

THE BATTLE OF THE
VIRTUES
& VICES

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& VICES

DEFENDING THE INTERIOR
CASTLE OF THE SOUL

POPE SAINT LEO IX

TRANSLATED BY
FR. ROBERT NIXON, OSB

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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Cover design by Jordan Avery

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ISBN: 978-1-5051-3174-1

Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-3184-0

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-3185-7

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

www.TANBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

“To the one who is victorious, I shall grant to sit upon My throne with Me; just as I was victorious, and sit with My Father in His throne.”

—Revelation 3:21



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE



THE BATTLE BETWEEN the virtues and the vices is a real part of every person's life, regardless of age, gender, or state in life (with the singular exceptions of Jesus Christ Himself and the Blessed Virgin Mary). For a tendency to sin, as well as a natural desire for the good, are both intrinsic parts of our mortal human nature. The tendency to sin arises from the primordial fall of Adam and Eve, which has given rise to innumerable deficiencies and defects in our character and nature. The opposing tendency—the desire for that which is truly good—emerges both from the innate dignity of our condition as creatures fashioned in the image and likeness of God and by virtue of the grace bestowed upon us through Our Lord Jesus Christ.

These opposing tendencies in our nature often confront each other headlong, almost in a kind of battle for dominance over the soul. This battle between the virtues and vices is the theme of the present work, which depicts this interior struggle between good and evil in the form of a dialogue between various vices and the virtues which serve to oppose them.

The Latin original of this dialogue (or series of dialogues) was one of the most popular and widely circulated works in the latter portion of the Middle Ages, and a great multitude of manuscript copies of it exist. Not surprisingly for such a widely circulated and copied work, the various manuscript versions of it exhibit numerous small differences, perhaps reflecting particular insights or redactional choices of the individual copyists. The identification of the author is also extremely variable. Some manuscripts give the author as Saint Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–397), while others attribute it to the pen of Saint Leo the Great (c. 400–461), and yet others identify Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) as the writer. The fact that such great saints (all of whom are Doctors of the Church) are nominated as possible authors reflects the very high esteem in which the work was held.

But there are various good reasons for doubting the historical accuracy of each of the above-mentioned attributions. Firstly, the style of the Latin is that of the middle or late medieval period rather than the more classical style of Saints Ambrose, Leo the Great, or Isidore of Seville. Moreover, there are numerous passages where the author seems to be making direct reference to principles and phrases from the Rule of Saint Benedict, which would not be expected with any of the three saints proposed.

There is, however, another and much more probable saint to whom the authorship of the work has been attributed:

Saint Leo IX, who served as pope during the turbulent years of the eleventh century. He had a background in, and close affinity to, Benedictine monasticism, and Saint Benedict was a special patron of his. Although relatively little known to most Catholics today, Leo IX was one of the greatest and most revered popes of the Middle Ages. The short biography of him, included in this volume, reveals that his life was distinguished both by humble sanctity, diligence in his pastoral duties, and astonishing miracles.

The attribution of the work to Leo IX is supported by no less an authority than Saint Peter Canisius (1521–97), who is himself a Doctor of the Church. He gives three reasons for crediting Saint Leo IX as the author:

1. The oldest existing manuscripts, which date from the eleventh or twelfth centuries, give the author as “Leo” or “Pope Leo,” but none include the designation “Leo the Great.”
2. There are numerous clear references to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which seems to rule out Ambrose, Leo the Great, or Isidore as possible authors, but which match perfectly with the well-known devotion of Leo IX to that great monastic saint.
3. The style of the Latin very closely resembles that of the other writings of Saint Leo IX and

the form of expression typical of the era in which he lived.

It is pertinent to make some comment in these introductory notes on the nature of the vices and virtues. The literal meanings of the terms “vice” (*vitium*) and “virtue” (*virtus*) are “weakness” and “strength,” respectively. The vices are not in themselves sins; rather, they are propensities or tendencies to sin. Thus, for example, impatience or irritability are both vices, for they may readily lead a person into sinful words or actions. But simply to experience these as feelings is not a sin, unless it leads to some voluntary action or expression, or conscious consent of the will.

However, it is to be noted that in certain cases, a thought (if it is deliberately cultivated and entertained) can also constitute an action. An example of this would be the case of lust, or sexual attraction of an illicit nature. Such tendencies of illicit sexual attraction are not in themselves necessarily sinful, since they do not always arise from a person’s free will and are of purely natural origin. But if illicit sexual attractions are deliberately cultivated (even if accompanied by no actions), they easily become sinful.

It is also to be noted that persons whose actions are sinful may actually possess many virtues. For example, it is possible that a sinful person may possess self-discipline, prudent restraint of speech, and patience. Such virtues may, indeed,

even occasionally be misdirected towards sinful goals. Furthermore, a particular trait can cease to be a virtue and become a vice if unmoderated or taken to extremes. For example, generosity, if excessive and ungoverned by wisdom, could become improvidence and prodigality. Love of justice, if inflexible and untampered by mercy, can easily become severity or harshness.

For the person who aspires to live a life of goodness and uprightness, the cultivation of the virtues and the active fighting against the vices is essential. The more a person is aware of the presence of specific vices in his character, the better equipped he will be to resist their influence and temptations. Moral goodness, which the virtues help to achieve, not only leads to the heavenly rewards which Christ has promised us but also is conducive to happiness and peace in this present life. Conversely, sin (if unrepented and unatoned) leads not only to the eternal misery of hell but also generally tends to make a person unhappy and unsuccessful in the present life as well.

In the dialogue which follows, a particular virtue is identified as a remedy for each vice. These virtues allow the propensity or impulse to sin to be checked and controlled by offering an opposing thought or consideration which cancels and rebukes each temptation. The translational approach adopted here aims at creating a convincing sense of a dialogue (including many instances of irony

and colloquial language), with the vices and virtues each appearing as characters which address the soul. Descriptions of these various characters, which are intended to be personifications of each respective vice or virtue, have been added by the translator for the purpose of lending color to interlocutors in each dialogue. The scriptural verses quoted in the work are translations from the Vulgate text used by Leo, reflecting the sense in which he himself cites them.

From the popular circulation of the work in the Middle Ages, it is clear that many readers from that period found the dialogue extremely useful and edifying. It is the sincere hope of the present translator that many contemporary readers will also find this beloved and classic work similarly instructive and enjoyable, and that Saint Leo IX will prove to be an effective and wise spiritual director for today's Catholics.

And may Jesus Christ, who is Himself the "Virtue of God,"¹ assist each of us following the path of goodness and wisdom which leads to the eternal joys of heaven.

Sancte Leo, ora pro nobis!

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¹ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

THE LIFE OF POPE SAINT LEO IX



POPE SAINT LEO IX, whose baptismal name was Bruno, was born in the year of Our Lord 1002 in Alsace, a fertile, verdant, and richly wooded region of France, extending from the border of Switzerland to the border of Germany. He was the only son of a certain Hugh, a distinguished and honorable man of the highest wealth and most exalted nobility, being count of the French regions of Nordgau, Eguisheim, and Dabo, as well as a cousin to the Holy Roman emperor, Conrad II. Even as a child, Bruno distinguished himself for his angelic sanctity and precocious intelligence. At the age of five, he was entrusted to the care of Berthold, the bishop of the French diocese of Toul, from whom he received a comprehensive instruction in both classical learning and sacred doctrine. Bruno soon gained the admiration and esteem of all who knew him on account of his prodigious memory and the acuity of his understanding, as well as his unfailing humility and charity.

It was during his childhood years that Bruno chose Saint Benedict as a particular patron and beloved guide for

himself. This resulted from a remarkable and curious miracle in which the life of young Bruno was spared through the intervention of this great saint. Once, while Bruno was enjoying a well-earned vacation from his studies at one of his parents' rural castles, it happened that a venomous toad stealthily crept into the bed chamber of the boy and concealed itself there in a dark corner. That night, as Bruno slept, the toad leapt upon him. At this, the boy woke up suddenly in a panic to find this loathsome creature resting on his person. The toad then bit the young lad on the throat, letting its vile poison flow into the gaping wound. Upon hearing the fear-stricken cries of Bruno, the entire household rushed to his bedchamber to see what was amiss. There, they found the boy in pain with a festering and inflamed wound upon his neck. He described to them the monstrous toad which had attacked him, but no trace of the hellish amphibian could be found.

The most expert physicians were summoned to treat Bruno, but without success. Indeed, for the next two months, the hapless youth became steadily worse, and his family began to despair of his chances of recovery.

But although these natural and human remedies proved ineffective, divine healing was given to Bruno. For one night, he beheld a vision of a man of venerable appearance robed in a monastic habit and surrounded by streams of refulgent light. He appeared to be descending from heaven

through the skies, until he entered young Bruno's room through the window. In one hand, he held a crucifix, which he touched gently to the boy's forehead. And instantly, he was restored to perfect health!

Bruno had no doubt that the man whom he had seen in his vision and who had healed his illness was none other than Saint Benedict, the patriarch of all monks of the West. And from that time, Bruno had a deep devotion to Benedict and recited the office of the saint every day for the remainder of his life. And he did everything he possibly could, as a bishop and then as pope, to support Benedictine monasteries.

In due course, Bruno was ordained to the priesthood. His ministry was characterized by diligence and devotion, which was well supported by his prudence, wisdom, and erudition. Soon, he was consecrated as bishop of the important diocese of Toul, which he governed effectively and fruitfully for over two decades.

At this point in history, the governance of the Church in Rome was highly unstable and tainted by corruption. Moreover, there was a lack of certainty in many circles about whether it was the Holy Roman emperor or the college of cardinals in Rome who had the right to select a pope. Because of this confusion, there were frequently two rival claimants to the papal crown; indeed, at one point in the eleventh century, no less than three bishops each

asserted themselves to be the legitimate pope. Pope Damasus II, Leo's predecessor, had died in 1048, and the Holy Roman emperor, in conference with an assembly of German bishops and some cardinals, chose Bruno to be the next pope.

In humble (though misguided) obedience, Bruno accepted this imperial decision. Accordingly, he set out to Rome, attired in his new papal regalia, to assume his new role. On the way, he met two monks. One was Saint Hugh, of the great abbey of Cluny, and the other was a young monk named Hildebrand, who would eventually become Pope Saint Gregory VII. They both expressed dismay that Bruno had accepted his appointment as pope and explained that it was not up to the Holy Roman emperor to choose the pontiff. Bruno, seeing the wisdom of their counsel, immediately removed his papal regalia and continued to Rome in the humble attire of a pilgrim. Yet, once he had arrived, all the clergy and cardinals of Rome (acting upon the advice of Hildebrand) enthusiastically and unanimously elected him as their new supreme pontiff. And thus Bruno ascended the Petrine throne (supported by both the college of cardinals and the Holy Roman emperor), taking for himself the name of Leo IX.

As pope, Leo was extremely effective. He fought strenuously against corruption within the Church (which was

then widespread) and worked to strengthen education and discipline among the clergy and to enforce priestly celibacy.

He continued to be distinguished by his noble sanctity and sincere piety. A veritable multitude of astonishing miracles occurred during his life, one of which will be recounted here.

During Leo's pontificate, the king of Denmark possessed, amongst his many treasures and curiosities, a particularly splendid parrot. This noble and sagacious bird not only was blessed with glorious, polychromatic plumage but also had the ability to speak with a voice that seemed to be human. Now, when the king heard reports of the great sanctity and wisdom of Pope Leo IX, he resolved to send this fine bird to the holy pontiff as a gift. Amazingly, as the bird was being transported, it spontaneously began to say:

All ye who hear me, know
That to the pope I go;
I'm off to my new home
In great and noble Rome!"²

And the parrot continued to repeat these verses as it travelled along its route to Rome.

After it was presented to Leo, a very close rapport at once sprang up between the pontiff and his new feathered

² These lines (and those which follow) have been freely adapted from the original Latin text in order to produce rhyming verses.

companion. When the bird was first taken into his presence, it is said to have uttered the following verses:

O Leo, gracious pope,
In whom Christ's Church does hope,
Most blest am I to meet thee,
Rejoicing, do I greet thee!

Furthermore, it is reported that Leo, whenever fatigued or anxious with the demands of his pontifical office, would frequently derive great consolation and diversion from his conversations and verbal exchanges with this most talented bird.

This miracle, though apparently trivial in itself, attests to the fact that the working of divine power to achieve wondrous results was a conspicuous and regular part of Saint Leo's life. Another miracle, which happened towards the end of his life, reveals the extent of his compassion to those who are afflicted by suffering and his mystical closeness to Christ Himself.

It was the habit of Leo to go out at night incognito and wander the streets of Rome, accompanied by a single servant. During these nocturnal excursions, he would give alms and assistance to any beggars or needy pilgrims he encountered. It happened that on one night, he came across a particularly wretched beggar huddled in a corner. This beggar was not only afflicted by the most dire and squalid poverty but also infected with the dreaded disease of leprosy. The heart of

Leo was at once touched with the deepest compassion for this suffering man. Without hesitation, he took him back to the pontifical palace. There, he gave him his very own bed to sleep on and replaced the filthy rags he had been wearing by some of his own finest garments. Meanwhile, Leo himself took his rest on a spare couch.

Early the next morning, the saint went in to see how the leprous beggar had slept. But, to his great surprise, no trace of him could be found! Although the doors of the bedchamber had been locked, the mysterious beggar had vanished entirely.

The following night, Leo had a dream in which Christ appeared to him. He was noble and radiant in form but clothed in the exact same garments which Leo had given to the beggar.³ And thus it was revealed to the holy pontiff that it was Christ Himself to whom He had shown compassion and care in the person of the wretched leper.

Leo's successor, Pope Victor III, described his predecessor as "a new and glorious light to the world who renewed and restored God's Holy Church." He also recounts that it was Leo's custom to make a devotional procession from the Lateran Basilica to Saint Peter's Basilica in the solitary hours of the night, with bare feet and clad in a penitential habit, chanting the psalms and praying fervently for the

³ An almost identical incident is related in the life of Saint Martin of Tours.

Church. It was the practice of the holy pope to perform this secret act of piety and penance three times every week.

Saint Leo IX died in the year of Our Lord 1054, by which stage he was already popularly venerated as a living saint. Contemporary sources testify to the vast multitude of miraculous healings which occurred at his tomb following his burial. As well as writing numerous letters and decrees, Leo IX wrote *The Battle of the Virtues and Vices*—a remarkable and timeless literary masterpiece which amply displays both his profound wisdom into the Christian spiritual life and his penetrating and subtle insights into human psychology.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION



THE APOSTOLIC VOICE of Saint Paul cries out throughout the entire world addressing zealously and boldly the attentive ears and hearts of all the faithful. It gives to them a timely and dire warning, lest they should grow complacent in their apparent state of security. For in resonant tones, it proclaims, “Whosoever wishes to live devoutly in Christ Jesus is destined to suffer persecutions.”⁴

And this was indeed the truth for the faithful during those early years of the new-born Church, when Saint Paul penned those fateful words. For in those dark and dire days, everyone who adhered to Christian faith faced daily the perils of persecution, exiles, torture, and martyrdom.

But today, for those who wish to live devoutly in the faith of Jesus Christ, there are no longer the dangers of chains, or beatings, or whippings, or prisons, or cruel devices of torture, or crosses—at least, not in any literal sense. Such things have long passed into history for most Christians. How, therefore, can the words of Saint Paul continue to

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:12.

ring true when he says that all who wish to live devoutly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecutions? Is it perhaps that there are, in our own times, no one who truly wishes to live devoutly, and that it is for this reason that the tortures and perils of the earlier times now exist no more? Such a foolish proposal is very clearly and manifestly untrue, for amongst the multitude of Christians, there are certainly still a great number who fervently wish to live devoutly.

Rather, the sentence of Saint Paul must be understood in a broad and metaphoric manner, taking the word “persecution” in its most general sense. For there are indeed many within the bosom of Holy Mother Church who *do* sincerely desire to live piously and devoutly in the faith of Jesus Christ, and who endure slander, condemnation, insults, derision, and mockery. But even this cannot be the same as the “persecution” of which Saint Paul speaks, and which he says that *all* who wish to live devoutly will suffer. For there are a great many other devout people who never suffer from slanders, condemnation, insults from others—or anything of that kind.

Hence, we may conclude that the apostle’s words are to be understood in a different and even more subtle manner. For they must refer to some form of persecution or a conflict which is a universal experience for all who aspire to follow Christ.

But what could this persecution and conflict be? I suggest that it is nothing other than the battle between the vices and the virtues, which takes place within the heart of each and every human being, every single day of our lives. The enemies in this battle—the vices and temptations which infect our fallen nature—are invisible and internal. But, as experience teaches us, they are constant and unrelenting in their assaults. For pride always arises to attack and persecute humility; vainglory assaults fear of the Lord; counterfeit piety tries to undermine true holiness; and rebellion tries to overthrow obedience.

We see a veritable multitude of such conflicts arise, entailing each of the following oppositions:

- envy against fraternal charity
- hatred against love
- detraction against just correction
- wrath against patience
- severity against gentleness
- self-satisfaction against respect for others' feelings
- worldly melancholy against spiritual joy
- sloth against energetic virtue
- dissolute wandering against firm stability
- despair against faithful hope
- avarice against detachment from the world
- stinginess against generosity

- thievery and fraud against innocence
- concealment and deception against truthfulness
- gluttony against moderation
- inane elation against holy sorrow
- garrulity against prudent restraint
- fleshly desire and lust against purity and chastity
- spiritual fornications against purity of heart
- worldly attachment against longing for our heavenly homeland

All of these oppositions arise within us and wage their tumultuous wars upon the battlefields of our hearts. What is this, then, if not to suffer persecutions? For the one who wishes to live piously and devoutly finds himself persecuted by a multitude of vices, each seeking to overthrow the virtues and to lead the soul away from God.

O how hard and how bitter are the forces of pride, and all its malign companions and heinous henchmen! For these diabolic vices cast the very angels from the heavens and caused the first human beings to be expelled from the garden of paradise. This dark army of wickedness, whose commander is pride and whose soldiers are all the other vices, never ceases to persecute and pursue the soul which aspires to the kingdom of heaven. But in response, we may assemble our own army, composed of the virtues of Christ,

ready to enter into battle and to defend ourselves against every temptation and every attack of the foe.

In the dialogue which follows, the vices will each seek to deceive and corrupt the human soul. But the virtues, in turn, will respond, putting up powerful and effective defenses.

O Reader, let us venture forth and see how this conflict—this epic battle for mastery of the soul—will transpire.

PRIDE IS PUT TO FLIGHT BY HUMILITY



THE FIRST OF THE vices, Pride, arrives on the scene. He is clad in a brightly colored military uniform covered with golden medals and adorned with shiny epaulettes. A fiery gleam burns in his eyes, and an arrogant, disdainful smile (or rather, grimace) rests on his self-satisfied mouth. With a supercilious and haughty air, he says to the soul:

Listen to me, O Soul! Give heed to my words, for I will speak to you frankly.

You and I both know that you are undoubtedly better than almost everyone else, in respect to your words, your knowledge, your wealth, and your honors. In fact, you easily surpass most other people in virtually all talents and all gifts of the body, mind, and spirit! Why deny it? So you *should* look down on these others and honestly recognize yourself to be better since (if you look into your heart) you *know* that you actually are better than they!

Humility arrives in time to hear the speech of Pride. Humility wears a simple but clean and well-cut suit and carries himself with gentleness and quietness. Raising his wise and penetrating eyes with quiet and unostentatious authority, he responds thus:

O Soul, do not listen to the voice of Pride! For he seeks to deceive you—to puff you up only so that he may laugh when you fall down. He pretends to be your greatest supporter and most loyal advocate, but really he is the sworn enemy of your happiness and salvation.

Instead of hearing the voice of Pride, it behooves you to “remember that thou are but dust and ashes,”⁵ as Scripture puts it. And “you are fashioned by the earth, and no more than a worm.”⁶ Whatever you might be, however great you might be, ask yourself this question: “Am I greater than the one who was the most exalted of all the angels?” Indeed, was there anyone who was more splendid and magnificent than the angel known as Lucifer, the Prince of Light? But he, through his wicked pride, was cast down to the darkest depth of hell! Now will you, who are a mere mortal, dare to exalt yourself, just as he did? Do you wish to share his sin and so share his utterly wretched fate?

Remember that as long as you live this earthly life, your condition is one of extreme fragility and weakness. You

⁵ Genesis 3:19.

⁶ Job 25:6.

are burdened with more limitations than you know, as a wise man once wrote: “The mortal body weighs down the soul, and our earthly dwelling place constrains the spirit which aspires to many things.”⁷ How lethal and heavy is the darkness of pride! How easily can it drag down the soul of us human beings, who inhabit bodies fashioned from the earth! For it caused the fall even of that formerly radiant and mighty being, the angel once known as the “Morning Star” and the “Bearer of Light,” whom we still call “Lucifer.”⁸

Listen, therefore, to the words of the One who is Himself the immortal light and the source of all light, the One who is Truth itself. He tells us, “Whoever follows me shall not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”⁹ And on another occasion, He gave us this most prudent admonition: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.”¹⁰

Hear, O vain Pride, the voice of Christ, the Master of humility: “All who exalt themselves shall be humbled, but everyone who humbles themselves will be exalted.”¹¹

⁷ Wisdom 9:15.

⁸ *Lucifer* means “bearer of light” and was an appellation given to the morning star.

⁹ John 8:12.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:29.

¹¹ Luke 14:11.

And in the writings of the prophets, do we not read: “Upon whom will my Spirit rest, apart from the one who is humble and quiet, and who fears my words?”¹² Listen also to what the apostle Saint Paul said, speaking of Our Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Savior:

He was in the form of God,
Yet He did not cling to equality with God,
But emptied Himself, accepting the form of a
servant.
And having accepted our human condition,
He became humbler yet,
Even to accepting death, death on a cross.¹³

If the One who possessed all the fullness of Divine Majesty was prepared to humble Himself in this radical way, then surely it does not behoove us mere mortals, who are but weak and fragile creatures, to extoll ourselves with foolish pride! Take care, O Soul, and do not let this malicious fiend, Pride, who is the captain of all the vices, gain possession of you.

¹² Isaiah 66:2.

¹³ Philippians 2:6–11.