

The  
Sinner's  
Guide



# The Sinner's Guide

Venerable Louis of Granada, O.P.

*Translated by*  
a Dominican Father

*“If you walk in my precepts, and keep my commandments, and do them, I will give you rain in due seasons. And the ground shall bring forth its increase, and the trees shall be filled with fruit: . . . And you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land without fear. I will give peace in your coasts: you shall sleep, and there shall be none to make you afraid. . . . I will set my tabernacle in the midst of you, and my soul shall not cast you off. I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”*

—Leviticus 26:3-6, 11-12

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*“Be assured, ye who seek that true peace promised to a future life, that you may here enjoy it by anticipation, if you will but love and keep the commandments of Him who promises this reward; for you will soon find by experience that the fruits of justice are sweeter than those of iniquity. You will learn that the joys of virtue, even in the midst of trials and misfortunes, far exceed all the delights of pleasure and prosperity accompanied by the remorse of a bad conscience.”*

—St. Augustine



*Louis  
de Granada*

Venerable Louis of Granada, O.P.

1504–1588

The Writer of the Spanish Empire

## BRIEF OF OUR HOLY FATHER GREGORY XIII

*To our well-beloved Son, Louis of Granada,  
of the Order of Friars Preachers*

GREGORY PP. XIII

Dearly Beloved Son, Health and Apostolic Benediction:

Your arduous and incessant labors, both for the conversion of sinners and for the guidance of souls to perfection, together with the valuable assistance you render those who are earnestly engaged in the work of the ministry, have always afforded us great consolation.

Your sermons and writings, filled with sublime doctrine and practical piety, are unceasingly drawing souls to God. This is particularly gratifying to us, for all who have profited by your teaching (and their number is very great) may be considered as so many souls gained to Christ. You have thus benefited your fellow creatures more than if you had given sight to the blind and raised the dead to life. For the knowledge of the Eternal Light and the enjoyment of the heavenly

life, according as they are given to man on earth to know and enjoy, are far above the knowledge and enjoyment of the transitory goods of this world.

The charity with which you have devoted yourself to your great and important labor has gained for you many crowns.

Continue, then, to devote all your energies to the prosecution of your undertakings. Finish what you have begun, for we understand that you have some works yet incomplete. Give them to the world for the health of the sick, for the strength of the weak, for the delight of God's servants, and for the glory of the Church both militant and triumphant.

Given at Rome the 21st of July, 1582,  
in the eleventh year of our pontificate.

ANT. BUCCIPALULE



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## VENERABLE LOUIS OF GRANADA HIS LIFE AND WORK

THE life of Venerable Louis of Granada (1504–1588) paralleled to a remarkable degree the greatest era of the Spanish Empire—that empire known as “the evangelizer of half the world, the hammer of heretics, and the light of the Council of Trent.” Louis himself is known as “the writer of the Spanish empire.” He was born only shortly after the famous year 1492, when Spain had, under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, defeated the Moors after eight centuries of Moorish occupation and oppression in Spain and financed Christopher Columbus’ momentous voyage to America. These were the times of Spain’s intense exploration and missionary activity in the New World, of the Council of Trent (1548-1563), and of the great Christian victory over the Turks at Lepanto (1571).

The end of this glorious era is marked by the great defeat in 1588 of the “invincible” Spanish Armada off the coast of England, an event which signalled the beginning of the end of Spain’s brief but glorious reign as a world power. This was also the very year of Louis’ death. But during the early and mid-16th century, Catholic Spain gave to the world

many priceless gifts; not least of these were the books of her renowned son, Ven. Louis of Granada.

In the aftermath of the surrender of the Moors in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella were faced with the task of making Granada a Spanish city once again. In order to hasten the influx of Spanish influence into the city and the blending of the Moorish and the Spanish people, Ferdinand and Isabella granted free entrance to the city of Granada to any Spaniard from the provinces who wished to settle there. One young couple who took advantage of this opportunity was Francis Sarriá and his wife (whose name has been lost to history), a couple who in 1504 became the parents of a son named Louis, later to become famous as "Louis of Granada." Unfortunately, Francis died in 1509, and Louis and his mother were reduced to poverty, being supported by alms from the Dominican Monastery.

After a few years of destitution, there occurred an event whereby Louis de Sarriá's fortunes changed suddenly and dramatically. While engaged in a street fight with a boy who had insulted his mother, Louis was discovered by the Count de Tendilla, Mayor of the Alhambra, who was impressed with his courage. The Count took Louis under his patronage. Thereafter Louis spent many hours on the balconies of the Alhambra; thus, in addition to his other education, his soul was fed by the magnificent beauty of the surrounding countryside, fueling that deep love for the beauty of nature which was to be a hallmark of his thought and writing for the rest of his life.

When Louis de Sarriá reached young manhood, he turned his path toward the religious life. At the same Dominican

Monastery where he had begged alms as an orphaned child, the Convent of the Holy Cross, he received the habit of a Friar Preacher on June 15, 1524, to the joyful tears of his beloved mother. A year later he made his religious profession.

At the Convent of the Holy Cross, Friar Louis, or *Fray* Louis, as he was called, undertook the rigorous Dominican *ratio studiorum*: a review of Latin and then three years of Philosophy and three years of Theology. The texts used were the grammar of Nebrija, the *Summae* of Peter the Spaniard, and the works of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Louis de Sarriá was brilliant in scholastic disputations; he had no equal in mental capacity, application to study, and exact observance of the monastic life.

After some time, he was awarded a scholarship to the celebrated College of St. Gregory in Valladolid. Arriving there in 1529, he spent the designated eight days in preparation for taking the oath to uphold the statutes of the College; thus Louis de Sarriá became formally invested in the College of St. Gregory, taking on both the honors and the obligations thereof. In the mind of the young friar, his first duty was worthily to represent Holy Cross Convent of Granada. Grateful for the confidence placed in him by his fellow religious of Holy Cross, he changed his name from Fray Louis de Sarriá to Fray Louis of Granada. With such great seriousness did the Spanish ecclesiastical student of the 16th century hold his exalted position as a knight of Thomistic truth.

The students of St. Gregory studied logic, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, theology, exegesis, and cases of conscience. Latin only was spoken, except on vacation days, when Spanish was allowed.

The first fruit of Louis' pen to appear in print was a book he did not himself write; rather, he edited one written by the Regent of Studies, Astudillo, though he himself wrote and added to the book two encomiums of Astudillo. These small works by Louis portray their author as a man enamored of philosophy, and as an authentic man of the Renaissance.

But there was more than learning in Louis' heart and soul. By prayer and penance, as well as study, he was preparing for a future apostolate of preaching.

In the year 1534, at the age of 30, because of his ardent longings for the apostolate, Louis stepped forward and generously offered himself as a missionary to Mexico. Although he had not yet completed his eight-year course of studies, he was willing to abandon the lecture halls. He was all prepared to leave for the Americas; but when his departure was imminent, Fray Louis' superior commanded him to cancel his trip and let another go in his place.

This was a tremendous disappointment for Fray Louis. In fact, although he obediently accepted the sacrifice, the longing for the mission field remained a thorn in his soul all his life. This event ushered in a deepening in the soul of Louis of Granada. More and more he realized that prayer, rather than study, is the way to true spiritual knowledge of Christ. He saw more clearly that his goal should be to live the life of Christ within his own soul, and then to preach Christ to others. He even began to have a distaste for study. In this regard, the writings of the famous Master John of Avila also had a great influence in the changing of Fray Louis' attitude. At this time there also awakened in him his vocation as a spiritual writer. He desired that the riches of the spiritual treasure should be

imparted to and shared by all, and the means by which he intended to diffuse them were preaching and writing.

In 1539, at the age of 35, he wrote a small tract on the method of prayer for a student at St. Gregory in Valladolid who had written to him for advice. The tone of this work is entirely different from the Renaissance humanist flavor of his prologue to the work of Astudillo; this little tract is spirituality pure and simple. It is the first lecture of Fray Louis from the chair of Spanish spirituality. This same tract was later to be transformed into a work that would make Fray Louis' name immortal: *The Book of Prayer and Meditation*.

In 1544 the Dominican Order gave Louis the title of Preacher General. In 1546, he was granted the privilege of going anywhere in Spain to preach, in the company of a companion of his choosing, and no superior could prevent his preaching. During this period, Fray Louis spent much of his time travelling and preaching. He was in demand everywhere as a preacher and spiritual director—even among the royalty. He became widely known as a holy friar, a preacher, and a man of great administrative ability.

About the year 1552, Queen Catherine of Portugal, the sister of Charles V, selected him as her confessor and advisor. Practically the rest of his life was spent in Portugal, with occasional visits to Spain. Because of his great knowledge and his practical talents, Fray Louis was frequently called upon to help settle problems arising among the royalty—important problems upon which might hang the welfare of entire nations. But all such dealings with worldly affairs were painful to him, and appear to have constituted the greatest cross of his later life.

In addition, in 1556 he was elected Provincial of the Dominican Province of Portugal. A year later he turned down Queen Catherine's offer of the archbishopric of Braga, which would have made him Primate of Portugal. In the midst of such preoccupations, Fray Louis never forgot his apostolate of spiritual writing.

In 1554 *The Book of Prayer and Meditation* was published. Its success was a complete surprise, especially to Fray Louis, but it confirmed him in his vocation of spiritual writer. From that time forward he dedicated himself with a divine impatience to writing on spiritual themes for all.

Louis himself, because of his ascetical practices and the constant work of the pen and pulpit, came to appear older than his years. His cell was poor and his possessions few: a wooden bed, a crude table, a few books, reams of colored paper (so that the eyes would not tire as he wrote), and a collection of various penitential instruments. Fray Louis could have lived in the palace, but since childhood he was espoused of poverty and he disdained the delights and comforts of the world. He received many alms and he earned much money from his books, but all went to the convent or to the poor. He dressed in such poverty that he wore the same hat for forty years and his black cappa was worn and patched with twelve years of use. Although he was a frequent visitor in the royal palace, he paid no attention to the courtly atmosphere; his spirit rose above all the things that fascinate the worldly ones: gold, coaches, love, silk, and power. To subdue the rebellious flesh, he wore a penitential belt. He excelled in meekness, native and acquired humility, an exquisite distinction in his bearing, and good counsel for all who needed it.

Such is Granada's moral portrait. The physical portrait is given to us by one of his oldest biographers: "He was of large and majestic stature, with a well-distributed weight. He had a face of angelic affability and his flesh was delicate and of good color. His eyes were happy but modest; his forehead, wide and serene; his teeth, white and in good order; his nose, stately and aquiline and somewhat large; his mouth, of good proportion; his head, large and somewhat bald. Most cordial in conversation, he was a friend to all, although no one became too friendly with him. He had an indescribable gravity in his appearance, as if he were always absorbed in spiritual contemplation."

This affable and simple religious, entirely given to the things of God, was very active and even dynamic. He rose at four in the morning and spent two hours in prayer. At six o'clock he celebrated Mass with remarkable solemnity and devotion. In those days priests were not accustomed to celebrate Mass every day, but Fray Louis never omitted it, and stated that the best preparation for the celebration of Mass was to celebrate daily. After Mass he devoted himself to a lengthy thanksgiving and then returned to his cell to begin the labors of the day.

The 16th century was a most turbulent time in the history of the Church, a time whose terrible legacy of heresy and apostasy is still with us today. (It was also a century of many, many great saints.) There was a crying need for true Catholic reform, but many heretics had arisen to feed the faithful with stones and scorpions instead of bread. An un-Christian humanism was spreading its contagion of rebellion against God; and in 1517, when Fray Louis was 12 years old, Martin

Luther took the step that was to launch the tragic heresy of external justification, a doctrine which smothered the true supernatural life of the soul and thus led to the most man-centered form of humanism. Another error which was spreading at the time was a false form of spirituality which claimed that religion should be something completely interior. A fourth error was Quietism, which discounted the effort required for the Christian soul to grow in grace and virtue. A goodly number of spiritual writers of the time fell into one or another of these traps.

Louis of Granada, on the other hand, was a voice of true orthodox Catholic reform. Although, in the confusion, he was for a time accused of heresy, this false charge was disposed of at Trent and Rome. Louis presented life in Christ as the life proper to all Christians, and he showed the essential role which the virtues play in the growth of this life. He showed how grace is essential to life in Christ, and how the Christian must receive the Sacraments and pray in order to obtain the necessary grace of God. Thus, by reading Fray Louis' true picture of the Christian life, the 16th-century Catholic—as well as the Catholic of today—is protected against many errors and given true and powerful spiritual food. His soul is protected against the error of man-centered humanism, against the error of external justification without an inner transformation into holiness in the soul, the error of religion as being something entirely interior and independent of laws and ceremonies, and the error that the Christian need not expend effort in order to live and grow in the life of grace. Fray Louis answers all these errors (which persist in one way or another yet today), even when he does not attack heresies as such;



he preaches the true Christian doctrine with such clarity and beauty that the soul is attracted and enlightened and moved to embrace it. His talents and vocation as a spiritual writer were a gift of Divine Providence to the 16th century; they are likewise providential for the Catholics of today. St. Teresa of Ávila, Louis' contemporary, called him "a man given to the world by God for the great and universal good of souls." St. Charles Borromeo, another contemporary, wrote: "Of all those who up to our time have written on spiritual matters . . . it can be stated that no one has written books either in greater number or of greater selection and profit than Fray Louis of Granada. . . . In fact I do not know if in matters of this type there is today a man more beneficial to the Church than he is."

The teaching in Fray Louis' books is firmly orthodox, completely Catholic. These works are based on the Scriptures, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and on the principles of St. Thomas Aquinas; they also include many elements from the best of classical literature. Nevertheless, Fray Louis' writings are neither dry nor difficult; they breathe fire and life, touching the heart of the reader and motivating him to seek God's will as the only source of true happiness. Fray Louis was an astute observer of human nature, and his books are as notable for their solid common sense as for their sterling orthodoxy.

Louis of Granada also overcame the tendencies to separate asceticism and mysticism, which were started in his day. Both aspects of the mystical life were evaluated by him and he coordinated them in such a way that both the ascetics and the mystics can look to him as a master. Undoubtedly, he gives

greater emphasis to ascetical matters, for the simple reason that he directs his words in a special way to the great number of simple faithful who need above all to become enamored of virtue and holiness of life so that they will eradicate evil inclinations and rise steadily to a higher life. Granada attempted to lead souls to the threshold of contemplation and the mystical life, and because he himself lived that life intensely, his soul frequently soared to the regions of intimate communion with God and at times seems to move entirely on the planes of the mystical life.

Yet Louis' writing on all subjects is so clear that he was accused of "writing for the wives of carpenters," and his zeal so apostolic that he was criticized for wanting "to make all Christians perfect." He quoted Scripture so often that he seems to have known it by heart. Louis of Granada is truly a "theologian of the people," who wrote for the simple and unlettered. Yet so sublime is his writing that he was read by princes and kings, saints and literary figures, pontiffs and ordinary laity, Protestants and pagans. No one knew as well as he did how to combine loftiness of doctrine with a clarity and transparency of style that is within the grasp of all.

In his 35 years of writing, Fray Louis produced 49 works. These can be classified into five categories: spiritual theology, apologetics, hagiography, sacred oratory, and translations. Four of his books are masterpieces of spiritual theology. These are *The Book of Prayer and Meditation*, a book that laments the miseries of life and manifests spiritual contempt for the world—this is the one of his books that Louis loved best, and one that has served as a manual of prayer for countless souls; *The Sinner's Guide* (first published in 1556), a masterwork of

Aristotelian symmetry and the most scholastic work of Fray Louis, a book which covers from myriad angles the virtues of the Christian life, proving that this life is the only way to true happiness (even on earth); *Memorial of the Christian Life*, a book of a Platonic flavor, which reminds the Christian of his obligations and embodies such exquisite doctrine on love that St. Francis de Sales remarks that it is all that could be said or that one could wish to say; and *Introduction to the Creed*, a gigantic work written in Louis' old age, but which breathes the spirit of youth. This work shows Louis' preoccupation with the conversion of the Jews and Muslims; he knew the Oriental mind very well, and in this book he shows, among many other things, that only the Christian religion can give God due worship. This is undoubtedly his most admirable book, and modern critics never cease to be amazed at the genius that produced it.

Louis' books have been translated into 25 different languages, including Syrian, Arabic, and Japanese, in addition to the European languages (which often saw hundreds of editions in a single language). There have been some 6 thousand editions of Fray Louis' works. In fact, it is known from tales brought back by missionaries that the Japanese version of *The Sinner's Guide* was one of the bullwarks that sustained the faith of the Japanese Catholics during two centuries of terrible persecution, when both in Europe and Japan, Japanese Christianity was believed dead. In 1865, when missionaries were again allowed into Japan, missionary Father Bernard Petitjean was astonished to find in the hills around Nagasaki thousands of Japanese Catholics who had kept the Faith, hidden but vital, without priests, for over 200 years! Immense was the joy of

these faithful ones at once again having a Catholic priest among them. *The Sinner's Guide* had played a providential role in sustaining the Faith in their souls during that trying time.

The works of Fray Louis were included in the precious cargo brought to the New World by the Spanish missionaries; these missionaries even translated some of Granada's works into the native Indian languages. St. Rose of Lima, too, loved the books of Fray Louis; she had them always at hand. Her favorite was *The Book of Prayer and Meditation*. In one of her struggles with the devil, she protected herself by reading this book; the devil became furious, snatched the book from her, and threw it onto a rubbish heap. Rose remained unmoved, certain that the Lord would return it to her—as indeed He did.

Other famous Catholics who have read and loved the works of Venerable Louis include St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, St. Francis de Sales, Cardinal Berulle and Bossuet (all French); St. Charles Borromeo (Italian), Louis of Leon (Spanish), and the Jesuit and Barnabite Orders. St. Teresa read Louis' books and commanded her nuns to do the same. She credited *The Sinner's Guide* with having converted over a million souls. In some religious rules and constitutions the works of Louis were mentioned as almost obligatory spiritual reading for the novices. There was no bishop in Spain in the 17th and 18th centuries who did not eulogize, recommend, and even grant indulgences for the reading of the works of Fray Louis. Regarding *The Book of Prayer and Meditation*, St. Peter of Alcántara wrote: "It is the best book that I have read in our language because it best expounds the practice and exercise of prayer. It contains good

meditations and helpful counsels for beginners, the advanced, and the perfect." This book is also renowned for its literary beauty, so that Azorin could say of it that "the Spanish language has never reached such fierceness or such angelic suavity" as it does in this work. And it must be added that Fray Louis' books were read in England, as literature, long before the works of Cervantes were discovered there.

St. Francis de Sales urged a Bishop-elect of his acquaintance to read the works of Louis of Granada, and to treat them as a second breviary. He advised this man to read them *slowly*, beginning with *The Sinner's Guide*, then continuing with the *Memorial of the Christian Life*, then on to all the rest.

Granada's vast classical and ecclesiastical culture, his absorbing spirit, and the perfection of his literary style place him among the creators of Christian Spanish humanism. With good reason has he merited the title of "the Spanish Cicero." And the Spanish biographer, Nicolás Antonio, gave to Fray Louis this well-earned tribute: "Our nation has never had a greater or more useful man, and perhaps it will never again have one to equal Louis of Granada."

Yes, in his native Spain Fray Louis' influence was immense. He ushered in the golden age of spiritual literature in Spain, an age which was to become most famous for the magnificent works of St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross. Fray Louis was in some ways the creator, and in every sense the exponent, of Spanish devotion and piety; his is an extraordinary instance of one man's influence, and he contributed immeasurably to the Christian and theological formation of the Spanish people.

Even heretics and atheists were readers and admirers of

Fray Louis. Most notable is the case of Marchena—an atheist, revolutionary, liberal, and the sworn enemy of all spiritual writings. This man carried *The Sinner's Guide* around with him for 20 years, and not a day passed but that he read part of it. To an amazed man who discovered him reading this book, tattered and worn in testimony of its constant use, Marchena exclaimed: "This book has a power over me that I cannot explain. I cannot read it nor can I stop reading it. I cannot read it because it convinces my understanding and moves my will in such a way that while I am reading it, I feel as much a Christian as you or any nun or as the missionaries who go to die for the Catholic faith in China or Japan. I cannot stop reading it because I know of no book more wonderful in our language."

Such is the power of Venerable Louis of Granada's writings. His books, filled with quotations from the Scriptures, and magnificently coordinated with Thomistic order, are yet written for all. Of their kind, nothing superior has been written since their author first gave them to the world four centuries ago. They speak to the heart, they convince, they persuade, they motivate. Anyone who becomes steeped in even one of Louis' masterpieces will thereby acquire a profound Catholic outlook on life and a powerful motivation to live that life. He will know clearly what he must do to gain eternity, the goal of every true Christian.

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In Advent of 1588, when he was nearly 84 years old, Louis' health was unusually poor. Nevertheless he prayed more, fasted more, and took his discipline. In December he

began to have attacks of nausea and vomiting which left him extremely weakened. By December 30 all hope for his recovery was abandoned. On December 31, 1588, in the bare and humble cell at Santo Domingo where monarchs of the world had visited him, it was obvious that Fray Louis' lamp of life was almost extinguished. With tears of joy he received the Last Sacraments. The novices knelt at the door to his cell for a last farewell. Fray Louis sensed the approach of death, and asked that they place him in his coffin. Then, at nine in the evening, he breathed his last and exchanged the counting of years for eternity.

His death was considered one of the greatest losses to Christianity. Lisbon became a city of mourning. Streams of people came to see him who in death seemed to be yet alive. It was only with difficulty that the funeral could be carried out, as people surged to the coffin to touch his clothing, to kiss his hands, and to touch his body with religious articles. As the body was carried out for burial, people tried to cut off pieces of his habit.

The General Chapter held in Rome in 1589 communicated to the entire Dominican Order the news of the death of Fray Louis of Granada, and the following terse comment serves well as his epitaph: *Vir doctrina et sanctitate insignis et in toto orbe celebris*—"A man signed with doctrine and sanctity, and celebrated throughout the entire world." Such was the earthly journey of Fray Louis of Granada, a journey filled with triumphs and crosses. He was truly, in the words of St. Teresa of Ávila, "a man given to the world by God for the great and universal good of souls."

*(This introduction to the life and work of Ven. Louis of Granada was taken largely from the work of Father Alvaro Huerga, O.P., Regent of Studies, Convent of the Holy Cross, Granada, Spain—with grateful acknowledgement.)*



## CHAPTER 1

*The First Motive which obliges us to practice  
Virtue and to serve God: His Being in itself,  
and the excellence of His Perfections*

TWO things, Christian reader, particularly excite the will of man to good. A principle of justice is one, the other the profit we may derive therefrom. All wise men, therefore, agree that justice and profit are the two most powerful inducements to move our wills to any undertaking. Now, though men seek profit more frequently than justice, yet justice is in itself more powerful; for, as Aristotle teaches, no wordly advantage can equal the excellence of virtue, nor is any loss so great that a wise man should not suffer it rather than yield to vice. The design of this book being to win men to virtue, we shall begin by showing our obligation to practice virtue because of the duty we owe to God. God being essentially goodness and beauty, there is nothing more pleasing to Him than virtue, nothing He more earnestly requires. Let us first seriously consider upon what grounds God demands this tribute from us.

But as these are innumerable, we shall only treat of the six principal motives which claim for God all that man is or all that man can do. The first, the greatest, and the most inexplicable is the very essence of God, embracing His infinite majesty, goodness, mercy, justice, wisdom, omnipotence, excellence, beauty, fidelity, immutability, sweetness, truth, beatitude, and all the inexhaustible riches and perfections which are contained in the Divine Being.

All these are so great that if the whole world, according to St. Augustine, were full of books, if the sea were turned to ink, and every creature employed in writing, the books would be filled, the sea would be drained, and the writers would be exhausted before any one of His perfections could be adequately expressed. The same Doctor adds, "Were any man created with a heart as large and capacious as the hearts of all men together, and if he were enabled by an extraordinary light to apprehend one of the divine attributes, his joy and delight would be such that, unless supported by special assistance from God, he could not endure them."

This, then, is the first and chief reason which obliges us to love and serve God. It is a truth so universally acknowledged that even the Epicureans, who endeavored to destroy all philosophy by denying a Divine Providence and the immortality of the soul, nevertheless maintained religion, or the worship due to God.

One of these philosophers (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*) proves the existence of God by strong and undeniable arguments. He proclaims the greatness and sovereignty of His admirable perfections, which oblige us to reverence and adore

Him, and shows that for this reason alone, independently of any other title, God has a right to our love and service.

If we treat a king, even out of his own dominion, with respect and honor purely because of the dignity of his person, though we owe him nothing, with how much more justice should we render honor and service to this King and Lord, who, as St. John tells us, bears written "on his garment, and on his thigh: King of kings and Lord of lords"! (*Apoc.* 19:16). This is He who hath "poised with three fingers the bulk of the earth." (*Is.* 40:12).

All beings are in His power; He disposes of them as He wills. It is He who propels the heavenly bodies, commands the winds, changes the seasons, guides the elements, distributes the waters, controls the stars, creates all things; it is He, in fine, who, as King and Lord of the universe, maintains and nourishes all creatures.

Nor is His kingdom acquired or inherited. By His very nature it is for Him an inherent right. Just as man is above the ant, for example, so is the Divine Substance in an eminent degree above all created things, and the whole universe is no more than one of these little insects compared to Him. If this truth were so manifest to the Epicureans, otherwise unworthy of the name of philosophers, how much clearer ought it not be to us, who have been illumined by the light of true Christian philosophy! For this latter teaches us, in fact, that among the innumerable reasons which oblige us to serve God, this is the greatest; and though men were endowed with a thousand hearts and a thousand bodies, this reason alone should be sufficient to cause them to devote them all to His love and service.

Though of all motives this is the most powerful, yet it has the least influence on the imperfect. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, they are more moved by self-interest, self-love having deep root in their hearts; and on the other, being still ignorant, and novices in the ways of God, they are unable to appreciate His grandeur and beauty. Had they a better knowledge of His perfections, His beauty would enrapture their souls and cause them to love Him above all things. Therefore we shall furnish some considerations from the mystical theology of St. Denis which will help them to apprehend the perfections of the Master they serve.

To lead us to a knowledge of God, St. Denis teaches us first to turn our eyes from the qualities or perfections of creatures, lest we be tempted to measure by them the perfections of the Creator. Then, turning from the things of earth, he raises our souls to the contemplation of a Being above all beings, a Substance above all substances, a Light above all lights—or rather a Light before which all light is darkness—a Beauty above all beauties and before which all other beauty is but deformity. This is what we are taught by the cloud into which Moses entered to converse with God, and which shut out from his senses all that was not God. (*Ex.* 24:16, 18). And the action of Elias, covering his face with his cloak when he saw the glory of God passing before him, is a lively expression of the same sentiment. (*3 Kg.* 19:13). Therefore, to contemplate the glory of God, man must close his eyes to earthly things, which bear no proportion to this supreme Being.

We shall better understand this truth if we consider with more attention the vast difference between this uncreated Being and all other beings, between the Creator

and His creatures. The latter without exception have had a beginning and may have an end, while this eternal Being is without beginning and without end. They all acknowledge a superior and depend upon another, while He has no superior and is the supreme Arbiter of all things. Creatures are composed of various substances, while He is a pure and simple Being; were He composed of diverse substances it would presuppose a being above and before Him to ordain the composition of these substances, which is altogether impossible. Creatures are subject to change; God is immutable. They all admit of greater perfection; they can increase in possessions, in knowledge. God cannot increase in perfection, containing within Himself all perfection; nor in possessions, for He is the source of all riches; nor in knowledge, for everything is present to His eternal omniscience. Therefore Aristotle calls Him a *pure act*—that is, Supreme Perfection, which admits of no increase. The needs of creatures subject them to movement and change; God, having no necessities, is fixed and immovable, and present in all places. We find in all creatures diversities which distinguish them one from another, but the purity of God's Essence admits of no distinction; so that His Being is His Essence, His Essence is His Power, His Power is His Will, His Will is His Understanding, His Understanding is His Being, His Being is His Wisdom, His Wisdom is His Justice, His Justice is His Mercy. And though the last two attributes are differently manifested, the duty of mercy being to pardon, that of justice to punish, yet they are one and the same power.

The Divine Being thus comprises in its unity apparently opposite qualities and perfections which we can

never sufficiently admire; for, as St. Augustine observes, "He is a profoundly hidden God, yet everywhere present; He is essentially strength and beauty; He is immutable and incomprehensible; He is beyond all space, yet fills all the universe; invisible, yet manifest to all creatures; producing all motion, yet is Himself immovable; always in action, yet ever at rest, He fills all things and is circumscribed by nothing; He provides for all things without the least solicitude; He is great without quantity, therefore He is immense; He is good without qualification, and therefore He is the Supreme Good." Nay, "One is good, God." (*Matt.* 19:17).

Finally, all created things having a limited being, their power is likewise limited; the works they accomplish, the space they fill, their very names, are no less limited. Human words can define them; they can be assigned a certain character and reduced to a certain species. But the Divine Substance cannot be defined nor comprehended under any species, nor can It be confined to any place, nor can any name express It. Though nameless, therefore, as St. Denis says, It yet has all possible names, since It possesses in Itself all the perfections expressed by these names.

As limited beings, therefore, creatures can be comprehended; but the Divine Essence, being infinite, is beyond the reach of any created understanding. For that which is limitless, says Aristotle, can only be grasped by an infinite understanding. As a man on the shore beholds the sea, yet cannot measure its depth or vastness, so the blessed spirits and all the elect contemplate God, yet cannot fathom the abyss of His greatness nor measure the duration of His eternity. For this reason also God is represented "seated upon the cherubim"

(*Dan.* 3:55 and *Ps.* 17:11), who, though filled with treasures of divine wisdom, continue beneath His majesty and power, which it is not given them to grasp or understand.

This is what David teaches when he tells us that God “made darkness His covert” (*Ps.* 17:12), or, as the Apostle more clearly expresses it, He “inhabiteth light inaccessible.” (*1 Tim.* 6:16). The prophet calls this light darkness because it dazzles and blinds our human vision. Nothing is more resplendent and more visible than the sun, as a philosopher admirably remarks, yet because of its very splendor and the weakness of our vision there is nothing upon which we can gaze less. So also there is no being more intelligible in itself than God, and yet none we understand less in this present life.

Know, therefore, you who aspire to a knowledge of God, that He is a Being superior to anything you can conceive. The more sensible you are of your inability to comprehend Him, the more you will have advanced in a knowledge of His Being. Thus St. Gregory, commenting on these words of Job: “Who doth great things and unsearchable, and wonderful things without number” (*Job* 5:9), says, “We never more eloquently praise the works of the Almighty than when our tongue is mute in rapt wonder; silence is the only adequate praise when words are powerless to express the perfections we would extol.”

St. Denis also tells us to honor with mute veneration, and a silence full of love and fear, the wonders and glory of God, before whom the most sublime intelligences are prostrate. The holy Doctor seems to allude here to the words of the prophet as translated by St. Jerome, “Praise is mute before

thee, God of Sion,” giving us to understand, doubtless, that the most adequate praise is a modest and respectful silence springing from the conviction of our inability to comprehend God. We thus confess the incomprehensible grandeur and sovereign majesty of Him whose being is above all being, whose power is above all power, whose glory is above all glory, whose substance is immeasurably raised above all other substances, visible or invisible. Upon this point St. Augustine has said with much beauty and force, “When I seek my God I seek not corporal grace, nor transient beauty, nor splendor, nor melodious sound, nor sweet fragrance of flowers, nor odorous essence, nor honeyed manna, nor grace of form, nor anything pleasing to the flesh. None of these things do I seek when I seek my God. But I seek a light exceeding all light, which the eyes cannot see; a voice sweeter than all sound, which the ear cannot hear; a sweetness above all sweetness, which the tongue cannot taste; a fragrance above all fragrance, which the senses cannot perceive; a mysterious and divine embrace, which the body cannot feel. For this light shines without radiance, this voice is heard without striking the air, this fragrance is perceived though the wind does not bear it, this taste inebriates with no palate to relish it, and this embrace is felt in the center of the soul.”

If you would have further proof of the infinite power and greatness of God, contemplate the order and beauty of the world. Let us first bear in mind, as St. Denis tells us, that effects are proportioned to their cause, and then consider the admirable order, marvelous beauty, and incomprehensible grandeur of the universe. There are stars in heaven several hundred times larger than the earth and sea together.



Consider also the infinite variety of creatures in all parts of the world, on the earth, in the air, and in the water, each with an organization so perfect that never has there been discovered in them anything superfluous or not suited to the end for which they are destined; and this truth is in no way weakened by the existence of monsters, which are but distortions of nature, due to the imperfection of created causes.

And this vast and majestic universe God created in a single instant, according to the opinion of St. Augustine and St. Clement of Alexandria; from nothing He drew being, without matter or element, instrument or model, unlimited by time or space. He created the whole world and all that is contained therein by a single act of His will. And He could as easily have created millions of worlds greater, more beautiful, and more populous than ours, and could as easily reduce them again to nothing.

Since, therefore, according to St. Denis, effects bear a proportion to their cause, what must be the power of a cause which has produced such effects? Yet all these great and perfect works are vastly inferior to their Divine Author. Who could not but be filled with admiration and astonishment in contemplating the greatness of such a Being? Though we cannot see it with our corporal eyes, yet the reflections we have just indicated must enable us in a measure to conceive the grandeur and incomprehensibility of His power.

St. Thomas, in his *Summa Theologica*, endeavors by the following argument to give us some idea of the immensity of God: We see, he tells us, that in material things that which excels in perfection also excels in quantity. Thus the water is greater than the earth, the air is greater than the water, and

fire is greater than the air. The first heaven is more extensive than the element of fire, the second heaven is more extensive than the first, the third likewise exceeds the second, and so of the others till we come to the tenth sphere, or the empyreal heaven, to the grandeur and beauty of which nothing in the universe can be compared. Consequently the empyreal heavens, the finest and noblest of all the bodies which compose the universe, being incomparably greater than all the rest, we may infer, adds the Angelic Doctor, how far God, the first, the greatest, the most perfect of all beings, spiritual or corporal, and the Creator of all, exceeds them, not in material quantity—for He is a pure spirit—but in every possible perfection.

Thus we begin to understand, in some manner, what are the perfections of God, since they cannot but be in proportion to His being. For, as we read in Ecclesiasticus, "According to His greatness, so also is His mercy with Him." (*Eccclus.* 2:23). Nor are any of His other attributes less. Hence He is infinitely wise, infinitely merciful, infinitely just, infinitely good, and, therefore, infinitely worthy to be obeyed, feared, and revered by all creatures. Were the human heart capable of infinite homage, infinite love, it should offer them to this supreme Master. For if reverence and homage must be proportioned to the greatness and dignity of him to whom they are offered, then the homage we offer God should, if we were capable of it, be infinite also.

How great, then, is our obligation to love God, had He no other title to our love and service! What can he love who does not love such Goodness? What can he fear who does not fear this infinite Majesty? Whom will he serve who refuses to

serve such a Master? And why was our will given to us, if not to embrace and love good? If, therefore, this great God be the Sovereign Good, why does not our will embrace it before all other goods? If it be a great evil not to love and reverence Him above all things, who can express the crime of those who love everything better than they love Him?

It is almost incredible that the malice and blindness of man can go so far; but yet, alas! How many there are who for a base pleasure, for an imaginary point of honor, for a vile and sordid interest, continually offend this Sovereign Goodness! There are others who go further and sin without any of these motives, through pure malice or habit. Oh! Incomprehensible blindness! Oh! More than brute stupidity! Oh! Rashness! Oh! Folly worthy of demons! What is the chastisement proportioned to the crime of those who thus despise their Maker? Surely none other than that which these senseless creatures will receive—the eternal fire of Hell.

Here, then, is the first motive which obliges us to love and serve God. This is an obligation so great that compared to it, all obligations to creatures, whatever their excellence or perfections, are only obligations in name. For as the perfections of creatures are mere imperfections compared with the perfections of God, so the obligations resulting therefrom cannot with justice be considered obligations when contrasted with those which we owe to God. Nor can our offences against the creature be regarded as offenses, except in name, when we remember the guilt we have incurred by our many sins against God.

For this reason David cried out, "Against thee only, O God, have I sinned" (*Ps.* 50:6), though he had sinned against

Urias, whom he murdered; against the wife of Urias, whom he dishonored; and against his subjects, whom he scandalized. The penitent king knew that his offences against creatures, notwithstanding their different degrees of deformity, could not equal the enormity of his revolt against God. For God being infinite, our obligations towards Him and our offences against Him are, in a measure, infinite.