern the other half.”

In evaluating Richelieu’s character, there are many conflicting and even contradictory portraits available. These are, of course, very often tinted by the particular perspectives of their writers. The picture painted by Dumas is, of course, purely fictional. It is historical fiction indeed, but it is historical only insofar as the names, dates, and pivotal events are taken from

¹ “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit” (Ps 30:6).

history. Dumas depicts Richelieu as a bitter rival to the king, Louis XIII, for political and military supremacy in France. The great novelist even portrays Richelieu as being secretly motivated, at least in part, by an amorous infatuation with the wife of Louis XIII, Queen Anne of Austria. But such details, convincing and plausible as they are in the context of the novel, must be attributed entirely to the invention of Dumas's fertile imagination.

The actual evidence, if viewed objectively, suggests that Richelieu was instrumental in helping maintain the stability not only of France but of all Western Europe during what was an egregiously turbulent and complex era. He sought above all for peace and reconciliation between conflicting parties (or at least the refraining from violent conflict and the curtailment of needless bloodshed), both in matters of religion and secular governance.

BUT DIDN'T HE ALLY WITH THE PROTESTANTS?

In his foreign policy as a political leader, Richelieu did not shrink from forming alliances with Protestant states against Catholic ones when this suited the interests of France and the broader interests of the stability of Europe and the Church (as he saw it). In the Thirty Years' War, Richelieu allied France with Protestant princes and the Swedish Protestant king against the Catholic Holy Roman Empire in order to secure advantages for France over its traditional rival, the Holy Roman Empire in Germany, which had dynastic connections to Spain—also a rival to France—and through Spain to the Netherlands.

Cardinal Richelieu is often faulted by Catholics for this for the obvious reason that he appeared to prefer to fight another Catholic power rather than ally with it in a common front

against the Protestants; the argument is that he placed the particular interests of France over the universal need of the whole Catholic people. However, in Richelieu's own view, the empire was too weak or incapable of efficaciously defending Catholic interests. He believed that a strong France would best ensure the safety of Catholicism. In other words, Richelieu deemed that what was good for France was necessarily good for the Church in general.

In this context, it is important to note that France was traditionally identified as the "eldest daughter of the Church," and the French Crown was understood to be an inherently Catholic institution. Moreover, the Holy Roman Empire, despite also being Catholic, did not enjoy a uniformly harmonious relationship with the papacy, and the division of authority between the emperor and the pope had been a source of bitter contention throughout much of history. These considerations do not necessarily justify Richelieu's concrete choices in the Thirty Years' War, but they do show that he was not merely the unsavory or unscrupulous politician which Dumas made him out to be. Dumas made a caricature of a complicated man in a complicated time. It would be a small mind indeed that failed to see that these were prudential decisions in the political sphere and that they do not affect his orthodoxy, nor his piety and religion, in any way.

As an ecclesiastical leader, the cardinal played a key role in implementing the decrees of the Council of Trent in France. The fact that Pope Urban VIII, the great reforming pope of the seventeenth century, counted Richelieu among his closest personal friends and most highly esteemed colleagues and confidantes is a powerful testimony to the qualities and merits which he possessed as a man imbued with knowledge of the Catholic Faith.

CARDINAL RICHELIEU,
ACCOMPLISHED SPIRITUAL AUTHOR

Richelieu's literary output included several significant and interesting works that display well his talented intellectual faculties dedicated to serving the Church. By far, the most influential during his lifetime was his *Instruction du chrestien* (also published in Latin as *Institutio Christiana*), a kind of catechetical manual or digest of the Catholic Faith. This book, written while he was serving as bishop of Luçon (which is to say, while he was in his twenties), achieved enormous popularity in its time. Originally written as instructional material for the people of his own diocese, it was soon officially adopted by the other bishops of France and gained a very wide circulation. Many diocesan bishops ordered passages from the book to be read in their cathedrals and parish churches on Sundays as a means of instructing, encouraging, and correcting the faithful. According to a contemporary commentator, its popularity was such that there was virtually no one in France who was not intimately acquainted with the book, and it had been translated into a multitude of foreign languages, including even Arabic and Turkish. This claim, though *prima facie* somewhat farfetched, is, in fact, borne out by published copies of such translations still in existence.

Another noteworthy and highly innovative work is his *Traité qui contient la methode la plus facile et la plus assurée pour convertir ceux qui se sont separez de l'Eglise* (Treatise which contains an easy and certain method of converting those who are separated from the Church). Imitating Saint Francis de Sales's apologetical masterpiece, *The Catholic Controversy*, Richelieu's is a remarkable work of Catholic apologetics in which the soundness and solidity of the doctrines of the Church are capably expounded and clarified, and misconceptions and misrepresentations of the Catholic

position are studiously and systematically dispelled. Avoiding a polemical or confrontational approach, it is uniformly courteous, mild, and reasonable in tone, anticipating many of the recommendations for ecumenical dialogue made by the Second Vatican Council. A notable example of this is Richelieu's preference for referring to Protestants as "those separated from the Church" rather than as heretics or schismatics.

In addition, there were many publications of Richelieu's private memoirs, his correspondence, and his state and diplomatic papers, all of which offer invaluable sources of historical data and insights into the political machinations of Europe in the seventeenth century. Of historical interest to the scholar are the several volumes falsely attributed to him (presumably for the sake of promoting sales), especially those released by English publishers. A fascinating and typical example is *On the Art of Pleasing in Conversation, Written by the Famous Cardinal Richelieu* of 1708, in which the cardinal is used as a fictitious personification of a witty, experienced, urbane, and somewhat calculating man of the world imparting advice to an ambitious youth on how to make a favorable impression in society. Richelieu is also reported to have written dramas and comedies for his own amusement and recreation, but these were never published and apparently do not survive.

Undoubtedly, however, the cardinal's masterpiece as an author is his extended treatise on Christian spirituality and virtue entitled *Traité de la perfection du chrestien* in its French version of 1646 and *Tractatus de Perfectione Christiani* in the Latin version of 1651.² It is

² In the introductory epistle to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Richelieu states that he commenced writing the book at the time when the Kingdom of France was officially dedicated to Our Lady. This was done, at his prompting, in 1638, some four years before his death.

this illuminating and valuable work which is offered here in English for the first time with the title *A Treatise on Perfection*.³

A TREATISE ON PERFECTION:
HOW TO RULE ONESELF WELL

The present translation has been prepared principally from the original edition of the Latin text, with occasional references also to the French version where this has seemed helpful for the clarification of some nuance of meaning or tone. While it is, as far as the English idiom permits, a literal and direct translation, certain abridgments have been made at points when they have seemed judicious or advisable. These abridgments include the omission of the lengthy and rather scholastic discourses on the different varieties and classifications of mental prayer, and other similar topics in that vein. Since passages of this type are largely repeating or clarifying traditional terms and definitions, their omission takes little away from the original and particular substance of the book, while adding considerably to its readability and cohesiveness.

The book belongs to the genre of spiritual guidebooks intended primarily for laypersons. Such guidebooks enjoyed considerable popularity in the century following the Council of Trent, especially among Francophone readers. They responded to the pastoral needs of an emerging class of educated and reflective people who, while not called to consecrated religious life, sincerely sought to advance in Christian spirituality and virtue. For modern readers, the best-known example of a work of this type is certainly *The Introduction to the Devout Life* by Saint Francis de Sales, whom Richelieu admired and venerated deeply, and from

³ A more strictly literal (if unidiomatic) translation of the title would be *Treatise on the Perfection of the Christian*.

whom he quotes at certain points. But there were innumerable other publications of treatises from that era of this type, covering topics such as the practice of prayer and meditation, the cultivation of virtue, and the balancing of a spiritual life with the practical responsibilities of one's state in the world.

The spiritual approach outlined by Richelieu is one which evidently draws very much upon his own experiences—namely, those of a person who aspired to lead a meritorious and spiritually fruitful life, yet who was immersed in a world which presented numerous and varied challenges to this aspiration. Foremost amongst these challenges were the complex and onerous demands of his work as a public servant, statesman, and political advisor. Such work—then as now—is seldom free of ambiguous and ambivalent ethical questions. And while portrayals of the French court in the seventeenth century in literature and cinema may often be inclined to exaggerate its corruption, intrigues, and moral laxity, there can be little doubt that these were all realities which Richelieu frequently encountered. Moreover, the circles in which he lived and worked were ones in which material luxury prevailed conspicuously and was taken for granted. Even though such luxury did not accord at all with his own personal inclinations, he could scarcely hope to escape it entirely while carrying out his duties effectively. These duties involved the cultivation of easy social relationships with persons of high status, and for this reason, his manners and mode of life had to be broadly congruent with theirs.

But despite the opulence, extravagance, and moral ambiguities of the world in which he lived, the cardinal strove always to maintain true integrity of soul and genuine simplicity of heart. His approach to spirituality is a very pragmatic and practical one. According to this approach, it is best to adopt a style and form of

prayer which is moderate, sustainable, and suited to one's state of life rather than attempting one which is perhaps more elevated and demanding but entirely unsustainable in the long term. His aptitude for being a successful political ruler and wisdom gained thereby shows itself in his treatment on how to rule oneself well. Judging the particular circumstances of one's life by the virtue of prudence is imperative. It is always wisest to make the best of circumstances as they actually are rather than dreaming of and aspiring to imaginary and impossible alternatives.

THE PRINCIPAL POINTS OF THIS WORK

Fulfill Your State in Life Well

Central to Richelieu's approach is the notion that fulfillment of one's proper and legitimate duties in the world is the single most important moral responsibility of the Christian, and also the most effective form of prayer. At the time at which he wrote, there was far less social mobility than there is today. A person's status in the world, profession, or role—even the selection of a marriage partner or the discernment of a religious vocation—was largely determined by external circumstances rather than by free or individual choice. Even then, Richelieu encourages the reader to accept the realities of life as one finds them, as being determined by the mysterious will of a benevolent and wise God. To give one's full attention to the fulfillment of one's responsibilities with charity and diligence was thus to act in accordance with the sacred dispositions of Divine Providence. And since—according to the current view—social and political regimes were established and legitimized by this same Divine Providence, all genuinely Christian acts would be consistent with the prevailing secular and social order, together with the multitude of obligations, restrictions, responsibilities, and duties it prescribes or expects.

This position has a sound scriptural and philosophical foundation, reflecting the teaching in the first letter of Peter: “For the sake of the Lord, accept the authority of every human institution.”⁴ Yet it is perhaps somewhat problematic for many Christians today since the sense of social, political, and economic structures as being divinely ordained realities is far less strong than it was previously. Few people today, for example, would accept the notion of a hereditary monarchy or aristocracy as a manifestation of God’s will. Nevertheless, the notion that a person’s legitimate and proper duties in the world—including duties to his family, the Church, his profession, his nation, or his community—are ultimately done in the service of God’s plan remains a useful and valid one. For parents, the best prayer they can offer is to be good parents. For those engaged in a particular profession, to serve others well through that profession is their truest form of devotion to God.

Salvation Is Easy—for the Christian

Another striking suggestion made by Richelieu is that the path leading to eternal salvation is, in fact, an easy one—or at least, a relatively easy one. At first glance, this may strike many as contrary to conventional Christian wisdom—does not Our Lord say that “the way that leads to life is hard and narrow”?⁵ Yet Richelieu does not maintain that the Christian life is *entirely* free from suffering or adversities, which is hardly possible for any human being in any circumstance. No human life is ever completely “easy.” Rather, he suggests that a life of Christian virtue is, on the whole, much easier, happier, and more satisfactory than a life given over to sin or vice. Moreover, since a life lived in obedience

⁴ 1 Peter 2:13.

⁵ Matthew 7:14.

to God's law accords best with our true human nature, it is necessarily easier and happier than one lived in any other manner. Compared to any other form of living, salvation is easiest to attain within practice of Christian virtue in the Catholic Faith.

In offering this view, it is evident that the cardinal is speaking from his own rich and varied treasury of observations of the human condition. A life of moral rectitude and virtue tends, in almost all cases, to be more peaceful, stable, and tranquil than a life of sin, crime, or debauchery. Richelieu cites, in particular, the example of sexual immorality, which he asserts never leads to any real happiness or satisfaction but ultimately only to disgust, tedium, and a truncation of personal freedom. Furthermore, sins and crimes of any kind are inevitably accompanied by some degree of anxiety, fear, and guilt. For this reason, the happiness, advantages, and even pleasures that sin may appear to promise soon prove to be mere illusions.

Eternity Must Be Our Chief Concern

Finally, despite (or perhaps, because of) Richelieu's broad and penetrating experience of worldly affairs, he proposes that it is the eternal destiny of the soul which should be a human being's chief concern. The things of this world are, at best, temporary and contingent. Compared to the eternal life of the immortal soul—both in respect to duration and quality—the joys and sorrows of this life amount to very little, but a passing moment, as it were. It therefore behooves each person to consider his eternal fate very seriously indeed, since it will constitute the final and permanent destination of his soul. Accordingly, all decisions in the present life should be made in the context of the eternity that awaits.

The cardinal writes extensively and even poetically on the joys of heaven in the second chapter of the treatise, which is perhaps the most beautiful and striking portion of the entire work. In the third

chapter, he paints the terrors of damnation in equally vivid colors, summoning up a truly frightening vision of hell. Of course, few contemporary spiritual writers are inclined to introduce the fear of hell, at least as it is traditionally imagined, as a valid or effective motive for the cultivation of a virtuous life. Yet if Richelieu may seem somewhat dated in this respect, it is important to remember that the realities of both heaven and hell remain foundational elements of the Christian Faith and central pillars of its doctrines.

Since God is the true source and perfection of all happiness, to seek earnestly for eternal happiness in the life to come (as Richelieu so convincingly advises) and to love God are ultimately one and the same thing. Since happiness consists in the enjoyment of goodness, and God Himself is the epitome and source of all true goodness, to separate the pursuit of genuine personal happiness from devotion to God is, in fact, a false dichotomy.

RICHELIEU'S TEACHINGS TODAY

It is suggested that the spirituality of Richelieu, while imbued with the attitudes and realities of seventeenth-century France, offers much that is of value and relevance to the twenty-first-century Christian. Many contemporary Christians, like Richelieu, find themselves dealing with complex and demanding responsibilities and ethical questions which do not present any simple or univocal answers. For people in such situations, the present work offers sound and solid guidance by showing how the diligent fulfillment of secular responsibilities and duties can become a means of giving glory to God. One might say that Richelieu offers a spirituality of social duty—something sorely needed in our present age of apathy and alienation.

The fact that his approach is gently moderate and highly rational will strike a note of appeal for many modern readers. He

speaks little of visions, revelations, and mystical experiences, and his manner of expression and arguments are all conspicuously reasonable, calm, and even dispassionate. He was a contemporary of René Descartes, and he exhibits something of the same desire to demonstrate the rational and intelligible character of the Christian doctrine and the consistency of Christian morality with both social and natural laws.

It is the hope of the present translator that many readers will find much to sympathize with in the person and thought of Richelieu—a man who was admittedly not quite a saint but certainly not a villain either. He indeed possessed all the wisdom of the serpent, though he fell, at times, rather short of the innocence of the dove. On a practical level, he was pragmatic, astute, and perhaps inclined to be unscrupulous when necessity or the common good seemed to demand it of him. Yet on a spiritual and religious level, he was deeply and unwaveringly loyal to the doctrines and hierarchy of the Church and animated with a most earnest desire for the eternal beatitude of heaven. Recalling Saint Teresa of Avila's famous advice that the primary quality in electing a spiritual director is to select a man learned in the spiritual life,⁶ we would be hard-pressed to find a man more learned in the spiritual life and able to express it well than Cardinal Richelieu. And it was upon this, the spiritual life and its natural culmination in heaven, that his heart remained faithfully and lovingly fixed throughout his life. With some justice, Cardinal Richelieu might be characterized as being a wonderful, albeit imperfect, example of one who sincerely endeavored always "to render unto Caesar the things which are of Caesar, and unto God the things which are of God."⁷

⁶ *Way of Perfection*, chapter 5.

⁷ Matthew 21:22.

Dedicatory Epistle



To the most holy Virgin, Mother of God.

O great and holy Virgin, there are many cogent reasons why I should dedicate to you this work, which deals with the attainment of Christian perfection. For it was your own Son who came into the world to teach us such perfection, both by His holy words and the wonderful example of His manner of life. And it was you yourself who, after your only-begotten and Divine Son, embraced and displayed most fully and perfectly all the aspects of Christian virtue and sanctity.

Furthermore, I commenced the writing of this present work at the same time when this entire Kingdom of France was most solemnly consecrated to you, O Virgin Queen, and commended to your glorious patronage.⁸ It would therefore be utterly inexcusable on my part if, at such a time, I failed to dedicate to you also my own humble writings.

I should fear, however, that my efforts should prove entirely unworthy to offer to you unless I was confidently depending upon your kindly assistance to help me. Through this assistance, I hope to gain the blessing of your Divine Son for both myself,

⁸ In 1638, Louis XIII dedicated the Kingdom of France to the Blessed Virgin. This consecration of the kingdom appears to have been an initiative of Richelieu.

as the author, and for this little book I am writing. Indeed, since I offer both myself and this book to you, His glorious Mother, it is fitting that your divine Son should look kindly upon my endeavors and efforts.

It is truly impossible for any Christian to praise and honor your Son, who is Lord of all the universe, with due and fitting reverence. For this reason, we honor you, His most holy Mother. For in embracing you with love and reverence, we embrace Him also. And the surest way we can honor and glorify His most holy name is through your merciful grace and kindly assistance. For you and He both draw virtue and power from the same Divine font. And it is through His merits that I trust that you will give generous assistance to me and be lovingly present to me as I work. And your Son's sacred wounds—the glorious price of our salvation—shall heal whatever deficiencies and shortcomings there are the prayers and vows I offer you.

Thus with my eyes fixed upon Christ as the head, I shall endeavor to teach the way which He established, exemplified, and taught. And though I may try to indicate this way to others, I cannot—alas!—claim to demonstrate it in my own life or person. It behooves each Christian to strive assiduously after this way of perfection. And, although this is something which I myself approach only in words and intentions, I pray that each person who truly seeks it may find it, and those who earnestly strive after it may attain it.

There is nothing you are not able to do, O Mary, through the immense love which God bears you! It was because of this infinite and glorious love that you received the incomparable dignity of being the Mother of the omnipotent and only God. And you desire above all else that this God, who is also your only-begotten Son, should be praised, glorified, and blessed forever and ever.

I pray therefore that, through your kindly and maternal aid, this work may prove useful and edifying—both to the souls of those for whom it is written as a guidebook and also to myself, its author, who invoke and implore your protection at each and every moment of my life, and most especially at the hour of my death.

I remain, my dearest Lady,
Your most devoted and ever-loving servant,
Richelieu

Author's Preface



I must firstly acknowledge and defer, with all due humility, to the great merits and abilities of all the illustrious multitude who have already treated the theme which I am to consider in my present work. However, there are many such spiritual and moral treatises which are, despite their indisputable value and penetration, extremely lengthy and somewhat difficult to understand. For this reason, they are often not able to be absorbed by the reader without much laborious and even prohibitive effort. Therefore—motivated by charity, that kindly power which is able to accomplish all things—I myself shall compile and propose a method of achieving perfection in the Christian life, which is both short and easy.

Nonetheless, those who have devoted their efforts to this endeavor before me have certainly surpassed whatever my own humble attempts are or shall be, and have produced works which are more useful and which bear better and more substantial fruit than my own. They have already triumphantly run the course upon which I shall now tentatively dare to embark. But my intention in following their footsteps is not only to profit and instruct others but also to nourish and guide my own soul in its reflections and considerations.

If anyone who happens to read this modest work wishes to place their trust in what is contained herein, may they walk the path which I shall open to them with confidence, security, and alacrity. If I am able to promote or assist others in finding the way that leads to salvation by rendering such a service, I shall certainly have made some advances in arriving at my own.

The philosophers teach us that it is some final end or ultimate goal that motivates and determines each person or thing in their particular actions. Hence, we ought to consider carefully what our own final end or goal is, or what is the ultimate reward for which we are seeking. The way of Christian perfection has a two-fold objective: firstly, one that pertains to the individual's own benefit—namely, the attainment of personal salvation—and, secondly, one that pertains to God Himself—namely, that the divine glory may radiate forth ever more splendidly.

When these two things are considered, it will be realized that the first objective is finite in its nature and scope, whereas the second is without end. Hence, it is that when a person has progressed in virtue to the point where his own salvation is established, the pursuit of the second objective—that is, the glorification of God—still remains to compel him to yet further cultivation of the perfection of life, in imitation of the example of Christ Himself. It is impossible for persons genuinely committed to the glorification of God not to achieve their own personal salvation. It is similarly impossible for a person to arrive at true personal salvation without contributing, in some way, to the glorification of God. For this reason, the twin objectives of the Christian life—the attainment of individual salvation and the glorification of God—are always and inseparably bound together.

The nature of Christian perfection, which brings the human being both to individual salvation and to the glorification of God,

is something which should be considered carefully and prudently. It will suffice for me to speak of it in general terms in order to manifest the way of virtue to which each is called, in accordance with the twofold objective of Christian perfection. Indeed, those who are at an earlier stage in the spiritual life will be motivated primarily by the desire for individual salvation, whereas those who are more perfect will seek primarily for the glory of God. This may perhaps be compared to the difference between infants who are scarcely able to run and still need to be nourished with milk and those who have reached maturity and can accept solid food. Similarly, those at the beginning of the Christian life need to be encouraged by considerations of personal rewards and punishments, but, little by little, they arrive at a state in which the glory of God becomes their sole motivating force, leading, in turn, to the ultimate crown of virtue.

In order that the perusal of this book may bear its best fruit, it behoves the readers to apply themselves attentively and to read without excessive haste so that there may be ample leisure for due reflection. Above all, the reader is advised always to strive to elevate his mind to God and to implore God's gracious assistance in achieving a sound understanding of what is written, together with a fruitful observance and practice of its recommendations.

Finally, there is a need for what has been read to be called back to mind from time to time for further meditation and reflection. This may be compared to the practice of certain ruminant animals that chew the food they have consumed repeatedly in order to extract from it purer sap and richer nourishment. The importance of the matters addressed herein demands, by its very nature, this careful diligence—since it is nothing less than eternity itself, and the cultivation of an effective and reliable method of arriving at the blessed state of everlasting happiness.

CHAPTER I

That Christians ought to give diligent care to their eternal salvation, in view of the great dignity of the human soul



The pure light of natural reason clearly declares that God truly exists. This is apparent to all persons who are willing to employ such reason, and even to those of the most limited mental capacity. Faith, confirming this self-evident truth, similarly teaches those who are illuminated by its light that God must indeed exist. It affirms also that God, on account of the goodness and justice which are essential to His divine nature, shall return to each person eternal rewards or eternal punishments, according to what one has justly deserved while in this mortal life. For this world exists primarily as a stadium for merit and a period of testing. “I will come quickly!” says the Lord, “and I shall bring my rewards with me, to give to each person according to what their deeds deserve.”⁹

Truly, those who ignore and disregard their own salvation are enveloped in a darker blindness than those who are born

⁹ Revelation 22:12.

completely without sight. Those who neglect to do such things that are necessary to their eternal happiness must certainly have hearts which are harder and more obdurate than stone!

The great dignity of the human soul may be perceived from its divine origin, from its deiform nature, from its celestial final destiny, and by the great price—namely, the precious blood of Christ—by which it was redeemed from everlasting perdition. These considerations should prevent us from lightly permitting our precious and immortal souls to be plunged into the abyss of eternal misery, either by our sins or by our foolish negligence. Rather, this realization of the soul's intrinsic dignity compels us to seek earnestly after the sublime heights of final blessedness by means of that divine grace which is the true and only seed of celestial glory.

Since God Himself is the Creator of our souls, they were each made bearing the image and “signature” of God. And they are therefore destined to return to God. This is expressed in the wonderful teachings of Saint Augustine, who asserts that since God is the Creator of human beings, the final objective and ultimate purpose of human beings is to partake in the being of God. Each human being carries within himself an image of his Creator—something which is spiritual, invisible, and immortal. Of course, as long as we live in this mortal life, our essence is circumscribed and confined by the limitations of time and space. But when our short earthly existence is ended, each soul is ultimately destined to pass into the infinite realm of eternity, in which all limitations and bounds are entirely transcended.

Just as the soul imparts life to the body, so it is that God imparts life to the soul. And, this being the case, is it possible for the soul to wish to separate itself from eternal life and divine beatitude? If we frown upon the act of murder, whereby a soul is separated

from a body, should we not be more alarmed at those sins which separate the soul from God? As Saint Bernard says, does it make sense for anyone to pour out tears that a soul and a body are separated through physical death and not to pour our tears all the more abundantly when a soul is separated from God through sin?

And if God is the Creator of all things, including each human soul, is it not necessarily the case—as Saint Augustine expresses so eloquently—that the human soul will not find true rest except in God alone?

For whatever is set into motion is not able to rest until it arrives at the end of its particular course of motion. When a stone falls, it has no rest at the beginning of its fall. While it flies through the air, it similarly has no rest. But when it reaches the end of its course and settles on the earth, then it finally knows its place of rest. As for we human beings, the beginning of our journey is from the earth, then through the earthly realm. But our place of rest is in heaven. It is therefore in heaven alone that we shall delight entirely in God. Upon this earth, no true or complete tranquility is able to be found. As Saint Bernard says, there is no created thing that is capable of satisfying the longings of the soul. Created things are certainly able to distract or occupy the soul for a time, but they are never able to fulfill it. God alone is able to do this, since each soul is imbued with the capacity to receive God. Whatever is less than the glorious infinitude of God must therefore fail to satisfy the yearnings of the soul.

Is it possible for a soul, illuminated by the light of this realization, to disregard and ignore such things? Or is it possible for the soul—aware that it is destined for the eternal possession of the beatitude of God—to allow itself to be deprived of this infinite goodness so that it may seek instead the passing corruption of the world and the flesh?

Next, let us consider the precious blood of the Son of God. This was indeed paid as the price for the redemption of our souls. Are we then able to value our souls so cheaply that we disregard this most precious blood, this royal and divine ransom? Christ willed to suffer death in order to save our souls. Are we not bound then to value our own souls accordingly, since they have been redeemed at such a noble and incalculable price?

If, as Saint Gregory the Great observes, it is a happy thing when a mortal body is spared from physical death, is it not a much greater thing when an immortal soul is saved from eternal death? If we are not able to contemplate the physical death of one of our loved ones with dry eyes, should we be able to endure the eternal perdition of an immortal soul without much greater tribulation? Should we weep for those whose physical death no mortal could have prevented, and yet not weep more fervently over the damnation of souls, which, by simple penitence and contrition of heart, may have easily been saved?

Regarding the relationship of the mortal body and the immortal soul, Saint Augustine gives us the following dialogue. The souls says to the body, “I have descended from heaven to lead you from this mortal misery to divine perfection. Is it not better that you should follow me upwards to the heavens rather than that I should follow you downwards to the inferno?”

I may add something to these striking words. There is nothing, nothing at all, in this lower world which is not passing, deceptive, and conditional. Conversely, there is nothing in the upper world—the celestial realm of heaven—which is not eternal and perfect. This earth offers us anxiety, trial, and labor, whereas heaven is full of ineffable joy, infinite peace, and transcendental beatitude. Therefore, simple reason itself dictates that we should seek the infinite and eternal good things that are

of heaven and renounce the ephemeral and limited things that are of the earth.

Furthermore, this means that each person should not only seek his own personal salvation but should also do whatever he reasonably can to promote the salvation of others. Indeed, this consideration was the motivating force which induced me to write the present work. But nevertheless, in finding and describing the way that leads to salvation, I must perforce instruct and guide myself first before I venture to advise any others. Indeed, to work for one's own salvation and that of others are so closely connected as to be practically inseparable. For if we devote our efforts to promoting the genuine well-being and eternal felicity of the souls of others, we shall thereby certainly achieve also the salvation of our own souls, as if by an infallible path. And similarly, if we diligently seek our own salvation, we cannot fail to guide and assist others as well.

We may recall from the pages of Sacred Scripture how Jonathan was sentenced to death by his father, King Saul, because he had placed a rod into a honeycomb and—contrary to the king's orders—tasted some of the honey. Yet he then went on to achieve an illustrious victory for the royal forces. This compelled his father the king to revoke the sentence against him, and thus Jonathan was freed.¹⁰ Similarly, whatever crimes a sinner should carry with him before the tribunal of judgment of the Divinity, if such a sinner has procured so great a victory as bringing other souls to salvation, then these souls shall certainly implore mercy from God on behalf of that sinner. They shall cry out for leniency, just as the people of Israel did on behalf of Jonathan. And it is certain that God—whose sweetest delight is to pour forth good things to human beings—shall respond to such

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 14:24–31, 43–45.

intercessions with clemency, allowing the hand of justice to be bound in the chains of love.

As Saint James writes, “Whoever converts a sinner from the error of his ways covers up a multitude of sins.”¹¹ And we may place confidence in the words of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, with which I shall conclude this chapter: “Among all the works of human beings, those that cooperate with God to bring about the salvation of other souls most perfectly imitate the nature of the Divinity. It is therefore such works that draw the soul closest to the beatitude of the Godhead.”

¹¹ James 5:20.