

HOLINESS OF LIFE

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By
Saint Bonaventure

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
I True Self-Knowledge	1
II True Humility	9
III Perfect Poverty	19
IV Silence	31
V The Practice of Prayer	39
VI The Remembrance of Christ's Passion	53
VII The Perfect Love of God	69
VIII Final Perseverance	75

PREFACE

“**B**lessed is the man whom Thou shalt instruct, O Lord, and shalt teach out of Thy Law” (Ps. xciii, 12.) I hold that only the man taught by the Holy Spirit and imbued with His blessed unction is to be considered wise. The Prophet David lays down the same principle; he alone is really happy and wise whose mind the Lord has made learned in the Law. “The Law of God,” David notes elsewhere (Ps. xviii, 8), is the only law “without fault” and irreproachable. It alone has the secret of “converting souls” to the way of salvation. To read the Law does not suffice. We only discover its wealth of meaning and reap the fruits of its profound learning through devout and affectionate meditation.

Conscientiously, “in Spirit and in truth” (1 Thess. i, 5.), are we to seek this meaning. We must beg the Holy Spirit, with ardent longing, to give us these fruits. The Holy Ghost alone knows how to bring to light the

sweetness hidden away under the rugged exterior of the words of the Law. We must go to the Holy Ghost for interior guidance.

The Law of the Lord teaches us the way to live, what is to be done, avoided, believed, prayed for, longed for and feared. It teaches how to live the blameless and spotless life, how to keep one's promises, and how to be sincerely contrite for one's failings. The Law of the Lord teaches contempt for earthly things and a loathing for all things of the flesh. Finally, it explains how with our whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind we are to be converted to Jesus Christ (Matt, xxii, 37.)

Compared with the doctrine of God's Law, worldly wisdom is vain and foolish. "As long as a man does not fear or love God, no matter how great his reputation for wisdom may be," says St. Bernard, "I shall never consider him wise" (S. Bern. Serm. 73 de Diversis.) I would remind you that many forget what they hear, but these are not numbered among the wise. The truly wise man acts, and does zealously what the Law prescribes. The doer is the wise and the happy man. "Blessed is the man whom Thou shalt instruct, O Lord, and shalt teach him out of Thy Law."

You asked me, Reverend Mother dear to me and devoted to God, to outline from the poor treasures

of my heart some little thing that for the time being would be a help to devotion and would bring some light to your soul. Really, it is I who need such help, particularly as my life is not a shining example to others. Inwardly, I am not burning with tender devotion. Further, I have scarcely the knowledge necessary to do what you ask. Nevertheless, out of regard for your repeatedly expressed wishes, and anxious to oblige you, I have done what you so earnestly prayed of me.

Let me, however, beg of Your Beatitude, dear most holy Mother, not to think so much of what I have written, as of my good and kind intentions. Please look for the truths of which I speak rather than for beauty of expression. Where I do not come up to your expectations, pardon me, and put my shortcomings down, please, to lack of time and stress of business.

CHAPTER I

TRUE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The spouse of Christ who longs to become perfect must begin with her own self. She must put aside and forget everything else, entering into the secrecy of her own heart. When she has done this, let her sift thoroughly all her weaknesses, habits, affections, actions and sins. She must weigh everything carefully, and make a complete examination of past and present. Should she discover even the least imperfection, let her weep in the bitterness of her heart.

Negligence, passion, and malice are the three root causes of sin (Cf. Bonaventure's *Threefold Way*.) When we realize, dear Mother, that our sins and imperfections originate from one or other of these three causes, we enter on the way to an exact understanding of ourselves; but unless in our recollection of past offences we

put our finger on the precise cause of each sin, we shall never reach the goal of perfect self-knowledge.

Perfect self-knowledge, I feel sure, is the object you propose to yourself. You wish, helped by such knowledge, to bewail your past transgressions. Since this is so you cannot do better than to proceed as follows.

First, discover by reflection whether you are occasionally or habitually negligent. Recollect whether the control of your heart is slipshod and haphazard. Are you careless in the use of your time? Is the intention you propose to your self habitually imperfect? Examine yourself diligently on these three points, because it is of the utmost importance that you govern your affections, that you spend your time profitably and that always and in every action you have a good and becoming object or end in view.

Recollect how negligent you have been in the discharge of your duties: prayer, reading, and the like. Remember that the performance of these tasks and the cultivation of these practices demand your best energies if you are to produce and bring forth worthy fruit in due season. (Cf. Ps. i, 3.) It is of little avail to excel in one practice if you fail in the others.

Go on with the examination, recalling to mind your neglect of penitential exercises, your negligent

attitude towards temptation and sin, as well as your general disregard for the means of perfection. To reach the Promised Land you must weep with grief at the thought of the sins you have committed. Further, you must resist temptations to evil, and you must “advance from virtue to virtue.” (Ps. lxxxiii, 8.) Take to heart these principles, and you will be able to form a true estimate of your negligence.

Should you wish to pursue the subject and know yourself still better, take another look at yourself and ask whether your interior promptings tend towards pleasure, curiosity or vanity.

There is an evident weakness for pleasures of sense when a religious looks eagerly for what is sweet, for instance, delicious dishes. A similar weakness prevails when she is anxious for what is soft and comforting: fine clothing, for example, or things gratifying to or soothing to the flesh, as, for example, luxuries. You may know for a certainty that the handmaid of the Lord is a victim of inquisitiveness when she longs to fathom secrets, to gaze on pleasurable and beautiful objects, and to possess unusual and precious things. To seek the esteem and the good opinion of others, to look for the praise of men and to be anxious for the honors in their gifts: the presence of any or all of these tendencies in

a spouse of Christ shows a vain mind. O handmaid of Christ, shun these proclivities as poison, for they are the springs or founts of evil!

You will complete the examination and understand yourself thoroughly if you discover whether you nourish or have nourished within your breast the malice of anger, envy, or sloth. Please pay attention to what I have to say.

Anger or irascibility is surely nourished in the heart when the thoughts, whisperings, spoken words, emotions, gestures or features of a religious are tinged with even the slightest coloring of animosity or indignation against another. Envy holds sway in a man when he feels joyful at another's misfortune or is sad when better things come his neighbor's way. The envious man rejoices at another's troubles and is cast down when all goes well with him. Sloth cannot be mistaken. It is sloth that inclines the religious to lukewarmness, drowsiness, unpunctuality, laziness, negligence, remissness, dissoluteness, lack of devotion, sadness, or weariness. The spouse of God must have a holy horror of these things and avoid them as deadly poison. In them lurks the ruin of both soul and body.

O handmaid, beloved of God, if perfect self-knowledge is your aim, reflect! "Enter into your heart

and learn to value yourself at your proper worth. Discuss with yourself what you are, what you were, what you ought to be, and what you can be. Note what you were originally, what you are now through your own fault, what on the contrary good efforts ought to have made you, and what you still may be by correspondence with grace.” (St. Bernard, *The Inter. Dwelling* xxxvi)

Listen, dear Mother, to the Prophet David proposing himself as an example to you. “I meditated in the night with my own heart and I was exercised and I swept my spirit” (Ps. lxxvi, 7.) He meditated with his heart; do the same yourself. He swept his spirit; sweep yours. Cultivate this field. Fix your eyes upon your own self.

Without doubt, if you keep up this exercise you will find the hidden treasure of priceless worth. (Cf. St. Matt, xiii, 44) A golden increase will come to you. More and more will your knowledge be widened and your wisdom strengthened. Be faithful to this exercise and the eye of your heart will be cleansed, the acumen of your mind developed, and your intelligence enlarged. If you do not know your own dignity and condition, you cannot value anything at its proper worth. One must first take thought upon one’s own soul if the angelic and divine natures are to be correctly estimated and esteemed. If you are not able to reflect upon

yourself, how will you be fitted to investigate the things above you? "If you are not yet worthy to enter the first tabernacle, how will you have the effrontery to enter the Holy of Holies?" (Richard of St. Victor)

If you wish to be lifted up to the second and third heavens (Cf. II Cor. xii, 2), you must pass through the first; that is, you must pass through your own heart. How this is possible, and how it ought to be done, I have already explained. In addition, here is a piece of excellent and illuminating advice from St. Bernard: "If you are earnestly desirous of uprightness and perfection, examine continually and think well on your way of living. Notice how much you advance in virtue and how much you fall away. Examine your conduct and the sentiments that inspire you. Look and see how like to God you are, and how unlike! How near to God, and alas, how far away from Him!" (S. Bernard, Meditations, Ch. v, 14)

Oh, how dangerous a thing it is for a religious to wish to know much and yet not to know himself! How near death and perdition is that religious who is keenly interested in getting to the bottom of things, or who as a spiritual guide lives to solve the doubts and perplexities of distressed souls, yet does not know himself nor

his own state! (Cf. S. Bonav, Soliloquium, i, 2.) O my God, whence comes such blindness in a religious?

I will tell you. I have the reason at my fingertips. A man whose mind is distraught in its anxieties for others has no memory for himself. His imagination is so clouded with pictures of other persons and things that he cannot form an idea of his own state. The allurements of unlawful passions so fascinate him that he never gets back to himself with a longing for interior sweetness and spiritual joy. Things of sense so possess his whole being that he can no longer enter into himself as the image of God. Thus entirely wretched, not knowing himself, he knows nothing (Cf. S. Aug., de Ordine I, 3.)

Put everything else aside and learn well and bear in mind what you are. For such self-knowledge St. Bernard prayed: "God, grant that I may know nothing if I do not know my own self." (S. Bernard, Serm. de Diversis, I)