

The SPIRITUAL COMBAT
and A TREATISE ON
PEACE OF SOUL

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The SPIRITUAL COMBAT
and A TREATISE ON
PEACE OF SOUL

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*“Labor as a good soldier of Christ Jesus . . .
For he also that striveth for the mastery,
is not crowned, except he strive lawfully.”*
—2 Timothy 2:3,5



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*“Therefore take unto you the armour of God,
that you may be able to resist in the evil day,
and to stand in all things perfect.
Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth,
and having on the breastplate of justice,
and your feet shod with the preparation
of the gospel of peace:
In all things taking the shield of faith,
wherewith you may be able to extinguish all
the fiery darts of the most wicked one.
And take unto you the helmet of salvation,
and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God).”*

—Ephesians 6:13-17

PREFACE

The *Spiritual Combat* is known as one of the greatest classics in ascetic theology. It has this in common with the *Following of Christ* that the identity of its author still lies in mystery.

Several seventeenth-century editions were published under the name of the Spanish Benedictine John of Castanzia. Some writers of the Society of Jesus have ascribed the book to the Jesuit Achilles Gagliardi. Most critics however consider the Italian Theatine Lawrence Scupoli as the author of this famous treatise. In his *Spiritualité Chrétienne*, Father P. Pourrat, S.S., ventures the opinion that the *Spiritual Combat* may well be the work of a religious order rather than that of an individual writer; for it was not originally composed such as we now have it. The first edition published in Venice in 1589 contained only twenty-four chapters; then, successive editions appeared with respectively thirty-three, thirty-seven, forty, and finally sixty-six chapters. It can also be said, in favor of this view, that there is an apparent lack of logical sequence between chapters in several parts of the work, and that the style of the latest edition differs considerably from that of the first.

Whatever may be the solution of this problem, doubt concerning the authorship of the *Spiritual Combat* can take nothing away from the value and utility of this “golden book,” as St. Francis de Sales called it. It was “the favourite, the dear book” of this great master of the spiritual life who, for eighteen years, carried in his pocket a copy which he had received from Father Scupoli in Padua. The Saint read some pages of it

every day, entrusted to its supernatural and human wisdom the guidance of his soul, and recommended it to all under his direction as being most attractive and most practical.

The purpose of the *Spiritual Combat* is clearly stated in the First Chapter; it is to lead the soul to the summit of spiritual perfection. What is meant by spiritual perfection? We are told that it does not consist in external works and practices, but is all interior; it means knowing and loving God, despising and mastering in us all our evil inclinations, that we may be able to submit and abandon ourselves entirely to God, out of love for Him.

Such is the goal at which we must aim. How can we reach it? By means of constant and courageous struggle against our evil nature, which tends to keep us away from that goal. This accounts for the title of the book, the *Spiritual Combat*, for it is truly “a course of spiritual strategy”* in which we learn how to conduct the fight against our evil tendencies, even the least of them, with the help of four essential weapons: 1) self-distrust; 2) confidence in God; 3) training in spiritual warfare through the proper use of our mental and physical powers; 4) prayer, both short or ejaculatory, and prolonged in the form of mental prayer. The detailed instructions given for a successful use of our faculties are especially characteristic of the *Spiritual Combat's* strategy.

The author's method is thorough, and, precisely because it goes deep into the roots of each subject, the reader would, at times, find it difficult to follow the trend of the thought, if the translation contained a certain number of involved sentences studded, here and there, with unfamiliar or abstract expressions.

The purpose of the present edition is to remove this difficulty. It is not a new translation from the Italian original; it is intended as a careful and thorough revision of the style and form of an already old English version. The revisers have broken up long paragraphs and sentences into shorter units, to relieve the attention of the reader. By sim-

* Pourrat. Vol. 3, p. 360.

plifying or modifying the grammatical structure, when it was thought advisable, by substituting clearer or more familiar terms for obscure or archaic words, they have efficiently contributed in making accessible to all the treasures of spiritual doctrine and of wise spiritual direction contained in this remarkable and unique book.

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THE SPIRITUAL COMBAT

*“For though we walk in the flesh,
we do not war according to the flesh.
For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal,
but mighty to God unto
the pulling down of fortifications,
destroying counsels, and every height
that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God,
and bringing into captivity
every understanding
unto the obedience of Christ.”
—2 Corinthians 10:3-5*



CHAPTER ONE

*Preliminary Words on Perfection.
In What Does Christian Perfection Consist?
We Must Fight in Order to Attain It.
The Four Things Necessary for This Combat.*

CHRISTIAN soul! If you seek to reach the loftiest peak of perfection, and to unite yourself so intimately with God that you become one in spirit with Him, you must first know the true nature and perfection of spirituality in order to succeed in the most sublime undertaking that can be expressed or imagined.

Some, who judge only by appearances, make it consist in penances, in hair shirts, austerities of the flesh, vigils, fasting, and similar bodily mortifications.

Others, particularly women, fancy themselves extremely virtuous when they indulge in long vocal prayers, hear several Masses, spend many hours in church, and frequently receive Communion.

Others, and this does not exclude some of the religious who have consecrated themselves to God, think that perfection consists in perfect attendance in choir, in observing silence and retirement, and in a strict observance of their rule.

Consequently, different people place perfection in different practices. It is certain that they all equally deceive themselves.

Since exterior works are nothing more than dispositions for achieving true piety, or the effects of real piety, it cannot be said that Christian perfection and true piety consist in them.

They are, without doubt, powerful means for becoming truly perfect and truly holy. When used with discretion they are of unique value in supporting our nature which is always indifferent to good and inclined to evil; in repelling the attacks and escaping the snares of our common enemy; in obtaining from the Father of Mercies those helps that are so necessary for the faithful, and especially for beginners.

They are, moreover, precious fruits of the consummate virtue achieved in truly holy persons. Such men chastise their bodies either in punishment for past offenses or for greater humiliation and subjection to their Creator. They seek solitude and observe silence that, withdrawn from the world, they may preserve themselves free from the least stain of sin, and speak only with Heaven and its angels. Their time is spent in works of piety and in the service of God. They pray and meditate on the life and Passion of our Redeemer, not through curiosity, nor for the sake of some sensible pleasure arising from this, but from a desire of knowing better, on one hand, the grandeur of the Divine Goodness, and on the other hand, the depth of their own ingratitude. They do this in order to increase their love of God and detestation of self, to follow their Lord in shouldering His Cross, and in renouncing their own will. They receive the sacraments for no other reason than the honor of God, a closer union with Him and greater security from the power of the devil.

The situation is much different with those who ignorantly place their devotion in external acts, which frequently are the cause of their own downfall, and are of far deeper consequence than open crime. In themselves they are not evil, but only when wrongly applied. They are so attached to these acts that they utterly neglect to watch the inner movements of their hearts; but giving them free rein, they leave them a prey to their own corruption and to the tricks of the devil. It is then that this destroyer, seeing them go astray, not only encourages them to go on their way, but fills their imagination with empty ideas, making them believe that they already taste the joys of Paradise, the delights of Angels, that they see God face to face! As decoys, he does not hesitate to suggest in their meditation sublime, surprising, and ravishing thoughts,

so that, forgetting the world and all earthly things, they are swept up to the third Heaven.

A very little reflection on their conduct discloses their error and the great distance between them and that perfection of which we are now in search.

In every circumstance they love to be shown preference over others. They know no guide but their own private judgment, no rule but their own will. They are blind in their own affairs, ferret-eyed in regard to those of their neighbors, always ready to find fault.

Touch the empty reputation they think they possess, and of which they are extremely jealous. Order them to stop some of the devotions to which they are accustomed. Their amazement and vexation can hardly be expressed.

If God Himself, in order to open their eyes and to show them the true path of perfection, should send them crosses, sickness, or severe persecutions, the surest trials of His servant's fidelity, which never happen unless by His plan and permission, then the degenerate condition of their hearts is laid bare through their own extravagant pride. In all the events of this life, whether happy or not, they know nothing of a proper conformity to the will of God. They do not know how to yield to His almighty power, to submit to His judgments which are as just as they are secret and impenetrable. They do not know how to imitate Christ Crucified, as He humbled Himself before all men; nor do they know how to love their enemies as the instruments used by God's goodness to train them to self-denial and to help not only in their future salvation, but in a greater sanctification of their daily life.

This is the very reason why they are in imminent danger of being lost. With eyes blinded by self-love, they examine themselves and their actions which are not otherwise blameworthy, and they are inflated with vanity. They conclude that they are far advanced towards God and they readily look down on their neighbor: in fact, their pride often will so increase their blindness, that their conversion cannot be effected without a miracle of grace.

Experience proves that acknowledged sinners are reformed with less difficulty than those who willfully hide themselves under the cloak of a false virtue.

From this you can easily understand that the spiritual life does not consist in the practices enumerated above, if they are considered only in their outward appearance.

It actually consists in knowing the infinite greatness and goodness of God, together with a true sense of our own weakness and tendency to evil, in loving God and hating ourselves, in humbling ourselves not only before Him, but, for His sake, before all men, in renouncing entirely our own will in order to follow His. It consists, finally, in doing all of this solely for the glory of His holy name, for only one purpose—to please Him, for only one motive—that He should be loved and served by all His creatures.

These are the dictates of that law of love which the Holy Ghost has written on the hearts of the faithful. This is the way we must practice that self-denial so earnestly recommended by our Saviour in the Gospel. This it is that renders His yoke so sweet, His burden so light. In short, the perfect obedience that our divine Master has enjoined by word and example consists in this.

Since, therefore, you seek the highest degree of perfection, you must wage continual warfare against yourself and employ your entire strength in demolishing each vicious inclination, however trivial. Consequently, in preparing for the combat you must summon up all your resolution and courage. No one shall be rewarded with a crown who has not fought courageously.

But remember that as no war can be carried on with greater fierceness, the forces, no other than ourselves, being equal on both sides, so the victory when gained is most pleasing to God and most glorious to the conqueror.

For whoever has the courage to conquer his passions, to subdue his appetites, and repulse even the least motions of his own will, performs an action more meritorious in the sight of God than if, without this,

he should tear his flesh with the sharpest disciplines, fast with greater austerity than the ancient Fathers of the Desert, or convert multitudes of sinners.

It is true, considering things in themselves, that the conversion of a soul is, without doubt, infinitely more acceptable to the divine Majesty than the mortification of a disorderly affection. Yet every person, in his own particular sphere, should begin with what is immediately required of him.

Now what God expects of us, above all else, is a serious application to conquering our passions; and this is more properly the accomplishment of our duty than if, with uncontrolled appetite, we should do Him a greater service.

Now that you know what Christian perfection is and that, in order to attain it, you must resolve on a perpetual war with yourself, begin by providing yourself with four weapons without which it is impossible to gain the victory in this spiritual combat. These four things are: distrust of one's self, confidence in God, proper use of the faculties of body and mind, and the duty of prayer.

With the help of God's grace, these will be treated clearly and concisely in the following chapters.