

# Spiritual Theology

By

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.

## Preface

The present volume was written in response to numerous requests for a complete and definitive work on Christian spirituality. It is not an entirely new work, however, for some sections are taken substantially from *The Theology of Christian Perfection* by Antonio Royo and Jordan Aumann, published in 1962 by Priory Press.

Spiritual theology is both speculative and practical, but it is eminently practical because it deals with Christian life in relation to the perfection of charity. Consequently, the study of the theology of Christian perfection should proceed scientifically and systematically, although its aim is not to produce scholars but to form holy Christians. Therefore the first part of this volume investigates the theological principles of Christian holiness; the second part deduces from those principles the general directives by which souls can be guided in their journey to the goal of the Christian life.

The theology contained in this volume is based on the spiritual doctrine of three Doctors of the Church: St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. Moreover, it is fully in accord with the teaching of John G. Arinterro and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

A final word of thanks is due to Laura Gillet, John Osman, Michael Balaria, and Sister Veronica Marie. They were most generous in contributing their time and labor in the typing of the manuscript.

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.

In **Spiritual Theology** Father Jordan Aumann dispels the common misconception that ascetical and mystical theology is for the select few. He reminds us that "the real purpose of the study of the spiritual life is not to produce scholars but to form holy Christians."

Basing much of his work on St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa, Father Aumann proves that Christian perfection consists especially in charity, a charity richly rewarded in spiritual graces.

He presents the most complete and systematic treatment of spiritual theology since Vatican II. Comprehensive in scope, it meets the needs of seminarians, professors of spiritual theology, spiritual directors, and retreat masters. This classic will also appeal to the educated reader seeking a richer and fuller spiritual life.

JORDAN AUMANN, O.P. is a native of the United States and Director of the Institute of Spirituality at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome. He is also a Consultor for the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy and Catechetics and likewise a Consultor for the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization. Since 1977 he has been giving special courses in spirituality at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, where he is an

honorary professor. He has likewise travelled extensively throughout the Philippines to give retreats to the clergy, and retreats and special series of lectures to religious and seminarians. Father Aumann has also written the book History of Spirituality published in the Philippines by St. Paul Publications.

## **CONTENTS**

### **PART ONE: DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS**

#### **Preface**

#### **1. Nature and Scope of Spiritual Theology**

Terminology

Spirituality and Theology

Definition of Spiritual Theology

Theological Method

Sources of Spiritual Theology

Schools of Spirituality

#### **2. The Goal of Our Striving**

The Glory of God

Salvation - The Life of Glory

Sanctification

#### **3. Our Life in Christ and Mary**

Scriptural Testimony

Christ the Way

Christ the Truth

Christ the Life

Through Him, With Him, In Him

Mary - Mother and Mediatrix

#### **4. The Supernatural Organism**

Sanctifying Grace

Effects of Grace

[Indwelling of the Trinity](#)

[Actual Grace](#)

[The Infused Virtues](#)

[The Gifts of the Holy Spirit](#)

[Fruits of the Spirit and Beatitudes](#)

## **5. Perfection of the Christian Life**

[The Nature of Christian Perfection](#)

[Special Questions](#)

## **6. Christian Perfection and Mystical Experience**

[Mystical Experience](#)

[The Mystical State and Christian Perfection](#)

## **PART TWO: GROWTH IN HOLINESS**

### **7. Conversion From Sin**

[The Psychosomatic Structure](#)

[The Struggle Against Sin](#)

[Temptations](#)

### **8. Progressive Purgation**

[Purification of the External Senses](#)

[Purification of the Internal Senses](#)

[Purification of the Passions](#)

[Purification of the Intellect](#)

[Purification of the Will](#)

[Passive Purgations](#)

### **9. Means of Spiritual Growth**

[The Sacraments](#)

[Meritorious Good Works](#)

[Prayer of Petition](#)

## **10. The Theological Virtues**

Faith

The Gift of Understanding

The Gift of Knowledge

Hope

The Gift of Fear

Charity

The Gift of Wisdom

## **11. The Moral Virtues**

Prudence

The Gift of Counsel

Justice

The Gift of Piety

Temperance

The Gift of Fear

Fortitude

The Gift of Fortitude

## **12. Grades of Prayer**

Vocal Prayer

Meditation

Affective Prayer

Prayer of Simplicity

Contemplative Prayer

Prayer of Quiet

Prayer of Union

Prayer of Conforming Union

Prayer of Transforming Union

### **13. Aids to Spiritual Growth**

[The Presence of God](#)

[Examination of Conscience](#)

[The Desire for Perfection](#)

[Conformity to God's Will](#)

[Fidelity to Grace](#)

[Plan of Life](#)

[Spiritual Reading](#)

[Holy Friendships](#)

[Spiritual Direction](#)

### **14. Discernment of Spirits**

[Types of Spirits](#)

[Psychosomatic Phenomena](#)

[Extraordinary Mystical Phenomena](#)

## **Doctrinal Foundations**

### **1**

#### **Nature and Scope of Spiritual Theology**

Although treatises on the spiritual life can be found in the writings of the earliest theologians and Fathers of the Church, spiritual theology did not emerge as a distinct and well-defined branch of sacred doctrine until the eighteenth century. Traditionally, sacred doctrine possessed a remarkable unity that was at once the test of doctrinal orthodoxy and a sign of authentic theology -- the science that studies God and all things in relation to God.

However, by the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the attacks of heresy and the changing political, cultural, and religious conditions made it necessary for theologians to investigate the truths of faith more deeply. The result was that sacred doctrine gradually became more diversified, and was ultimately divided into areas of specialization or distinct branches of the one theology.

#### **Terminology**

What is now called spiritual theology has been designated by various names throughout the history of theology. Some have called it simply spirituality; others have named it spiritual life;

devout life; supernatural life; interior life; mystical evolution; and theology of Christian perfection. The terms first used and still commonly used to designate the systematic theology of the spiritual life are *ascetical theology* and *mystical theology*, although these words do not have the same meaning for all theologians.

The word *ascetical* comes from the Greek *askeein*, meaning to practice or exercise in order to acquire a skill, especially an athletic skill. Later the word came to mean the study of philosophy or the practice of virtue, and it was used in this sense by Greek philosophers. St. Paul uses the word only once, in Acts 24:16, but he frequently draws the comparison between the practices of the Christian life and athletic exercises (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:28; *gymnazein* in 1 Tim. 4:7-8, Heb. 5:14, and 12:11 designates spiritual striving). Among the early Christians the name *ascetics* was given to those who observed continence under the vow of chastity, from which it was ultimately applied to the practices of the monastic life. It seems that a Polish Franciscan named Dobrosielski introduced the word *ascetical* into the Latin usage of western theology in 1655, and between 1752 and 1754 the Italian Jesuit Scaramelli used the term in contradistinction to the older word *mystical*.

The term *mystical*, also from the Greek (*mystikos*), originally referred to secret or hidden rites known only to the initiated. The noun *mysterion* is used in the Book of Daniel and also in the Deuterocanonical books; in the New Testament it is used by St. Paul to signify a secret of God pertaining to man's salvation, the hidden or symbolic sense of a narration, or anything whose activity or power is hidden. The adjective *mystical* is not found in the New Testament or in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers; it was introduced only in the third century, and with the passage of time it assumed three meanings: *liturgically*, it referred to religious cult; *exegetically*, it signified an allegorical or a typical interpretation of Scripture as distinct from the literal sense; *theologically*, it meant a more profound knowledge of the truths of faith -- knowledge not shared by all.

In the fourth century the expression *mystical theology* is found in the writings of Marcellus Ancyranus; in the fifth century, in the writings of Marcus Eremita; and the expression was introduced into western theology at the beginning of the sixth century by the PseudoDionysius, author of *De mystica theologia*. By this time the word *mystical* designated not only the superior and deeper knowledge formerly known as *gnosis* but also an experiential, intuitive knowledge of the divine. Gradually the word was identified with contemplation, and treatises on the subject tended to become more abstract and scientific.

John Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, made a further distinction in his treatise, *On Mystical Theology, Speculative and Practical*, and speculative mystical theology was extended to include the whole theology of the spiritual life, from first conversion to the full experience of the mystical life. Early in the 1750s Scaramelli introduced the distinction between ascetical and mystical theology, and the latter was again restricted to the study of contemplation and the extraordinary mystical graces. In modern times two Dominicans, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and John Arinterro, defended and restored the traditional teaching: there is but one path to Christian perfection, though it admits of ascetical and mystical stages, and the mystical life is not the result of extraordinary graces but the normal development and perfection of the grace received by every Christian at baptism. Vatican Council II made this same doctrine its own when it stated:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: "In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mark 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. John 13:34; 15:12) .... It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love .... The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one -- that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory.<sup>(1)</sup>

In view of the historical development of the terminology, it is not surprising that modern theologians do not agree on the meaning of the words *ascetical* and *mystical*. All the more reason, then, for students of ascetico-mystical theology to familiarize themselves with the variations in vocabulary before attempting to evaluate an author's teaching.

Modern authors will usually fall into one of the following categories in their use of the words *ascetical* and *mystical*:

1. The terms are convertible, and either one can be used to designate the entire field of spiritual theology.
2. Ascetical theology studies the spiritual life from its beginning to the threshold of infused contemplation; mystical theology treats the stages of infused contemplation, passive purgation, and the transforming union.
3. Ascetical theology investigates the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways so far as ordinary grace is the operative principle in each; mystical theology is restricted to infused contemplation as an effect of extraordinary grace and to the epiphenomena that sometimes accompany infused contemplation.
4. Ascetical theology treats of the purgative and illuminative ways; mystical theology studies the unitive way.
5. The distinction between the ascetical and the mystical aspects of the spiritual life is determined by the predominance of the acquired and infused virtues (ascetical theology) or the predominance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (mystical theology).

Other theologians, fundamentally in agreement with this teaching, distinguish between the activity and passivity of the soul so far as it operates under grace and the virtues (ascetical) or under the movement of the Holy Spirit through his gifts (mystical).

6. In Protestant theology the word *asceticism* usually refers to the practices of mortification and self-denial; *mysticism* signifies any experiential knowledge of suprasensible things, including occultism, spiritualism, religious ecstasy, and extraordinary psychic phenomena. Many contemporary Protestant theologians reject the terms *ascetical* and *mystical* and prefer to speak of *piety*, *pietism*, or *Christian lifestyle*.

Because of the discrepancies in the use of the terms *ascetical* and *mystical*, there is no universally accepted name for the theology of Christian perfection. We prefer the succinct title, *spiritual theology*. It has the advantage of including both the ascetical and the mystical elements of the Christian life without implying an exaggerated dichotomy between the two. Moreover, it emphasizes the fundamental unity of the spiritual life, which culminates in the same perfection for all; it signifies that this perfection is a spiritual or supernatural perfection; and it classifies the theology of Christian holiness as a branch or specialization of theology.

The distinction between the ascetical and the mystical is not without foundation on the existential level, for at any given moment in the spiritual life the ascetical or the mystical aspect will predominate, and therefore it is perfectly legitimate to isolate one from the other for the purposes of investigation. However, the total view, of the spiritual life should always embrace both aspects, since mysticism cannot be understood -- much less experienced -- without a concomitant asceticism, and any authentic Christian asceticism contains within itself the seed of the mystical experience.

### **Spirituality and Theology**

To formulate a definition of spiritual theology it is first necessary to make some precisions concerning the concepts *spirituality* and *theology* as they apply to the study of Christian perfection. In its widest sense, spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one's actions flow. This concept of spirituality is not restricted to any particular religion; it applies to any person who has a belief in the divine or transcendent, and fashions a lifestyle according to one's religious convictions. In this context one can speak of Zen, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim spirituality as well as Christian spirituality.

However, the comparative study of Christian and non-Christian spiritualities belongs to the field of religious psychology rather than theology. Spirituality does not become an area of theological study and investigation until it fits the description given by Paul Evdokimov: "the life of man facing his God, participating in the life of God; the spirit of man listening for the Spirit of God."<sup>(2)</sup> The spiritual life in this more restricted sense is a supernatural life, and this seems to be in accord with biblical usage, where the word *spiritus* or *pneuma* refers to a divine power and therefore to the supernatural.

In the strict sense of the word, the only authentic spirituality is a spirituality centered in Jesus Christ and through him to the Trinity. This is true not only because created grace, the vital principle of the spiritual life, comes to us only through the mediation of Jesus Christ, but also because those who cultivate the spiritual life must consciously or unconsciously follow the teachings of Christ, regardless of their religious affiliation. Vatican Council II has promulgated this doctrine in the declaration on non-Christian religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Con 5:18-19), men find the fullness of the religious life.<sup>(3)</sup>



Again, speaking of the Church in the modern world, the Council affirms that there is only one spirituality for all, and it consists in a participation in the mystery of Christ:

In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear .... Christ the Lord ... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling .... The Christian is certainly bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as one who has been made a part in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ, he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection. All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>(4)</sup>

Christian spirituality is therefore a participation in the mystery of Christ through the interior life of grace, actuated by faith, charity, and the other Christian virtues. The life that the individual receives through participation in Christ is the same life that animated the God-man, the life that the Incarnate Word shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit; it is, therefore, the life of God in the august mystery of the Trinity. Through Christ, the spiritual life of the Christian is eminently Trinitarian.

The difficulty in constructing a theology of the spiritual life consists in the fact that the spiritual life is at once a *mystery* and a *problem*. It is a mystery precisely because it is life, indeed divine life, a sharing in the Christ-life. Thus, St. John says: "Whatever came to be in him, found life, life for the light of men. The light shines on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). St. Paul writes: "Your life is hidden now with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Although one may experience this life in the depths of his being as a life of union with God, it is nevertheless ineffable because the supernatural and the divine transcend human comprehension. For this reason the mystics made use of such expressions as "ray of darkness," "negative theology," and "cloud of unknowing."

Spirituality becomes a "problem" when it is made the object of study and investigation, and this involves a transition from life to doctrine, from the intuitive knowledge of experience to the scientific knowledge of systematic theology. Accordingly, the field of spiritual literature can be divided into three types of writing: (1) that which exhorts the reader to greater perfection and provides instruction for that purpose; (2) that which records and describes the religious experience of holy Christians and mystics; and (3) that which makes a scientific study of the nature of Christian perfection and the means to attain it.

The first type of writing is exemplified by *The Imitation of Christ*, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and the works of Louis of Granada. The second type comprises autobiographical accounts composed by mystics themselves or special studies by experts in the field of religious experience. The third type includes systematic studies of spirituality, and this is spiritual theology in the strict sense, as evidenced in the works of John Arinterro, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Auguste Poulain, and Adolphe Tanqueray. Sometimes, however, a work may be a combination of several types of writing. Thus, the writings of St. Teresa of Avila are both instructive and autobiographical (the first and second types), whereas the treatises of St. John of the Cross are a combination of all three types, but predominantly instructive and

scientific.

The present volume treats of spirituality in a scientific manner, and since its object of investigation is the spiritual life, which is of the supernatural order, the only way to study it scientifically is by the way of theology. Therefore, the method of investigation must be one that is proper to theology. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the study must be general enough to serve as norms or directives of the spiritual life, since we are dealing with an applied and a practical science. Unless these requisites are met, there can be no possibility of a spiritual theology.

Without going into the history of the origin and uses of the word *theology*, it should be noted that the nature and methods of theology have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny by numerous modern theologians. The traditional concept of theology was that of a science that studies God as revealed to mankind in the mysteries of his intimate life and all things else as related to God. For St. Thomas Aquinas, an outstanding exponent of the traditional concept, sacred doctrine is principally a speculative science because it seeks knowledge through causes and deduces conclusions from principles according to the rules of logic.

The primary function of the theologian is to investigate the truths of divine revelation, arrange them according to a logical subordination, and arrive at conclusions that are substantiated by the certitude of faith and the rational process of demonstration. Etienne Gilson applied this traditional concept of theology to the theology of the spiritual life in the following way:

Since this life is ultimately nothing other than a communication of divine life to the soul, everything that one says of it enters directly into our science of God, which is theology .... Since it is the question of a science, this teaching will treat of the nature of the divine life and the general laws according to which it is communicated to the human soul; since it is the question of a science that is principally speculative, this teaching will be concerned primarily with the theoretical knowledge of this nature and of these laws; and since, finally, it is the question of a sacred science, and very particularly of a part of theology, this teaching will have no other method than that of theology itself: it will proceed dogmatically, starting from the word of God, of which the Church is the custodian and interpreter .... Based as it is on the authority of the word of God, the theology of the spiritual life itself proceeds by the way of authority .... It states dogmatically the laws which every authentic spiritual life ought to obey, because these laws are deduced from its origin and its end.<sup>(5)</sup>

However, in spite of the clarity and certitude that proceed from the logical demonstration used in Scholastic theology, some modern authors have raised objections to the Scholastic method and have argued that spiritual theology should be described as theology in a wider and more flexible context. First, they maintain that this is the only way to avoid an *a priori* definition of spiritual theology. Second, the Scholastic emphasis on the unity of theology seems to obliterate the distinction between spiritual theology and the other branches of theology. Third, and most important, the spiritual life is a dynamic and interior mystery that accommodates itself to the personality and existential situation of the individual Christian; therefore the theology of the spiritual life ought to treat of individual cases, particular charisms, and extraordinary phenomena, which do not pertain to theology as a science.

We are thus confronted with the perennial problems of the knowledge of particulars within the scope of a given science and the application of general laws to individual cases. Some modern theologians are seeking what Yves Congar described as a reflective type of theology that "philosophizes on the whole Christian reality, illuminated, if you will, by the existential experience of man."<sup>(6)</sup> To justify their claim, they will point to the different approach and method in the works of St. John of the Cross as compared with the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The basic issue is the distinction between systematic moral theology and the practical, specialized theology of the spiritual life. Some years ago the question was disputed at length by renowned theologians such as Santiago Ramirez, Jacques Maritain, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, but rather than repeat all the arguments, it will suffice to quote the conclusions of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange:

Theology is the science of God. We distinguish between natural theology or theodicy, which knows God by the sole light of reason, and supernatural theology, which proceeds from divine revelation, examines its contents, and deduces the consequences of the truths of faith.

Supernatural theology is usually divided into two parts, dogmatic and moral. Dogmatic theology has to do with revealed mysteries, principally the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments, and the future life. Moral theology treats of human acts, of revealed precepts and counsels, of grace, of the Christian virtues, both theological and moral, and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are principles of action ordained to the supernatural end made known by revelation  
....

Moral theology thus understood evidently contains the principles necessary for leading souls to the highest sanctity. Ascetical and mystical theology is nothing but the application of this broad moral theology to the direction of souls toward ever closer union with God. It presupposes what sacred doctrine teaches about the nature and properties of the Christian virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it studies the laws and conditions of their progress from the point of view of perfection.

To teach the practice of the highest virtues and perfect docility to the Holy Spirit and to lead to the life of union with God, ascetical and mystical theology assembles all the lights of dogmatic and moral theology, of which it is the most elevated application and the crown.<sup>(7)</sup>

The foregoing statement demonstrates clearly that the study of the spiritual life is truly a branch of theology, but a question remains: how can spiritual theology as a science treat of the spiritual life as lived on the existential level of the individual person? It would seem that personal experience lies outside the domain of spiritual theology as a science; it belongs to the area of prudence and is therefore the concern of spiritual directors rather than theologians. However, the answer to the question depends on the place we give to subjective experience in spiritual theology, and since experience pertains to the psychological order, it is ultimately a question of the role of psychological data in ascetical and mystical theology.

It is true that there can be no science of singulars, and therefore subjective experience does not fall under the scope of theology as a science. Nevertheless, the psychological data of the spiritual life do have a scientific value if they manifest a certain universality in the spiritual life and if this is demonstrable by means of a methodical process of induction. Then, when these psychological data are synthesized with theological principles, the experience as thus interpreted has theological value. For example, St. John of the Cross relates the psychological effects of the dark nights to the movement of the Holy Spirit, who more and more directs the soul but does not impede psychological reactions. Thus, spiritual theology deals directly with the psychological data of the spiritual life, and in so doing it adds to the principles of moral theology the experiential or existential element that constitutes spiritual theology as a combination of speculative and practical theology. To summarize, spiritual theology comprises three elements: (1) the psychological data of spiritual experience; (2) the application of theological principles; and (3) practical directives concerning progress in the spiritual life with a view to Christian perfection.

### **Definition of Spiritual Theology**

In view of the foregoing distinctions, spiritual theology can be described in general terms as the application of moral theology to the spiritual lives of individual Christians with a view to leading them to the-perfection of the Christian life. More precisely, *spiritual theology is that part of theology that, proceeding from the truths of divine revelation and the religious experience of individual persons, defines the nature of the supernatural life, formulates directives for its growth and development, and explains the process by which souls advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its full perfection.* A brief comment on each phrase of the definition will suffice to explain the subject matter and purpose of this branch of theology and to show its relationship to other parts of theology.

In saying that spiritual theology is a part of theology, we admit some degree of distinction between spiritual theology and the other branches of sacred doctrine, not as a specifically distinct science, but as a field of specialization. Theology itself is one because it has a unique object, namely, the revealed mystery of God as known by human reason through the divine revelation accepted in faith. But theology is also sacred wisdom and in that respect it comprises a complexity of elements that allow for a plurality of disciplines within the one sacred science, subordinating them to the purpose of the one theology and at the same time respecting their autonomy. Thus, as a part of the one theology, spiritual theology has its own identity as a specialty both by reason of its method (practical or applied theology as distinct from purely speculative theology) and by reason of its subject matter -- Christian perfection and the means to attain it. In like manner we admit the emergence of other areas of specialization in dogmatic theology and moral theology; for example, Christology, Mariology, sacramental theology, pastoral theology, and Christian anthropology, to name a few.

To say, secondly, that spiritual theology proceeds from the principles of divine revelation is to say that it is a science of the truths of faith, an unfolding of the faith. If this were not so, it would not be theology at all. Unlike natural theology, which provides a knowledge of God through the study of creation, sacred theology is a knowledge of God received initially through the gift of supernatural faith. Through faith, we possess God in his mystery; through sacred theology, we penetrate the truths of faith by means of the human reasoning process. Hence, God is both the object of theology and, through faith, the principle of theology. Faith is therefore the very

foundation of the knowledge acquired through theological study.

As sacred wisdom, theology is the supreme science; it utilizes the conclusions of other sciences but only after judging them in the light of faith. This does not mean that theology may intervene intrinsically and destroy the autonomy of the other sciences, but it does mean that so far as the profane sciences touch the area of revealed truths, it is the role of theology to determine their conformity or repugnance to the truths of faith. And since the theologian of the spiritual life must deal directly with many of the data of the natural sciences, especially psychology, it is particularly important to stress the magisterial function of theology in the study of the nature and phenomena of religious experience.

Nevertheless, spiritual theology must make use of experimental data and for that reason the definition calls for an investigation of the religious experience of individual persons. Spiritual theology, as we have seen, is not a purely speculative science but also a practical and applied theology; it must therefore investigate the experimental data lest it attempt to formulate the laws of the spiritual life by an *a priori* method. However, the experience to which the definition refers is not restricted to the external phenomena of religious experience, as can readily be investigated by the psychologist. Rather, it is a supernatural experience, an awareness of the workings of grace and the Holy Spirit within the soul. This is the primary concern of the theologian of the spiritual life; the external manifestations and extraordinary phenomena are of secondary importance.

We further state in the definition that spiritual theology defines the nature of the supernatural life. Here the theologian must rely almost exclusively on the truths of revelation, the teaching of the Church, and the conclusions of systematic theology. In seeking to identify the essential elements of the spiritual life, he transcends the variety of religious experiences of individual persons and the particular characteristics that distinguish one school of spirituality from another. The investigation focuses rather on such questions as the nature of Christian perfection, the life of grace, and the operation of the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual theology also formulates the laws or directives that govern the growth and development of the spiritual life. Still closely related to revealed truths and theological conclusions rather than experiential data, the approach is scientific and somewhat speculative rather than experimental and descriptive. The reason is that laws for spiritual growth must rise above particular differences in order to be applicable to Christians of every class and condition. Only when the universal laws have been stated and explained should the theologian proceed to discuss and evaluate the particular forms of spirituality such as lay spirituality, sacerdotal spirituality, spirituality of the religious life, or liturgical spirituality. Therefore this section of spiritual theology treats of such matters as sin and temptation, active and passive purification, the sacraments, good works, and the grades of prayer.

Lastly, spiritual theology describes the process by which people normally advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to full perfection. While it is true that God acts in various ways and the Spirit breathes where he will, so that each person follows a path proper to himself, it is nevertheless possible for the theologian to chart the various stages through which the individual usually passes. For this part of spiritual theology the descriptive and experiential data are absolutely indispensable, since it is here that the general theological principles are tested, so to speak, by the facts of experience. It is also here that the prudence of theologians is tested as they

formulate directives for those who are striving to make progress toward the perfection of the Christian life. "Between the knowledge of the principles of action and action itself," says Yves Congar, "there is room for a practical knowledge which is directly regulatory. This knowledge is one no longer of a science, but of a virtue at once intellectual and moral: the virtue of prudence."[\(8\)](#)

## **Theological Method**

Theology as wisdom is at once eminently speculative and eminently practical because the God who is the object of the study of theology is the God who intervenes in human history and calls us to perfection and salvation. Spiritual theology reflects precisely on the mystery of our participation in divine life. It is concerned not only with the construction of a science or theory of the supernatural life, but also with the existential condition of that life in the individual Christian. Consequently spiritual theology must express itself in both ontological and psychological terms.

Because spiritual theology is part of the one theology, it is closely related to dogmatic and moral theology, from which it derives its principles. And because it is an applied theology, it necessarily contains much that is practical and experiential. Consequently, the method of theologizing must take both of these factors into account; it must, in fact, combine the deductive method and the inductive method and strive to keep a proper balance between the two.

The descriptive or inductive method abstracts for the most part, *à*s, from theological principles in order to investigate and describe the ..., physical and psychological phenomena of religious experience. Studies of this type make a valuable contribution to the theology of ., the spiritual life, but to use the empirical method exclusively would cause serious problems.

First, the descriptive method tends to convert spiritual theology into experimental psychology or religious psychology, as GarrigouLagrange observes: "Whoever neglects to have recourse to the light of theological principles will have to be content with the principles furnished by psychology, as do so many psychologists who treat of mystical phenomena in the different religions."[\(9\)](#)

Second, although a psychological study may be scientific, the psychologist frequently fails to seek the causes of the phenomena investigated but is satisfied with a collection of descriptions and statistics.

Third, this method tends to give too much importance to extraordinary phenomena, with the result that it fails to distinguish between the normal, concomitant phenomena of mystical experience and the extraordinary, charismatic phenomena. Consequently, it at least implies that the mystical state is extraordinary, that Christians are not even remotely called to it, and hence that there are two distinct perfections in the Christian life, one ascetical and the other mystical.

Fourth, any general rules proceeding exclusively from the empirical data of the descriptive method are unscientific and untrustworthy, since they ignore the nature of the supernatural life of grace and the theological laws of its progress.

Fifth, the purely descriptive method is unable to distinguish between the supernatural, the natural, and the preternatural. It may therefore be tempted to categorize as pathological or diabolical any phenomenon that cannot be explained by the rules and theories of normal

psychology.

The exclusive use of the deductive method also presents problems. First, it tends to overlook the fact that spiritual theology is a practical, applied theology and must therefore be correlated with the data of experience. Second, there is a temptation to explain phenomena or formulate laws by an a priori method that is not substantiated by the facts. Third, spiritual direction based on the deductive method may be totally inadequate for the needs of the individual or may impede the soul from following where the Spirit leads.

It is necessary, therefore, to make use of both methods in order to correlate the theological principles with the empirical data of the spiritual life with a view to charting the steps to Christian perfection. In this way theologians will be able to discern the unity and variety of the spiritual life; they will distinguish the essential from the accidental and the ordinary from the extraordinary; they will then postulate what is absolutely essential for the attainment of Christian perfection and what is contingent upon individual personalities or states of life.

### **Sources of Spiritual Theology**

The question of method leads logically to a discussion of the sources of the theology of the spiritual life. Some of these sources are common to theology in general; others are proper to spiritual theology. The primary source of spiritual theology, and of theology in general, is *Sacred Scripture and Tradition*. Thus, Vatican Council II has stated: "Sacred theology relies on the written Word of God, taken together with sacred Tradition, as on a permanent foundation .... Therefore, the study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology."[\(10\)](#)

The Scriptures unquestionably present God as transcendent and immanent, as the beginning and the ultimate end of a person's life, but the primary witness of Scripture is that God has intervened in human history to fulfill in humankind the designs of his providence. Therefore, we study the divine mysteries revealed by God to know not only what they are in themselves but also what they are for us. Revealing to us our high destiny, the Scriptures answer our innate desire to rise from a fallen condition in order to experience the divine. The Bible is therefore the rule and standard of all authentic spirituality. The fundamental message that comes to us in the gradual revelation of the Old Testament is that God loves us and asks our response through faith and obedience. Then, in the New Testament, God's covenant with Abraham culminates in Christ, who is the "last revelation" and the source and model of our life in God.

Vatican Council II has stated that Scripture, which is "the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit," and Tradition, which "transmits in its entirety the Word of God that has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit," are closely bound together and "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God."[\(11\)](#) However, Tradition is not the purely mechanical transmission of static truth; it is a seed that must develop; it is a living tradition that has continuity in history. Thus, Vatican II has asserted:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities that they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those

who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing toward the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.(12)

Tradition is therefore a source of spiritual theology at the same level as Scripture because it includes Scripture in the sense that the oral transmission of revealed truths preceded the written record. Moreover, St. John states at the end of his Gospel: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

We also speak of Tradition as the transmission of the deposit of faith from one generation to another under the magisterial guidance of the Church, which proclaims, explains, and applies the revealed truths throughout the centuries. Unlike purely human tradition, which is subject to error, the living tradition of the Church is infallible as regards the essential content of the deposit of faith, as has been affirmed by Vatican Council II:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.(13)

It is evident, therefore, that the *Magisterium of the Church* is likewise a primary theological source for the study of the spiritual life and Christian perfection.

The relation of the *liturgy* to spiritual theology stems from the fact that "it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."(14) It is a vital manifestation of what life in Christ should be, for in the liturgy we have not only an expression of belief but also an experience of life in God. Consequently, the Fathers of Vatican Council II stated that the liturgy is "the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit."(15)

As a source of spiritual theology, the liturgy is closely related to Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. Vatican Council II stressed the importance of Scripture in the liturgy:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the Scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning .... Although the sacred liturgy is



principally the worship of the divine majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God speaks to his people, and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel.[\(16\)](#)

The link between Tradition and the liturgy is manifested in such statements as: *Lex orandi est lex credendi* -- The law of prayer is the law of belief. The liturgy is thus an expression of the vital continuity and perennial unity of the Church's proclamation of the revealed truths to all, nations throughout the centuries. Finally, as regards the Magisterium, Pope Pius XI referred to the liturgy as "the principal organ of the ordinary Magisterium of the Church."

Spiritual theology also makes use of the principles and conclusions of *dogmatic theology* and *moral theology*, but before explaining this relationship it would be helpful to comment briefly on the function of theology and its relation to the Magisterium. St. Augustine contrasts theology and Magisterium when he says: "What we understand we owe to reason; what we believe we owe to authority." Yet theology and Magisterium are also interdependent, for the function of theology, says Pope Paul VI, is "to bring to the knowledge of the Christian community, and particularly of the Magisterium, the fruits of its research so that, through the doctrine taught by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, they become a light for all the Christian people." The Church could undoubtedly proclaim and preserve the deposit of faith without the aid of the theologians, but without theology it could not discover the implications of the revealed truths or make applications to the everchanging needs of the faithful. It is the function of the theologians to place at the disposition of the Magisterium the theological information that is necessary for the exercise of the Church's teaching authority. Hence, St. Augustine describes theologians as the agents by which Christ guards his Church from error and makes it grow in truth.

On the other hand, the ultimate criterion of orthodox Christian teaching is the Magisterium, as Congar has stated:

Theology has for its rule a datum proposed by the ecclesiastical Magisterium, just as philosophy has for its rule the datum of natural knowledge. And it is well established that the first step of the theologian is an act of submission to this datum and the Magisterium. But the datum is so rich that it authorizes different manners of approach and, according to the intellectual orientation of each one, different manners of posing problems themselves.[\(17\)](#)

In using dogmatic and moral theology as sources, theologians of the spiritual life are not seeking primarily to formulate Church teaching as such, nor do they study dogma and morality as purely speculative sciences that prescind from religious experience and the spiritual life. Rather, their task is to investigate doctrine as lived by individual Christians, in accordance with the supreme norm of morality: life in Christ with a view to the perfection of charity. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, Thomas Hopko writes as follows concerning the relationship between spiritual theology and speculative theology:

The first step toward the rediscovery of authentic spiritual life in the Church ... must be the integration, or reintegration, of theology and religious experience. Theology must become again what it was for the Fathers: the way to union with God open to every Christian soul .... And it must deal not only with the possibility of religious experience, but also with the manner and the means of achieving it within the life of the Church ....

What must theology thus understood be like? What must be the dogmatic foundation of the experience of God? ... The three stages to this approach ... would be the absolutely transcendent and Trinitarian character of divine reality, revealed and experienced within the liturgical-sacramental life of the Church, and personally and corporately appropriated by men through guided ascetic-contemplative activity, also within the total life of the Church.[\(18\)](#)

Another important source of information for the theology of the spiritual life is the *history of spirituality*. Although the Christian life is essentially the same for all individuals in all ages, it admits of secondary differences and modifications. The reason for this is that grace does not change nature but perfects it by working through it, and therefore individual personalities, national temperaments, and the needs or charisms of a given age are dominant factors in the variety of religious experiences and the classification of schools of spirituality. A knowledge of the history of spirituality enables the theologian to recognize the laws or constants that prevail throughout the centuries and at the same time to discern a progressive development and evolution in Christian holiness as manifested in the Church. Finally, the history of spirituality provides the experiential data so necessary for the practical science of spiritual theology, without which the theologian would have to depend exclusively on the *a priori* method of deduction from the principles of speculative theology and the teaching of the Magisterium.

Closely related to the history of spirituality are the *writings of saints and mystics*, their autobiographies, and their biographies. Apart from having descriptive value, such works also provide models worthy of imitation. However, the writings should be authentic and critically sound, and preference should be given to those works that have received the positive approbation of the Church. As a rule it is also safer to read the instructive and expository writings rather than personal letters or ardent exhortations, where exaggeration or misinterpretation may readily occur. The value of these works for spiritual theology is that they provide factual testimony of the wonderful and mysterious ways in which God is glorified in his saints.

Finally, spiritual theology makes use of purely experimental sources such as *personal experience* and the *various branches of psychology*. These sources are of particular importance for cultivating the art of spiritual direction and the discernment of spirits. Rational or normal psychology provides information concerning the nature of the human soul, the distinction and functions of the various faculties and powers, the laws of the emotional life, and the interrelation between soul and body. Experimental psychology complements rational psychology by providing the data of experience and an analysis of the phenomena of normal and abnormal or pathological states. A knowledge of the latter is indispensable for distinguishing between the natural, the diabolical, and the supernatural and for evaluating the phenomena of the mystical state.

It is necessary, however, to avoid two extremes in the use of psychological material: first, a "psychologism" that would reduce all religious phenomena to a state of consciousness and thus deny the possible intervention of the supernatural; second, a "syncretism" that would classify all religious experience as identical, thereby obliterating the distinction between Christian spirituality and the religious experiences of non-Christians. Psychology provides much important data for the study of the spiritual life, but it cannot make the ultimate judgment; that is the function of theology, which proceeds from the truths of faith and acknowledges authentic religious experience as a supernatural reality.

In listing personal experience as a source for spiritual theology, we refer first of all to one's own religious experience, but we also include one's experience in the direction of others and the vicarious experience that comes from a study of the testimony of saints and mystics. Nothing can replace personal experience in providing an understanding of the mysterious workings of the spiritual life. Thus, Congar asserts: "Charity, taste, and a certain personal experience of the things of God are necessary in order that the theologian may treat the mysteries and speak of them in a befitting manner."[\(19\)](#) And St. Teresa of Avila stated: "Many are mistaken if they think they can learn to discern spirits without being spiritual themselves."[\(20\)](#)

## **Schools of Spirituality**

Because the Holy Spirit moves in a variety of ways to lead individuals to perfection, with the result that saint differs from saint in glory, there are styles of Christian spirituality sufficiently diverse to be classified as schools of spirituality. Some theologians reject the concept of schools of spirituality, preferring to emphasize the essential elements that safeguard the unity of the Christian life, but the multiple forms of spirituality in the Christian tradition follow logically from the definition of the spiritual life as participation in the mystery of Christ.

First, the cause of the diversity, as St. Thomas Aquinas states, is that God "dispenses his gifts of grace variously so that the beauty and perfection of the Church may result from these various degrees."[\(21\)](#) St. Paul teaches the same doctrine: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us" (Rom. 12:4-6).

Second, St. Paul repeatedly admonishes the Christian to strive to become transformed into Christ as completely as possible. But the mystery of Christ is so complex and perfect that it can never be duplicated by an individual Christian or by a school of spirituality. It is a treasure that we share but never exhaust. The greatest of the saints exemplified in their lives one or another aspect of Christ, but never "the whole Christ." The total Christ is best manifested, as St. Paul teaches, in the Church as the holy people of God and the Mystical Body of Christ.

Third, schools of spirituality emerge as a response to the needs of the Church at a given time. The history of spirituality demonstrates that from the earliest days of the Church to the present, the Christian lifestyles and practices that later became stabilized as schools of spirituality were always introduced to help live the mystery of Christ more intimately and thus grow in holiness. Moreover, if we see the Church, not as an institution or static structure, but as a vital organism constantly evolving toward "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), the various schools of spirituality can be appreciated as contributing to the progressive building-up of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Finally, schools of spirituality are justified by reason of the fact that grace does not destroy but works through and perfects nature. The supernatural life of grace respects the human personality and condition, and therefore the differences in Christian lifestyles are rooted in the individuality of the human person and the particular characteristics of groups and nations. Thus, the temperament of individuals, the moral predispositions to virtue or vice, the type of character cultivated -- all these factors exert a great influence on one's response to grace and the use one makes of it. These factors will also determine to a great extent one's aptitude or need for

particular ascetical practices, devotions, and styles of prayer. They will likewise affect the choice of one's vocation or state in life, and that, in turn, introduces another set of factors that define one's spirituality in view of vocational commitments and duties of state.

When, therefore, saintly Christians follow Christ in a way that appeals to other persons, or when they formulate a spiritual doctrine that can lead souls to greater perfection, they frequently attract followers who adopt the same pattern of Christian living. In time the lifestyle or the doctrine is expressed in a corporate manner by the followers, and this social manifestation emerges as a distinct school of spirituality, e.g., Benedictine spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Teresian spirituality, or Salesian spirituality. Yet schools of spirituality are not restricted exclusively to individual persons as founders or leaders; they may also be classified according to national temperaments and cultures (French spirituality as distinct from Spanish spirituality), a particular period in history (post-Reformation spirituality and Vatican II spirituality), or the doctrinal basis and content (Eucharistic spirituality and Marian spirituality).

The schools of spirituality are thus an indication of the diversity of the ways of the Spirit, a proof of the Church's respect for personal freedom in following the impulses of the Spirit, and a corporate witness to the variety of ways in which the mystery of Christ is imaged in the Mystical Body of the Church. Therefore one's attitude toward schools of spirituality should be one of openness and tolerance, respecting the diversity of needs and charisms and approving whatever the Church approves.

## CHAPTER NOTES

1. Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, nn. 40-41. All quotations from the documents of Vatican II are taken from the English version edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., under the title *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y., Costello Publishing Co., 1975).
2. Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God* (Glen Rock, New York: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 41.
3. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, n. 2.
4. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 22.
5. Etienne Gilson, *Théologie et histoire de la Spiritualité* (Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp. 12, 17). This teaching coincides with that of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange: "Spiritual theology, like every science, ought to consider the interior life as such, and not in a given individual .... Spiritual theology, while noting the exceptions that may arise from the absence of a given condition, ought especially to establish the higher laws of the full development of the life of grace as such." *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. Timothea Doyle, Vol. I (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947), p. x.
6. Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, trans. and ed. H. Guthrie (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 17.

7. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. T. Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1945), pp. 12-14.
8. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-65.
9. Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
10. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n. 24.
11. *Ibid.*, n. 9-10.
12. *Ibid.*, n. 8.
13. *Ibid.*, n. 10.
14. Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, n. 14.
16. *Ibid.*, nn. 24, 33.
17. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
18. Jordan Aumann, Thomas Hopko, and Donald Bloesch, *Christian Spirituality: East and West* (Chicago: Priory Press, 1968), pp. 105-06.
19. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
20. St. Teresa, *The Life*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946) p. 237.
21. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Taurini: Marietti, 1948), I-II, q. 112, a. 4.

## 2

### **The Goal of Our Striving**

Because spiritual theology treats of the perfection of the Christian life and the means to attain it, and is therefore at once both eminently speculative and eminently practical, the first question proposed for investigation concerns the goal or end of the Christian life. Such is the procedure in any art or applied science, according to the axiom that the end or goal is the first thing in intention and the last thing in execution or achievement.

Whether a person is setting out on a journey, writing a book, or preparing for a career or profession, the first thing necessary is to know the goal or end, then to select the proper means to that end, and finally to utilize the means for attaining the end. That is why St. Thomas Aquinas begins his treatise on moral theology with the question of man's ultimate end and beatitude, for it is only in view of the ultimate end that one can establish the principles of morality governing human acts and then discern which acts will advance one toward the goal.

The Son of God came into this world that we might have life and have it to the full (John 10:10).

Indeed, "the ultimate purpose of all things is that, in Christ, all persons made by God's creative love might freely come to him and share the abundant life of the Blessed Trinity."[\(1\)](#)

This mysterious evolution by which Christ himself is formed in us is the principal purpose of divine revelation and the basis for all growth and development. To this evolution is ordained the divine light of faith, to it the entire gospel, to it the institution' of the Church and even the incarnation of the divine Word. For faith is ordained to charity, which is the bond of perfection; and the dogmas of our faith ... are not so much for finding intellectual satisfaction as for motivating us to seek the gift of God, the living water of the Holy Ghost, and the power of his vivifying grace. The Gospel was written that "believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), and the purpose of the Church is the sanctification of souls.[\(2\)](#)

Consequently, the justified Christian lives by the same life that animated Jesus Christ, according to the statement of St. Augustine: "One becomes a Christian by the same grace by which Christ was made. He is reborn of the same Spirit of whom Christ was born."[\(3\)](#) The life received from Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit respects our human condition at the same time that it elevates us to the supernatural order and makes us capable of performing actions that are likewise supernatural. "We receive, together with this life, a copious array of potencies and proportionate energies by which we can live, grow, and work as true sons of God, called from the kingdom of darkness to the participation of his eternal light. By means of these new powers we can discover the road to true life and thus arrive at the enjoyment of God's delightful presence."[\(4\)](#)

It is evident, therefore, that the supernatural life received through Jesus Christ is, like all life, meant to increase and expand through our efforts and cooperation. The spiritual life is not a treasure to be buried in a safe place; it is a seed that must be watered and cared for until it reaches full growth and maturity. But in order that we may understand more perfectly the nature of the supernatural life, its potencies or powers, and the phases through which it passes to full maturity, it is necessary to know what is the goal of our striving.

The spiritual life has three distinct goals or, if one prefers, it has one ultimate goal and two relative or proximate goals. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life, as of all things in creation, is the glory of God; the proximate goals are our sanctification and salvation.

### **The Glory of God**

Theologians generally attribute to God a twofold glory: the intrinsic glory of the inner life of the Trinity and the extrinsic glory that redounds to God through his external works. By intrinsic glory we mean the splendor of the infinite' beauty, goodness, and truth of the Trinity. God the Father, knowing himself perfectly, eternally reproduces a perfect likeness of himself by the intellectual generation of the Word, who is the only-begotten Son of the Father. As a result of their mutual contemplation, there is eternally exchanged between these two Persons a current of divine love, which is the Holy Spirit. The knowledge and love that God has for himself in the ineffable mystery of his infinite beauty constitute his intrinsic glory, to which nothing is lacking and to which nothing can be added.

God is infinitely perfect and has no need of anything outside himself. Therefore the reason for creation must somehow be found in God's goodness and love. God is love, says St. John (4:16),

and love by its very nature is communicable. God is infinite goodness and, as the philosophers say, goodness tends to diffuse itself. But it is a philosophical principle that every agent acts for an end, especially an intellectual agent, and therefore God, the first and supreme intellect, must likewise act for an end. However, it is impossible that in creating the universe God could have done so for some end distinct from himself, since that would mean acting for a good outside himself, a good he did not yet possess. Moreover, if God had acted for an end other than himself, he would have subordinated himself to that end and that is incompatible with his infinity and supremacy.

"I am the Lord, this is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols" (Isa. 42:8). It follows, therefore, that God created all things for himself; all created things exist in and for God.

At first glance this may seem to suggest a consummate egoism in God, as if he had created all things for his own selfish pleasure and utility. But it should be noted, as St. Thomas observes, that God does not work -for an end as we do, desiring and striving for a good we do not yet possess. God is infinite goodness, and therefore he cannot desire any good or end distinct from himself; but out of love of the infinite goodness that he is, God wills to communicate the good that he already possesses. Not only that, but all things that exist outside of God are to a lesser or greater degree a reflection of the goodness and glory that are intrinsic to the Trinity. Hence, St. Thomas states: "The entire universe with all its parts is ordained to God as to its ultimate end, in the sense that in all its parts it reflects the divine goodness by a certain limitation and for the glory of God."[\(5\)](#)

The extrinsic glory of God should be understood first of all as a sharing in the beauty, truth, and goodness that constitute God's intrinsic glory. Thus the statement of St. Paul: "Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20). In other words, whatever there is of goodness, truth, and beauty in God's creation is there as a reflection of the infinite goodness, truth, and beauty of God; and in the case of creatures endowed with intellect and will, they are called to share in the glory of the inner life of the Trinity. By a process that the Fathers of the Church did not hesitate to describe as "deification" and "divinization," God's own glory shines forth resplendently in the souls of the just.

If we had remained in the purely natural state and had not been raised to supernatural life, knowledge, and love, we could never possess formally and physically anything divine; not even divine faculties, powers, and energies. Our knowledge and love could never attain to God as he is in himself, and we could not embrace him with these two acts, which are the arms by which it is given to us now to unite ourselves with him .... But by a prodigy of love that we can never sufficiently admire, much less worthily acknowledge, he condescended to supernaturalize us from the beginning by elevating us to nothing less than his own status, to make us share in his life, his infinite power, his own operations, and his eternal happiness.[\(6\)](#)

So the entire created universe exists in order to manifest the goodness, truth, and beauty of God; that is extrinsic glory seen from the viewpoint of the Creator. From the creature's side, however, the glory of God is seen as a striving for greater perfection whereby God is praised and glorified. In fact, in spiritual writing the phrase "glory of God" usually signifies the adoration and praise

that are stimulated by the recognition of God's perfections as reflected in the beauties of the universe or the good deeds of individual persons. God is the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 22:13), the beginning and the end, and therefore God's extrinsic glory is at once something received from God and something returned to God. And while every creature of whatever kind manifests some perfection of God, the rational creature manifests much more: the capacity to share in the very nature and life of God himself and the ability to give back to God, through praise and loving service, all that has been received.

Everything in creation, and especially the human person, is ordained to the same ultimate end: the glory of God. Hence, St. Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). As Christian souls make progress along the road to perfection, they come to an ever clearer realization that their personal sanctification and even their perfect happiness in heaven are not the ultimate goal of the spiritual life; rather, one's sanctification and salvation are the most excellent and efficacious means of giving glory to the Trinity. Thus, when drawing his map of the journey to the mount of perfection, St. John of the Cross printed these words on the summit: "Here on this mount, dwell only the honor and glory of God."

### **Salvation --The Life of Glory**

"But trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home." The words of the poet Wordsworth serve as a succinct description of the intimate relationship, between the ultimate end of the Christian life -the glory of God -and the proximate or secondary ends: salvation and sanctification. Since the secondary ends are more immediate, Christians are usually much more aware of them, especially the salvation of one's soul. As a result, the secondary ends normally have a greater influence on one's daily life and actions than does the concept of the glory of God. In fact, the glory of God does not seem to be a dominating motive in the lives of Christians until they have advanced rather far on the road to perfection. This, however, is readily understood when we realize how difficult it is to achieve total abandonment to God's will, which comes only at the cost of a profound and painful purgation of self-love.

As we use the term here, salvation is synonymous with the expressions "man's ultimate happiness," "eternal life," and "life in glory." We have stated that as a proximate goal of the spiritual life, salvation is intimately related to the ultimate goal: the glory of God. It could not be otherwise because man's ultimate and perfect happiness in heaven will be the result of the full flowering of the life of grace received through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that life, both in time and in eternity, is at once a sharing in the life of the Trinity (God's intrinsic glory) and the source of man's justification and supernatural perfection (God's extrinsic glory).

Beatitude or perfect happiness, says St. Thomas, constitutes Man's ultimate perfection.<sup>(7)</sup> It cannot be realized in this life, which is a time of pilgrimage and vigil, because St. John writes: "What we shall later be has not yet come to light. We know that when it comes to light we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is .... Our love is brought to perfection in this, that we should have confidence on the day of judgment" (1 John 3:2; 4:17). Man's ultimate happiness and definitive perfection will be attained only in the life after death, in glory, where the blessed enjoy forever the beauty of the triune God.

St. Paul experienced such a profound yearning for heaven that he wrote to the Philippians: "I



long to be freed from this life and to be with Christ, for that is the far better thing; yet it is more urgent that I remain alive for your sakes" (Phil. 1:23). Many of the saints and mystics throughout the centuries have echoed the same sentiment, as we see in the statements made by St. Teresa of Avila: "I want to see God, and to see him we must die," and St. Augustine: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that man's final beatitude in glory depends on two conditions: the total perfection of the individual and a knowledge of the good possessed in glory.<sup>(8)</sup> The first condition is verified as soon as the just soul reaches heaven, for nothing imperfect or stained can enter into glory. Moreover, it has been divinized to the full extent of its capacity because the supernatural life received through Christ comes to its full development in glory. "Those he called he justified, and with those he justified he shared his glory" (Rom. 8:30). Therefore all the souls of the blessed are perfect, and every soul in glory is a saint, whether canonized or not, since each soul in heaven enjoys the most intimate union with God that is possible to it.

Does this mean that only those souls can enter glory that have reached a high degree of grace and spiritual perfection? To answer this question it is necessary to make a distinction between salvation as being saved, and salvation as the state of glory or the actual enjoyment of perfect happiness in heaven. Salvation is achieved by all those who die in the state of grace, even in a minimal degree,<sup>(9)</sup> but this does not mean that all the souls of the just enter immediately into the beatitude of glory. It is explicitly defined by the Church that those who die in the state of grace and are in no need of further purification will enter glory immediately after death, but those who still need to be purified will enter heaven only when their purification is completed.<sup>(10)</sup>

Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange explains the matter as follows:

The dogma of purgatory, then, throws a new light on the present question. Purgatory is a punishment that supposes a sin that could have been avoided and an insufficient satisfaction that could have been complete if we had better accepted the trials of the present life. It is certain that no one will be detained in purgatory except for sins that could have been avoided or for negligence in making reparation for them. Therefore normally we should, like the saints, undergo our purgatory in this life while meriting, while growing in love, instead of after death without meriting.

Therefore sanctifying grace, which is of itself ordained to eternal life, is also ordained to such perfection that the soul may receive the light of glory immediately after death without passing through purgatory. This disposition to enter heaven immediately after death supposes a complete purification, analogous at least to that of souls that are about to leave purgatory and have a very ardent desire for God. According to St. John of the Cross, this complete purification is normally found on earth only in those who have courageously endured the passive purifications of the senses and the spirit, which prepare the soul for intimate union with God (*The Dark Night*, Book II, Chap. 20).<sup>(11)</sup>

The second condition postulated by St. Thomas for man's perfect happiness in glory is a knowledge of the good possessed. Now St. John states that in the life to come we shall see God as he is (1 John 3:2), and St. Paul says: "Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then I shall know even as I am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Because of this teaching, theologians use the phrase "beatific vision" to describe the

intimate and joyful union of the souls of the blessed with God in glory. "The activity of eternal life," says Arintero, "consists in knowing and loving God the Father and Jesus Christ whom he sent; that is, in contemplating clearly the most august and most profound secrets of the divinity and the ineffable mysteries of our redemption and deification. Such is the everlasting activity of the blessed who enjoy the infinite treasures of the paternal heritage, contemplate the bottomless abyss of uncreated Beauty, and love the absolute Goodness."[\(12\)](#)

Two official ecclesiastical statements concerning the beatific vision are of special importance in the theology of man's life in glory. The first is a declaration by Pope Benedict XII: "The souls of the just see the divine essence by an intuitive, face-to-face vision, with no creature as a medium of vision, but with the divine essence immediately manifesting itself to them, clearly and openly."[\(13\)](#) The second statement is found in a decree issued by the Council of Florence: "Souls immediately upon entrance into heaven see clearly the one and triune God as he is, one more perfectly than another, depending on their merits."[\(14\)](#)

The necessity of postulating a "face-to-face vision, with no creature as a medium of vision" follows from the assertion by St. Thomas: "To say that God is seen through some likeness is to say that God is not seen at all."[\(15\)](#) And since the human intellect cannot know anything without an intellectual species or idea, it must be said that the divine essence itself is the intelligible species.

However, for the human intellect in glory to receive the divine essence as an intelligible species, its capacity must be vastly extended. Otherwise, according to the axiom that whatever is received is received according to the capacity or mode of the recipient, the knowledge or vision of God in glory would not be substantially different from that of the soul as a wayfarer. As a result, the divine essence would be brought down to the capacity of the human intellect. St. Thomas, therefore, argues to the necessity of an elevation of the human intellect by some kind of supernatural gift:

Nothing can receive a higher form unless it be disposed thereto by raising and enlarging its capacity, because every act is limited to its proper power. Now the divine essence is a higher form than any created intellect. Therefore, in order that the divine essence become the intelligible species for a created intellect, which is required in order that the divine substance be seen, the created intellect must be raised and enlarged for that purpose by some supernatural disposition. [\(16\)](#)

When any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary ... that the power of understanding should be aided by divine grace. Now this increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect .... And this is the light spoken of in Revelation 21:23: "It (the society of the blessed who see God) was lit by the radiant glory of God."[\(17\)](#)

The illumination of the intellect described by St. Thomas is known in theology as the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*), and while the Church has never defined its precise nature, the Council of Vienne (1311-12) did condemn the opinion that denies the necessity of a special illumination of the intellect in glory.[\(18\)](#) Some theologians, however, have attempted to probe more deeply into the nature and function of the light of glory. Thus, St. Thomas states that the beatific vision replaces the faith of the wayfarer and is a perfection of the gift of understanding.[\(19\)](#) The

function of this gift on earth is to apprehend spiritual things, but in heaven it attains to the divine essence through facial vision. He explains his teaching as follows:

The vision of God is twofold. One is perfect, whereby God's essence is seen; the other is imperfect, whereby, though we see not what God is, yet we see what he is not .... Each of these visions of God belongs to the gift of understanding: the first to the gift of understanding in its state of perfection, as possessed in heaven; the second to the gift of understanding in its incipient state, as possessed by wayfarers.[\(20\)](#)

Other theologians have discussed the beatific vision in terms of the divine essence as the intelligible species of the intellect of the blessed, perhaps taking their cue from the same passage from Revelation just cited: "The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). So St. Augustine writes: "Thou art that light in which we must see the light; that is, we must see thee in thyself with the splendor of thy countenance."[\(21\)](#)

The Fathers of the Church never spoke of the beatific vision in terms of any created light; rather, the intelligible species in which the blessed see the divine essence is the Word, and the interior power by which they see the divine essence is the power of the Holy Spirit. Arintero follows this line of thought:

What, objectively, is this divine idea, this faithful expression of the divine essence, but the very Word of God? What is the Word but the most perfect and adequate image, the eternal idea, the living word, the very face of God and his substantial manifestation? He is the eternal splendor of the Father and the figure of his substance; light of light, light of glory on whom the angels love to gaze, the sole luminary in the city of God where none other is needed.

Hence the Word, to whose image souls are configured and who is immediately united to their intellects, is the eternal light that objectively enlightens them, the true lumen gloriae in whom they see the face of God. He is the absolute and adequate idea in whom they see the divine essence faithfully and without any intermediary. But that we may see the divine essence and receive such an idea, it is necessary, we repeat, that our intellects be strengthened subjectively and their capacity enlarged .... This cannot be effected through any created power that would be of the same condition or incapacity as the soul itself. It can be done only through divine power; that is, through the loving Spirit who strengthens us from within and fortifies our weakness.[\(22\)](#)

What has been said about man's eternal beatitude in glory as a proximate end of the spiritual life should suffice to give a basic understanding of that beatitude as the perfect fulfillment of the life of the spirit. But it was not God's will simply to bestow on us the gift of grace and then bring it to its full flowering without our cooperation. Rather, he has commanded all men to love and serve him in this life in order to attain the ultimate happiness of heaven.

For God did not make men simply for heaven, but for coming to heaven through generous and good acts that his grace enables us to perform here and now. God's gift was not to be only the blessed life of heaven, but the further gift of letting men gain blessedness as a merited reward .... We live now a pilgrim life, among sacraments and

symbols. But one who believes and hopes and loves possesses-already the living seeds of that life which is beyond signs. It is our joy to have received the life God gives now, and freely to serve him now, making his kingdom present even now on earth among men.(23)

## **Sanctification**

After the glory of God and the beatific vision in heaven, the spiritual life has for its end or goal the sanctification of one's own soul. This means that all Christians should strive for the perfection of their spiritual life, in accordance with the teaching of Scripture: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48); "To all ..., who are called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7); "It is God's will that you grow in holiness" (1 Thess. 4:3).

The perfection of the spiritual life likewise follows from the very nature of life itself, since every living thing naturally seeks and tends to its perfection. Thus, St. Paul admonished the Ephesians to strive to "form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature" (Eph. 4:13). More recently, Vatican Council II reminded contemporary Christians of their lofty vocation to holiness in the following words:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction, "You must be made perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mark 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. John 13:34; 15:12). The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God ....

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society. In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that, following in his footsteps and conformed to his image, doing the will of God in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor. Thus the holiness of the people of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the lives of so many saints.(24)

When we speak of perfection or sanctification as a goal of the spiritual life, we must distinguish a twofold state or level of that life: life in glory and life on earth, life before death and life after death. The measure of the perfection or holiness of the spiritual life is the degree of participation by the individual Christian in the sanctity and perfection of God.

But sanctifying grace is a sharing in the nature and life of God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:23) and by its very nature tends to increase to perfection. Therefore, the degree of union with God and of perfection in the spiritual life will depend on the extent to which the soul is permeated with grace.

Perfect union, however, will be realized only in glory, only in life after death, according to the dictum of St. Thomas that man's ultimate beatitude or life in glory in his supreme perfection.<sup>(25)</sup> Consequently, in the strictest sense of the word, the Christian will attain his full and complete perfection only in glory, where, through the beatific vision, he possesses for all eternity the beauty, goodness, and truth of the triune God. Faith then yields to vision, hope to possession, and charity is forever satisfied but never satiated.

To speak of perfection here on earth, in man as a wayfarer, is to use the term in a relative sense, because grace and charity have no terminus or limit so long as we are capable of cooperating with grace and thus meriting an increase. St. Augustine states: "O God, you give us the grace to love you, and when we love you, you give us the grace to love you more." Only death puts a definitive limit to our growth in grace and charity, and therefore our growth in perfection.

Nevertheless, we may truly use the word perfection to describe the state of the just souls on earth, since even the minimal degree of sanctifying grace constitutes a basic perfection. St. Thomas calls grace "the beginning of glory," and St. Irenaeus designates it as "the seed of the Father." Therefore when we speak of perfection or sanctification as a proximate goal of the spiritual life, we are referring not to any specific degree of perfection at a given moment, but to the ideal placed before all Christians by Christ himself: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). This is the goal of our spiritual life as wayfarers: the perfection of the supernatural life received through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is likewise the field of our study in spiritual theology.

## CHAPTER NOTES

1. Ronald Lawler, et al., *The Teaching of Christ* (Huntington, Ind.; Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1975), p. 265.
2. John G. Arinterro, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949), Vol. I, p. 2. This work has been reprinted by TAN Books of Rockford, 111.
3. St. Augustine, *De praedestinatione*, 31.
4. Arinterro, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 47.
5. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 4; q. 65, a. 2.
6. Arinterro, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 61.
7. See *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 2 and ad 4.
8. *Ibid.*, I, q. 26, a. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 109, a. 5; q. 111, a. 5; q. 114, aa. 2-3.
10. See H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder,

1963), 857; 925; 990; 1000; 1067; 1305. Hereafter this reference will be given as Denz.-Schön., together with the number of the pertinent passage.

11. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1948), p. 649.
12. Arintero, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 121.
13. Denz.-Schön. 1000-02.
14. *Ibid.*, 1304-06.
15. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 2.
16. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book III, Chap. 53.
17. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 5.
18. Denz.-Schön. 895.
19. St. Thomas Aquinas, *III Sent.*, dist. 23, q. 1, a. 3, ad 6.
20. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 8, a. 7.
21. St. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, Chap. 36.
22. Arintero, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 126-27.
23. R. Lawler, et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.
24. Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 40.
25. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 2 and ad 4.

### 3

## Our Life in Christ and Mary

Two passages from Sacred Scripture serve as an excellent introduction to our discussion of Christ's role in our sanctification.

God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son, possesses life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not possess life (1 John 5:11-12).

Since the Second Vatican Council there has been a renewed emphasis on the role of Christ in our sanctification. It is true, of course, that the spiritual life of the people of God has always been Christ-centered because Christ has always been and must always be the exemplar and efficient cause of Christian holiness. But from time to time in the history of spirituality, Christ has been

eclipsed by other devotions, or at times one or another aspect of the sacred humanity of Christ has been exaggerated at the expense of his divinity. Nevertheless, in every age there have been competent theologians and spiritual writers who taught and promoted a truly Christocentric spirituality.

Since God has predestined those whom he called to share the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29), union with Christ is a central dogma in Christian revelation. Thus, St. Thomas states that "what is primary in the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit, shown in faith working through love. Now we obtain this grace through the Son of God-made man; grace first filled his humanity, and thence was brought to us." It follows, therefore, that "grace was conferred on Christ as the universal principle of all those who have grace."[\(1\)](#)

### **Scriptural Testimony**

St. John speaks of our union with Christ within the framework of four basic concepts. *Christ is the Word of life*; therefore we must live in him and let him work through us by his spirit. *Christ is the vine, and we are the branches*; therefore we must remain united with him in order to produce the fruits of eternal life. Christ alone has the words of truth; therefore in the measure that we accept his teaching we shall walk in the truth and impart his truth to others. *Christ is our way to the Trinity* and can lead us to the beatific joy of union with the three divine Persons, as he stated at the Last Supper (John 17:20-24).

St. Paul was a man literally seized by Christ and so completely did he give himself to Christ that everything in his life and teaching converges on Christ crucified and risen from the dead. One of the most succinct descriptions of Christ's central position in the plan of salvation and in man's sanctification is found in St. Paul's prayer of thanksgiving in his letter to the Ephesians:

Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens! God chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love; he likewise predestined us through Christ Jesus to be his adopted sons -- such was his will and pleasure -- that all might praise the glorious favor he has bestowed on us in his beloved.

It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us. God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time; namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship (Eph. 1:3-15).[\(2\)](#)

It is therefore God's will that we unite ourselves ever more intimately with Christ "till we become one in faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, and form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature .... Let us profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head" (Eph. 4:13,15).

Speculative theologians have discussed the nature of the union of the just soul with Christ, but the results have not been uniformly satisfying. Pope Pius XII reminded theologians that the union between Christ and the soul surpasses all description and that any exaggeration, even if it be merely a matter of terminology, can have serious consequences in the field of spirituality. He concluded by saying that this union surpasses any moral or physical union just as grace

transcends nature, and it is best described as a mystical union.[\(3\)](#)

Another point to be noted is that if the goal of the Christian life is configuration with Christ and transformation in Christ, as St. Paul explicitly teaches, there can never be a point at which the soul abandons Christ. St. Teresa found it necessary to combat this error in her day, and she did so with her customary vehemence:

You will also think that anyone who enjoys such sublime favors will not engage in meditation on the most sacred humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, because by that time he will be wholly proficient in love. This is a thing of which I have written at length elsewhere, and although I have been contradicted about it and told that I do not understand it, because these are paths along which our Lord leads us, and that, when we have got over the first stages, we shall do better to occupy ourselves with matters concerning the Godhead and to flee from corporeal things, they will certainly not make me admit that this is a good way .... And observe that I am going so far as to advise you not to believe anyone who tells you otherwise .... The last thing we should do is to withdraw of set purpose from our greatest help and blessing, which is the most sacred humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ ....

It is true that anyone whom our Lord brings to the seventh mansion very rarely, or never, needs to engage in this activity, for the reason I shall set down, if I remember to do so, when I come to deal with that mansion, where in a wonderful way the soul never ceases to walk with Christ our Lord but, is ever in the company of both his divine and his human nature.[\(4\)](#)

Lastly, there is the problem of relating with the saving actions of Christ, all of which are now past history. Christ has ascended to glory and still intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father, but to return to the historical Christ would seem to make Christianity a religion of memorial services and Christian spirituality a nostalgia for the past. The answer to this problem was provided by Cardinal Bérulle of the seventeenth-century French school, who stated that although the actions of Christ and the events of his life took place only once and are now historical facts, they retain their salvific efficacy for all eternity. Everything that Jesus did in time redounds to the divine Person of the Word forever. The glorified Christ is still redeeming and sanctifying us through the infinite merits of his life and passion and death.

We can now discuss in greater detail the precise role of Christ in the spiritual life of the people of God, and to do so we shall proceed from the description that Christ gave of himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

### **Christ the Way**

To say that Jesus Christ is the way means that no one can go to the Father except through him, for there has been given to us no other name under heaven by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). According to the divine plan, the sanctity to which God calls us through grace and adoption consists in a participation in the divine life that was brought to mankind by Christ. This is expressly stated by St. Paul:

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ,



according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4-6).

Christ reestablished the divine plan of our salvation, which had been destroyed by the sin of Adam. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9).

Therefore the primary concern of every Christian should be to live the life that Christ brought to us, to be united with Christ to the point of being configured with him. To express this profound truth of the union of the Christian with Christ, St. Paul had to invent terms that had never before been used: "For if we have died with him (*conmortui*) (2 Tim. 2:11), we were buried with him (*consepulti*) (Rom. 6:4), but God ... raised us up together (*conresuscitati*) (Eph. 2:6), brought us to life together with Christ (*convivificavit nos*)" (*ibid.* 2:5), so that "we shall also live with him (*et convivemus*)" (2 Tim. 2:11) and sit together in heaven with Christ Jesus (*et consedere*) (Eph. 2:6). In view of this Pauline doctrine, the statements of Dom Columba summarize:

We must understand that we can only be saints according to the measure in which the life of Jesus Christ is in us: that is the only holiness God asks of us; there is no other. We can only be holy in Jesus Christ; otherwise we cannot be so at all. There is not an atom of this holiness in creation; it proceeds from God by a supremely free act of his almighty will .... St. Paul returns more than once to the gratuitousness of the divine gift of adoption, and also to the eternity of the ineffable love which determined him to make us partakers of it, and to the wonderful means of realizing it through the grace of Jesus Christ.[\(5\)](#)

Christ is therefore the only way of going to the Father. He is also the personification of the only true sanctity according to the divine plan. Through him alone can we attain the ideal intended by God in the creation, redemption, and sanctification of the human race: the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:5-6). The Church reminds us of this each time the Mass is celebrated: "Through him, with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, forever and ever." Many of the saints, enlightened by God to understand more fully the mystery of Christ, yearned to be dissolved and to be absorbed in Christ. The desire expressed by St. Paul readily comes to mind (Phil. 1:23-34), but a modern mystic, Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity, seems to have penetrated the mystery of Christ as profoundly as did the Apostle to the Gentiles. Addressing Christ, she writes:

I realize my weakness and beseech thee to clothe me with thyself, to identify my soul with all the movements of thine own. Immerse me in thyself, possess me wholly; substitute thyself for me, that my life may be but a radiance of thine own. Enter my soul as Adorer, as Restorer, as Savior! O Eternal Word, Utterance of my God! I long to pass my life in listening to thee, to become docile that I may learn all from thee ....

O consuming Fire! Spirit of love! Descend within me and reproduce in me, as it were, an incarnation of the Word; that I may be to him another humanity wherein he renews his mystery. And thou, O Father, bend down toward thy poor little creature and overshadow her, beholding in her none other than thy beloved Son in whom thou hast set all thy pleasure.[\(6\)](#)

Our incorporation in Christ is therefore the basis of our sanctification and the very substance of

our spiritual life. From this fundamental dogma of incorporation in Christ follow all the conclusions that pertain to Christian spirituality. Souls earnestly striving for perfection would do well to dedicate themselves to a deeper appreciation of the mystery of Christ and then endeavor to reproduce this mystery in their own lives. If they do this, they will surely reach the summit of sanctity and will be able to repeat with St. Paul: "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Gal. 2:20).

### **Christ the Truth**

Christ is the Incarnation of the uncreated wisdom of the Word, and through his sacred humanity he communicates to us all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. As the Word uttered by the Father from all eternity, he is eternally generated as Son of God, and it is precisely his divine sonship that constitutes him as the model and exemplar of the perfection of the Christian life. The reason for this is that we are called to become through grace what Christ is by his very nature: children of God. Dom Marmion has written beautifully on this doctrine:

The divine sonship of Christ is the type of our supernatural sonship; his condition, his "being" the Son of God is the exemplar of the state in which we must be established by sanctifying grace. Christ is the Son of God by nature and by right, in virtue of the union of the eternal Word with human nature; we are so by adoption and grace, but we are so really and truly. Christ has, moreover, sanctifying grace; he possesses the fullness of it; from his fullness it flows into us more or less abundantly but, in its substance, it is the same grace that both fills the created soul of Jesus and deifies us. St. Thomas says that our divine filiation is a resemblance of the eternal filiation ....

Such is the primordial and supereminent manner in which Christ is first of all our example: in the Incarnation he is constituted, by right, the Son of God; we should become so by being partakers of the grace derived from him that, deifying the substance of our souls, constitutes us in the state of children of God. That is the first and essential characteristic of the likeness we must have to Christ Jesus; it is the condition of all our supernatural activity.[\(7\)](#)

This should be the basic preoccupation of every Christian: to know Christ and to cultivate the attitude of a child of the heavenly Father, who is also our Father, as Jesus told us: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17). "We shall understand nothing of perfection and sanctity," says Dom Marmion, "and we shall not even know in what simple Christianity consists, as long as we are not convinced that fundamentally it consists in being children of God and that this quality or state is given to us by sanctifying grace, through which we share in the eternal filiation of the Incarnate Word."[\(8\)](#) This is the most important exemplary causality that Christ exercises on us, although he is also an exemplar in his works and in his virtues.

The primary motive of the Incarnation was the redemption of the human race, but there were other secondary motives as well, and among them was that of offering us, in Christ, a perfect model and exemplar of holiness. In an absolute sense, the prototype of all holiness and sanctity is, of course, the Eternal Word, in whom the Father contemplates himself with infinite love. But it is this selfsame Word that came down to earth to assume our human nature, to be like us in all things except sin. As the Incarnate Word of the Father, Jesus Christ thus becomes for us the

perfect ideal whom we ought to emulate and to whom we should become configured. Consequently, it is through Christ our model and exemplar that we are able to attain a holiness that is truly divine, imaging, however faintly, the sublime sanctity of the Eternal Word.

Christ is also the truth in the sense that he is our master and teacher. As he said at the Last Supper: "I have given them the teaching you gave to me, and they have truly accepted this, that I come from you, and have believed that it was you who sent me" (John 17:8). All of Christ's doctrine, from the Sermon on the Mount to the Seven Last Words, is directed to the one goal: the perfection of the life of grace and charity. Indeed, the very words of Christ give life, as was often manifested during his preaching and healing ministry. Rightly, then, did Peter reply when Christ asked if the Twelve also wanted to leave him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one" (John 6:67-69).

### **Christ the Life**

Christ is our life in three different ways: *as meritorious cause*, he obtained for us the grace that is the life of the spirit; *as efficient cause* he is the very source of the life of grace; and *as Head of the Mystical Body* he communicates life to the members.

#### *Meritorious Cause*

The merit of Christ in relation to us flows from the redemptive sacrifice of his passion and death. Absolutely speaking, God could have freely forgiven the sin of Adam, but he required complete satisfaction, and this was possible only through the instrumentality of a divine Person who could bridge the infinite gap between the human and the divine. The offense of sin is measured in terms of the one offended, who is God, and that is why purely human satisfaction can never suffice as atonement for sin.

When the Word was made flesh in the person of Christ, a human nature and a divine nature were hypostatically united in the Person of the Word. And although the slightest action performed by the incarnate Word could have redeemed the human race, the Father willed that mankind be redeemed through the passion and death of Christ. Consequently, the sacrificial act by which Christ atoned for sin was far beyond the demands of strict justice. So also, the merits of Christ crucified are infinite and superabundant. This is the basis of our hope, for Christ died for us, and therefore his merits are at our disposition. Our weakness serves as a basis for appealing to the divine mercy, and the infinite merits of Christ give us the assurance that salvation can be ours.

All the graces bestowed on the human race since the original sin of Adam have been granted only by reason of the merits of Christ the Redeemer. All the graces bestowed on the human race until the end of the world will likewise be given through the merits of Jesus Christ. That is why the Church always prays "through Jesus Christ."

#### *Efficient Cause*

Jesus Christ is the Mediator, the Source, and the Dispenser of all grace because he is the Redeemer of the human race. And just as the Word needed to be united with a human nature in order to die for our redemption, so also the divine Person uses the sacred humanity of Christ as an instrument for conferring on men the supernatural life of grace. Thus, St. Paul writes:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord! (Phil. 2:6-11).

Jesus frequently referred to himself as the "Son of man" to indicate that through his sacred humanity he performed the works of his ministry, he preached his gospel, he worked miracles, he conferred grace and forgiveness of sin, and he died for our salvation. St. Thomas explains the function of the sacred humanity as follows:

To give grace or the Holy Spirit authoritatively belongs to Christ as God, but to give it instrumentally belongs to him as man, since his humanity is the instrument of his divinity. And hence in virtue of his divinity his actions were salutary so far as they caused grace in us meritoriously and efficiently.<sup>(9)</sup>

### *Head of the Mystical Body*

St. Paul speaks of Christ's headship over the Mystical Body when he states that Christ is "head of the Church, which is his body: the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts" (Eph. 1:22-23). As Head of the body which is his Church, Christ exercises a capital influence over all the members of that body.

St. Thomas explains that Christ as Head exercises a threefold primacy over the Mystical Body: a primacy of order, of perfection, and of power. He has the *primacy of order* because he is the first-born of many brethren (Rom. 8:29) and has been placed above everything in this world and in the world to come (Eph. 1:21). He has the *primacy of perfection* because, as St. John says, he is full of grace and truth (John 1:16). He has the *primacy of power* because of his fullness we have all received (John 1:16). These same characteristics are listed by St. Paul when he says: "Now the Church is his body, he is its head. As he is the Beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be first in every way; because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross" (Col. 1:18-20).

So far as it relates to our spiritual life, the most important aspects of Christ's headship are the primacy of perfection and power, for here we are touching the very formality of headship, namely, the life of grace. Christ, as we have seen, possesses grace in its plenitude (primacy of perfection) and from his fullness we receive grace for grace (primacy of power). But how does Christ exercise his capital influence, his primacy of power, on souls? He exercises it in many ways, but they can be summarized under two headings: through the sacraments and through contact by faith vivified by charity.

To understand the influence of Christ on souls *through the sacraments*, we need only recall the Church's teaching that Christ instituted the seven sacraments as sensible signs that communicate grace to those who receive them worthily.<sup>(10)</sup> It goes without saying that the influence and power of Christ are not so restricted to the sacramental signs that it would be impossible for

persons to receive grace outside the sacramental structure. On the contrary, we can safely assume that there are many souls who receive grace and grow in the spiritual life without having access to the sacraments. What the sacraments do is provide greater certitude and facility for the reception of grace.

The Church has declared that the sacraments produce grace by their intrinsic power, received from the merits of Jesus Christ. They are in fact so closely associated with Christ that after him they are the most powerful means of grace that we have at our disposal. It is necessary, however, to note that when the Council of Trent states that the sacraments can give grace by the very fact of being conferred (*ex opere operato*), it also asserts that this applies only to those recipients who place no obstacle to the sanctifying effects of the sacrament in question.<sup>(11)</sup> Hence the importance of possessing the proper dispositions for the valid and fruitful reception of the sacraments.

Contact with Christ is effected also through a faith vivified by charity. St. Paul states that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17), and St. Thomas explains this by saying that "by faith Christ's power is united to us."<sup>(12)</sup> This was especially evident during Christ's earthly ministry when power came forth from him to cure sicknesses of body and soul (Luke 6:19). On numerous occasions Christ would say, as he did to the woman who anointed him: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). But Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever; therefore we can be confident that if we approach him with faith and love, the same saving and healing power will emanate from him, as Dom Marmion points out:

How, then, can we doubt that when we approach him, even outside the sacraments, with humility and confidence, divine power comes forth from him to enlighten, strengthen, and help us? No one has ever approached Jesus Christ with faith without being touched by the beneficent rays that ever escape from this furnace of light and heat.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Through Him, With Him, In Him**

The essence of the Christian life can be summarized in the following statement: the glory of God is the ultimate end, our sanctification is the proximate end, and incorporation in Christ is the only way of attaining both ends. Everything depends on living the mystery of Christ with ever-increasing intensity because Christian spirituality is nothing other than an intimate participation in the mystery of Christ. The liturgical formula that best describes the theology of our incorporation in Christ is the one that the celebrant pronounces in the Mass as he holds aloft the sacred species: "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, forever and ever."

As expressed in this formula, the glory of the Trinity is the absolute end of the whole created universe and of the redemption and sanctification of mankind. But in the plan of God, the glory of the Trinity is realized through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ. Therefore the principal concern of Christians who are striving for perfection should be to configure themselves to Christ and to do all things in Christ. Then they can make a worthy offering of all their actions to the heavenly Father, and the Father will love them, as Jesus has promised: "The Father already loves

you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27). For this reason the Church never asks anything from the Father except "through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Not only should Christians do all things and ask all things through Jesus Christ, they should also strive to do all things with Christ. We have already seen that this concept of union with Christ appears constantly in the writings of St. Paul. Blessed as he was with a profound understanding of the mystery of Christ, St. Paul could not conceive of anything that would ever separate him from Christ:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

Jesus Christ is the source of grace for us, and the grace that he bestows as Head of the Mystical Body is the selfsame grace that filled his sacred humanity with "all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Moreover, as the second Person of the Trinity, the Word dwells in our souls through grace. Therefore, to say that we can and should do all things with Christ is no pious exaggeration; it is a theological fact. Every soul that receives from Christ the life of grace that he came to give us, is by that very fact living a life of union with Christ. But one should also live with an awareness of union with Christ, and this is achieved through acts of faith in Christ, meditation on the mysteries of the life of Christ, and frequent reception of the sacraments instituted by Christ, especially the Eucharist.

To perform one's actions through Christ and with Christ denotes a high degree of perfection in one's faith and love, but greater still is that identification with Christ that enables the soul to do all things *in Christ*. To understand what this means it is helpful to think of our incorporation in Christ as Head of the Mystical Body or as the Vine of which we are the branches. St. Augustine taught that when Christ incorporated us to himself and made us members of his Mystical Body, we in a sense became Christ. This being so, all our actions and sufferings take on a Christocentric modality, and it is now no longer we who live and act but Christ who lives and acts in us (cf. Col. 1:24; 1:29; Matt. 10:42). The slightest action performed in Christ then takes on an infinite value, so to speak, gives great glory to God, and causes the heavenly Father to look on us with love and complacency.

Everything is directed to the Father. This was the constant and unique goal of everything that Jesus did. He sought always to do the Father's will (Matt. 26:39) and to glorify his Father (John 17:1). The first words of Christ recorded in the Gospel are: "Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49); and the last words he spoke on the cross were: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). St. Paul summarizes beautifully our union with Christ and the need of directing all things to the glory of the Father: "All are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:22-23).

But the glory of God does not pertain exclusively to the Father; it is glory giver. to the entire Trinity. In this way the divine circular motion is completed: Jesus, as Head and Mediator, gives the supernatural life of grace to his members; they, in turn, give glory to the Trinity by returning the gifts of the Spirit through Christ, with Christ and in Christ.

**Mary--Mother and Mediatrix**

Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full, as we read time and again in St. John's Gospel. Similarly, the Church places the following words on the lips of Mary: "He who finds me finds life, and wins favor from the Lord" (Prov. 8:35).

This indicates that Mary is not only the Mother of Christ, and therefore the Mother of God; she is also the Mother and Mediatrix of grace, and therefore the Mother of the Church, the Mystical Body and of the people of God. It is Mary's spiritual maternity that we wish to stress in these pages, for it is in her role as Mother and Mediatrix of grace that we can best appreciate Mary's role in our spiritual life. Léon Bloy touches on this aspect of Mary in the following lines:

As long as you have not learned to know Mary and have not given her your heart, you, will remain in darkness because you can receive the Holy Spirit only in her and through her .... Keep the exceptional teaching I am giving you hidden in the depths of your soul, and it will make you glow before the Lord like a magnificent torch. You will feel, you will understand that inasmuch as the Word made flesh, Jesus the Redeemer, was given to the world by Mary his Mother, it follows necessarily that we who are his members and his brothers, must be brought forth by her, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. The Church, whose language is ordinarily mysterious -- since she is obliged to speak in the manner in which God himself has spoken -- teaches us that no grace, no power, no love, indeed nothing, absolutely nothing comes to us from God except through Mary .... And that is an admirable, a sublime truth.

Now if you ask me how it happens that Mary, who is a real woman, or rather the real Woman, is so completely identified with the third Divine Person that she cannot be separated from him, I shall be obliged to leave you without an answer. I am not the confidant of the Blessed Trinity. But I know in a way that is absolutely, infinitely certain, that this is so. The Church, ever mysterious, calls Mary the Spouse of the Holy Ghost. This expression does not give forth much light, and yet it permits us to assume that the Mother of the Son of God possesses extraordinary importance and dignity.[\(14\)](#)

The key to Mary's greatness and dignity is her divine maternity, as is beautifully expressed in the most popular of Marian prayers, the Hail Mary. In the first part we salute Mary in the words of the angel, Hail, full of grace," to indicate that she was a chosen vessel, selected by God to be the Mother of his Son through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. In the light of her sublime vocation, everything in her life, before and after the Annunciation, revolves around her divine maternity. She was conceived immaculate, preserved from all stain of sin, so that she could be a *Mater digna*, a Mother worthy of God's only begotten Son.

In the second part of the Hail Mary we implore her help and her prayers because as Mother of God she is an all-powerful advocate. In addition, she is our Mother, and she became such at the very moment that she uttered her *fiat* and the Word became flesh, although it was not solemnly ratified until that sublime moment when Jesus said from the cross: "Behold thy son .... Behold thy Mother." Thus, Mary's divine maternity is necessarily linked to her spiritual maternity as Mother of grace, which follows as a logical consequence from the fact that she is Mother of Christ. We offer two beautiful testimonies to this doctrine, the first from St. John Fades and the second from St. Louis Mary de Montfort:

From the instant the Blessed Virgin gave her consent to the Incarnation of the Son of God

within her, she contributed to the salvation of all the elect. From that happy moment on, she has always carried them like a very good mother, that is, within the depths of her heart. This is true, for inasmuch as the Son of God is the Head of all the elect, they are one with him just as members are one with their head. And just as Mary has always carried this adorable Head in her maternal heart, so also she has always carried and will always carry in it all his authentic members.[\(15\)](#)

If Jesus Christ, the Head of men, is born in her, the predestinate, who are members of that Head, ought also to be born in her, by a necessary consequence. One and the same mother does not bring forth into the world the head without the members, or the members without the head; for this would be a monster of nature. So in like manner, in the order of grace, the Head and the members are born of one and the same Mother ....

Besides this, Jesus being at present as much as ever the fruit of Mary -- as heaven and earth repeat thousands and thousands of times a day: "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" -- it is certain that Jesus Christ is, for each man in particular who possesses him, as truly the fruit of the womb of Mary as he is for the whole world in general; so that if any one of the faithful has Jesus Christ formed in his heart, he can say boldly: "All thanks be to Mary! What I possess is her effect and her fruit, and without her I should never have had it." We can apply to her more than St. Paul applied to himself the words: "I am in labor again with all the children of God, until Jesus Christ my Son be formed in them in the fullness of his age" (Gal. 4:19).[\(16\)](#)

Through grace, every Christian is a member of Christ and, by that very fact, is also a child of Mary. The spiritual maternity of Mary is linked by logical necessity to the dogma of the Mystical Body. This indicates also that Mary's spiritual motherhood is not something added by extrinsic denomination to her divine maternity; rather, both maternities are one and simultaneous, as we have already indicated.

Mary's role in the sanctification of the Christian has been beautifully described in the writings of St. Louis Mary de Montfort. Here is a synthesis of his teaching: All Christians are called to perfection and sanctity; to reach perfection it is necessary to practice and perfect the virtues; to practice the virtues we need the help of God's grace; to obtain God's grace it is necessary to receive it through Mary. The reasons for the last statement are as follows: (1) of all God's creatures, only Mary found grace before God, both for herself and for others; (2) Mary gave birth to the Author of grace and is therefore called the Mother of grace; (3) in giving Mary his only begotten Son, the eternal Father gave Mary all graces; (4) God appointed Mary as dispenser of grace, and by reason of this office she gives grace to whom she wishes and when she wishes; (5) as in the natural order a child must have a father and a mother, so in the order of grace the Christian has God as the father and Mary as the mother; (6) since Mary formed the Head of the Mystical Body, she should also form the members; (7) Mary was and still remains the spouse of the Holy Spirit; (8) as in the natural order the child is nourished by its mother, in the supernatural order Mary nourishes and strengthens her children; and (9) he who finds Mary, finds Jesus, who is with her always.[\(17\)](#)

We receive grace through Jesus Christ in virtue of his merits as well as by reason of the fact that he is the source and fountain of grace as Head of the Mystical Body. In like manner we receive grace through Mary as Mediatrix and co-Redemptrix. Pope Benedict XV asserted that the



Blessed Virgin, "in conjunction with Christ, redeemed the human race."[\(18\)](#) Therefore, in some unique way, Mary our Mother merited grace for us. Her cooperation with God in the Incarnation of his Son, her plenitude of grace and her ever-increasing charity, her total submission to the will of the Father -- all these qualities serve as a sound basis for her special type of merit for the sanctification of others.

It is true that only Jesus Christ could merit for us in strict justice; therefore when we speak of Mary's merit it can only be a question of congruous merit. Her merit rests completely on that of her Son, Jesus Christ, who made it possible that her life and works and prayers could be meritorious for herself and for others. Her merit is congruous in the highest possible degree, as St. Pius X indicated when he wrote: "In the work of our salvation, Christ joined his Mother to himself in such a way that she merited for us congruously what he himself merited for us condignly."[\(19\)](#) It is on the basis of her special type of merit that she deserves to be called Mediatrix of all graces and co-Redemptrix.

Like her Son, Jesus Christ, Mary is in the state of glory. There she is closer to us and our needs and less a stranger to us than the departed souls of our beloved dead. Her love for her spiritual children bridges the vast distance between heaven and earth even as it places her before the throne of God to intercede for them. Her activity on behalf of her children is described as follows by a contemporary theologian:

The activity of the Blessed Virgin on our behalf can, it seems, be summed up in two decisive interventions that can be deduced from the Gospels .... At Cana, her intervention consisted in taking the initiative to say to her Son: "They have no wine," in having the boldness to urge him to act and then to act herself accordingly. On Calvary her intervention took place when everything within her impelled her to repeat after him: "They know not what they do." This would seem to encompass everything: on the one hand, our poor humanity in its indigence and sinfulness; and on the other hand, the incomparable maternity that wraps humanity in its grace and rushes to its rescue. Indeed these two acts are the most maternal acts possible. The first consists in giving her children something they need; the other, in winning forgiveness for their misdeeds. These acts reveal Mary in the fullness of her motherhood.[\(20\)](#)

Having seen the nature of Mary's role in our sanctification, we again turn to St. Louis Mary de Montfort to learn the characteristics of true devotion to our heavenly Mother. First, our devotion should be interior; that is, it should be firmly established in the mind and heart. Secondly, it should be tender; that is, characterized by the respectful and trustful love of a child for a loving mother. Thirdly, it should be holy; that is, it should prompt souls to avoid sin and to cultivate the Christian virtues. Fourthly, it should be constant; that is, it should strengthen the soul in good so that it will not abandon its spiritual practices. Fifthly, it should be disinterested; that is, it should enable the soul to rise above self and self-centered interest to seek God alone and his glory.[\(21\)](#)

## CHAPTER NOTES

1. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 108, a. 1; III, q. 7, a. 8.

St. Paul has another doxology in Col. 1:15-20.

Cf. *Mystici Corporis*, pp. 32-3; 42. See Denz.-Schön. 3811.

St. Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), p. 304.

5. Columba Marmion, *Christ, the Life of the Soul* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1936), p. 39.

M. M. Philipon, *The Spiritual Doctrine of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1947), p. 54.

Marmion, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-1.

*Ibid.*

*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1.

10. Council of Trent, Denz.-Schön, 1606.

*Ibid.*, 1451; 1606.

*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 62, a. 5, ad 2.

Marmion, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Léon Bloy, *Lettres à sa fiancée* (Paris, 1922), p. 127.

15. R. Bernard, *The Mystery of Mary*, trans. A. M. Bouchard, (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1960), p. 9.

St. Louis Mary de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Bay Shore, N.Y.: Montfort Fathers, 1949), pp. 21-2.

*Ibid.*, Part I, Chap. 1.

*Sodalitati N.D. a bona morte*, March 2, 1918.

*Ad diem illum*, February 4, 1904; Denz.-Schön. 3370.

R. Bernard, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-93.

21. St. Louis Mary de Montfort, *op. cit.*, Part I, Chap. 3.

## 4

### The Supernatural Organism

Each of us is a complex being composed of body and soul, of matter and spirit, intimately united to form one person. It has been said that each of us is a microcosm, a synthesis of all creation. We have existence, as do inanimate things; we are nourished, reproduce, and grow, as do plants; we have sensate knowledge, passions, and the power of locomotion, as do animals; and like the angels, we can know the spiritual truth and be drawn to spiritual good. All these vital powers -- vegetative, sensitive, and rational -- constitute the natural life of man. They are not superimposed one on the other; they compenetrates one another and mutually complement one another, to lead

to the natural perfection of the whole person.

There is nothing in our nature that postulates, either proximately or remotely, the supernatural order. The elevation to this order is a totally gratuitous favor of God that infinitely transcends all the exigencies of nature. Nevertheless, there is a close analogy between the natural and the supernatural orders, for grace does not destroy nature but perfects and elevates it.

The supernatural order constitutes a true life for us and has an organism that is similar to the natural vital organism. As in the natural order we can distinguish four basic elements in human life -- the living subject, the formal principle of life, the faculties or powers, and the operations of those faculties -- so we can find similar elements in our supernatural organism. The subject is the soul; the formal principle of supernatural life is sanctifying grace; the faculties are the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and the operations are the acts of those virtues and gifts.

The human soul is a spiritual substance that is independent of matter in its being and its operations, although while it is in the body it makes use of bodily powers for the exercise of various functions. But the soul is not a completely independent substance, nor can the soul alone be properly called a person. A person is not the body alone nor the soul alone, but the composite that results from the substantial union of the two.

We know from reason and from sound philosophy, and also from the teaching of the Church,<sup>(1)</sup> that the soul is the substantial form of the body. Consequently, the soul gives us our essential grade of perfection, and communicates to the body the same act of being by which the soul itself exists. But the soul is not immediately operative; it needs faculties or powers for operation; and the specifically human faculties that emanate from the essence of the soul are the intellect and the will.

Such is the subject in which our supernatural life resides. Grace, which is the formal principle of that supernatural life, is rooted in the very essence of the soul in a static manner. The virtues and the gifts, which are the dynamic elements in the supernatural organism, reside in the human faculties or powers and elevate them to the supernatural order.

### **Sanctifying Grace**

We have said that sanctifying grace is the formal principle of our supernatural organism, as the spiritual soul is the formal principle of our natural vital organism. As a participation in the very nature of God, grace elevates us to the status of children of God and heirs of heaven. "We are children of God," exclaims St. Paul. "But if we are children, we are heirs as well; heirs of God, heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17). And in his famous sermon before the Areopagus, he insists that we are the race of God: "We are God's offspring" (Acts 17:29).

Sanctifying grace can be defined as a supernatural quality, inhering in the soul, which gives us a physical and formal participation, although analogous and accidental, in the very nature and life of God. Grace is clearly *supernatural*, as the formal principle that elevates us and constitutes us in the supernatural life. It far excels all natural things and makes us enter into the sphere of the divine. St. Thomas has said that the minimum degree of sanctifying grace in one individual is greater than the natural good of the entire universe.<sup>(2)</sup>

That grace *inheres in the soul* is denied by those who hold for extrinsic justification, but it is a

truth of faith defined by the Council of Trent.<sup>(3)</sup> The theological explanation is contained in the following principle: "The love of God infuses and creates goodness in things." In us, love is born of the good object, but God creates goodness in an object by the mere fact of loving it. And since love finds or makes things similar to itself, God's love for us elevates us to his level and deifies us, so to speak, by means of a formal participation in the divine nature. "It is necessary that God alone deify by communicating his divine nature through a certain participation of likeness."<sup>(4)</sup> Briefly, God loves with a supernatural love, and since God's love is the cause of goodness, it follows that he produces in the person he loves the supernatural goodness that is grace.

Participation is the assimilation by an inferior thing of some perfection existing in a superior thing. Sanctifying grace gives us a *physical, formal, analogous and accidental participation* in the divine nature. That it makes us participants in the divine nature is a truth constantly repeated in Sacred Scripture. St. Peter says, for example: "He has bestowed on us the great and precious things he promised, so that through these you ... might become sharers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). The liturgy also proclaims this fact in the Preface for the feast of the Ascension: "He ascended to heaven to make us participants in his divinity." And how persuasively St. Leo speaks of this truth when he says: "Recognize your dignity, O Christian, and having been made a participant of the divine nature, do not desire to return to the baseness of your former condition."

But it is necessary to examine the manner in which sanctifying grace confers a participation in the divine nature. God is not like creatures, for he and he alone is being by his very essence, while all creatures are being by participation. Nevertheless, creatures are in some way similar to God because every agent produces something similar to itself in some respect. But it cannot be said that creatures are like God by reason of a communication of form according to genus and species, but only according to a certain analogy, because God is being by essence, whereas creatures are being by participation.

Hence, there are three classes of creatures that are like him in some respect: *Irrational creatures* participate in the divine perfection so far as they have being, but this likeness is so remote that it is called a trace or vestige. *Rational creatures*, so far as they are gifted with a spiritual soul and faculties, represent the perfections of God in a more explicit manner; for that reason they are called the natural image of God. The *souls of the just* are united with God by sanctifying grace and for that reason they are called the supernatural image of God and, indeed, his adopted children.

But does sanctifying grace require a physical and formal participation in the very nature of God? Undoubtedly yes. Apart from the fact that this is a truth that is verified in revelation, there are theological arguments to support it.

First, the operations proper to a superior nature cannot become connatural to lower nature unless the latter participates in some way in the former, because as a thing is, so it acts, and the effects cannot be greater than the cause. But some supernatural operations do become connatural to man through grace. Therefore, it is evident that man, through grace, participates physically and formally in the very *nature of God*.

Secondly, from grace springs an inclination to God as he is in himself. But an inclination to God as he is in himself must be rooted in a nature that is divine, at least by participation. Moreover, this participation must be physical and formal, since the inclination proceeds physically and

formally from that participation.

Thirdly, the infused virtues are the faculties of supernatural operations in us; but, since operation follows being, a supernatural operation that proceeds from the soul presupposes in the soul the presence of a supernatural entity, and this can be nothing other than a physical and formal participation in the nature of God himself. It is true that through the power of an actual grace a sinner can realize a supernatural act without the need of sanctifying grace, but we are speaking of an act that proceeds from the soul connaturally, and not of an impulse to second act without passing through the proximate habitual dispositions.

It now remains for us to examine in what sense the physical and formal participation in the divine nature is *accidental and analogous*. Analogous participation signifies that the divine nature is not communicated to us univocally, as the Father transmits it to his Son by way of the eternal generation. We do not become divinized through grace by generation or by a pantheistic union of our substance with the divine substance. Rather it is an analogous participation in virtue of which that which exists in God in an infinite manner is participated by the soul in a limited and finite manner. The mirror that captures the image of the sun does not acquire the nature of the sun but merely reflects its splendor. In like manner, says St. Leo, "the original dignity of our race lies in the fact that the divine goodness shines in us as in a resplendent mirror."

The reason why participation in the divine nature through grace is an accidental one is explained by St. Thomas: "Every substance constitutes either the nature of the thing of which it is the substance, or it is a part of the nature, as matter and form are called substance. And because grace is above all nature, it cannot be a substance or a substantial form, but it is an accidental form of the soul. Hence what is substantial in God becomes accidental in the soul that participates in the divine goodness."[\(5\)](#)

Moreover, the Council of Trent expressly teaches that habitual grace inheres in the soul of man.[\(6\)](#) But that which inheres in another is not a substance but an accident, as we learn in philosophy. Nor does this in any way lessen the dignity of grace, for as a supernatural accident it infinitely transcends all created or creatable natural substances. Let us not forget the words of St. Thomas, to the effect that the good of grace in one individual surpasses the good of nature in the entire universe.

We have stated that through grace we share in the nature and life of God. There are several reasons for saying this:

1. Grace is the connatural principle of the operations that reach God under the formal aspect of deity. Therefore, grace, as the principle of these operations, must necessarily participate in the divine nature precisely as divine, that is, under the formal aspect of deity.

The antecedent of this argument is undeniable; all supernatural love and knowledge have God as their object. They focus directly on God as he is in himself, whether it be through the veil of faith or in the clear light of the beatific vision. The conclusion necessarily follows from the fact that grace is the root principle of the theological virtues.

2. Supernatural participation in the divine nature could not otherwise be distinguished from a merely natural participation, which is also a formal participation, because man is

an image of God. Therefore the sharing in the divine nature precisely as divine constitutes the distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

3. In order to transcend the natural order, the supernatural form that is grace must be either God himself or something that touches God under the formal aspect of his deity. But grace is not God himself, as is evident, and hence it must necessarily be something that touches God precisely under the formality of his deity. In other words, it is a participation of the divine nature precisely as divine.

St. Thomas says that "grace is nothing other than a certain participated likeness of the divine nature." (7) If we take the intimate nature of God as an exemplar, sanctifying grace is a perfect imitation that is effected in us by divine infusion. It produces in the soul a likeness to God that infinitely transcends that which is had in the purely natural order. By reason of this, we become God's children by adoption and form a part' of the family of God. Such is the sublime grandeur to which we are elevated by grace.

### **Effects of Grace**

The first effect of sanctifying grace is that it gives us that *participation in the divine nature*, of which we have already spoken. This is the root and foundation of all the other effects that flow from sanctifying grace.

Among the other effects, the three mentioned by St. Paul in his Epistle, to the Romans hold a place of preeminence: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, 'Abba!' (that is, 'Father'). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God. But if we are children, we are heirs as well: heirs of God, heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:15-17).

#### *Grace Makes Us Adopted Children of God*

God the Father has only one Son according to nature: the eternal Word. Only to him is there transmitted eternally, by an ineffable intellectual generation, the divine nature in all its plenitude. In virtue of this natural generation the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity possesses the selfsame divine essence of the Father and is God as fully as the Father is God. Therefore, Christ, whose human nature is hypostatically united with the Person of the Word, is not the adopted Son of God, but the natural Son, in all the rigor of the word.

Our divine filiation through grace is of a different kind. It is not a question of a natural filiation but of an *adoptive filiation*. But it is necessary to understand this truth correctly in order not to form a deficient concept of this great dignity. Adoption is the gratuitous admission of a stranger to a family. The child is henceforth considered as a son or daughter and is given a right to inheritance of the family good. Our adoption through grace does this and much more.

Purely human or legal adoption confers on the one adopted the rights of a legitimate child but without infusing in the adopted the blood of the family, and hence without causing any intrinsic change in the person adopted. On the other hand, on adopting us as his children, the one and triune God infuses sanctifying grace in us, which gives us a real and formal participation in the divine nature itself.

It is an intrinsic adoption that places in our souls, physically and formally, a divine reality in virtue of which we share in the very life of God. It is a true generation, a spiritual birth, and it reflects, analogically, the eternal generation of the Word of God. As St. John says explicitly, sanctifying grace not only gives us the right to be called sons of God, but it also makes us such in reality: "See what love the Father has bestowed on us in letting us be called children of God! Yet that is what we are" (1 John 3:1).

### *Grace Makes Us True Heirs of God*

This is an inevitable consequence of our divine adoptive filiation. St. Paul says expressly: "If we are children, we are heirs as well" (Rom. 8:17). And it is God himself, one in essence and three in persons, who is our inheritance as adopted children. "I am your shield; I will make your reward very great," God said to Abraham (Gen. 15:1); and he says the same to every soul in grace.

The beatific vision and the enjoyment of God that accompanies it are the principal part of the heritage that belongs, through grace, to the adopted children of God. This will cause the soul ineffable happiness, which will completely satisfy all its aspirations and longings. And the soul will receive all these benefits and gifts under the title of justice. Grace is entirely gratuitous; but once possessed, it gives us the capacity to merit heaven under the title of justice. Since grace is a divine form that inheres in the soul, any supernatural action of which grace is the root and principle bespeaks an intrinsic relation to glory and carries with it a title to the same. Grace and glory are situated on the same plane, and they are substantially the same life. There is between them only a difference of grade or degree. It is the same life in its initial or terminal stage. Thus, St. Thomas states that "grace is nothing other than the beginning of glory in us."[\(8\)](#)

### *Grace Makes Us Coheirs With Christ*

This relation derives immediately from the two already mentioned. The reason, as St. Augustine points out, is that he who says "Our Father" to the Father of Christ, what shall he say to Christ but brother?[\(9\)](#) By the very fact that sanctifying grace communicates to us a participation in the divine life that Christ possesses in all its plenitude, it necessarily follows that we become his brothers and sisters. He desired to be our brother according to his humanity, in order to make us his brothers and sisters according to his divinity. St. Paul states that God has predestined us "to share the image of his Son, that the Son might be the first-born of many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). By nature Christ is the only Son; but in the order of grace and adoption he is our elder Brother, as well as our Head and the cause of our salvation.

For this reason, the Father deigns to look upon us as if we were one thing with the Son. He loves us as he loves his Son; he looks on Christ as our brother and confers on us the title to the same heritage. We are coheirs with Christ. "Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory God, for whom and through whom all things exist, should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering. He who consecrates and those who are consecrated have one and the same Father. Therefore he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, 'I will announce your name to my brothers, I will sing your praises in the midst of the assembly' " (Heb. 2:10-12). God has modeled us on Christ; with Christ, we are children of the same Father who is in heaven. All this will be effected by realizing the supreme desire of Christ: that we be one with him as he himself is one with the Father. The foregoing are the three principal effects of grace, but they are

not the only effects. The others are as follows:

#### *Grace Gives Us Supernatural Life*

The physical and formal participation in the very nature of God, which constitutes the essence of sanctifying grace, infinitely transcends the being and exigencies of every created nature, human or angelic. By it, we are elevated not only above the human plane but even above the angelic nature. We enter into the sphere of the divine, are made members of the family of God, and begin to live in a divine manner. Grace, consequently, has communicated to us a new type of life, infinitely superior to that of nature; it is a supernatural life.

#### *Grace Makes Us Just and Pleasing to God*

As a physical participation in the divine nature, grace necessarily gives us a sharing in the divine justice and sanctity, since all the attributes of God are really identified with his essence. Therefore, sanctifying grace is absolutely incompatible with mortal sin.

The Council of Trent states that the justification of the sinner through sanctifying grace "is not merely the remission of sins but also the sanctification and interior renovation of man by the voluntary reception of grace and the gifts, by which man is changed from unjust to just, and from an enemy into a friend." A little further on, the Council adds that the unique formal cause of the justification is "the justice of God, not that which makes him just, but that which makes us just; or rather, that which, given by him, renews us interiorly and makes us not only to be reputed as just but that we should be called such and should be such in very truth."[\(10\)](#)

#### *Grace Gives Us the Capacity for Supernatural Merit*

Without sanctifying grace, the most heroic natural works would have absolutely, no value for eternal life. A person who lacks grace is a corpse in the supernatural order, and the dead can merit nothing. Supernatural merit presupposes radically the possession of the supernatural life. This principle is of the greatest importance in practice. While people are in mortal sin, they are incapacitated for meriting anything at all in the supernatural order.

#### *Grace Unites Us Intimately With God*

United as we are with God in the natural order through his divine conserving power, which makes him truly present to all creatures by his essence, presence, and power, sanctifying grace increases this union to an ineffable degree and transforms and raises it to an infinitely higher type of union. By reason of this new union, God is present in the just soul as a friend, and not merely as creator and conserver, establishing a mutual exchange of love and friendship between the soul and himself. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16).

The ultimate perfection of grace in this life and even the indissoluble union of the beatific vision in glory are not substantially different from the union effected between God and the soul that enjoys even the minimal degree of sanctifying grace. There is, of course, a difference in the intensity and intimacy of union, but all the grades are of the same substantial order.

#### *Grace Makes Us Living Temples of the Trinity*



This is a consequence of what we have just stated, and Christ himself revealed this truth when he said: "Anyone who loves me will be true, to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him" (John 14:23). The dogma of the indwelling Trinity is a cornerstone of the entire systematic structure of spiritual theology, for it constitutes that "kingdom of God within us" where the mystical experience and union are brought to their full perfection here on earth. We shall therefore consider in greater detail this effect of grace that under some aspects would seem to be identified with grace or at least to touch the very formality of sanctifying grace.

### **Indwelling of the Trinity**

The indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in the souls of the just is clearly revealed in the New Testament, as shown in the following:

If a man loves me, he will keep 'my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (John 14:23).

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16).

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own (1 Cor.6:19).

Guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (2 Tim. 1:14).

Scripture uses various formulas to express the truth that God dwells in the soul in grace. The indwelling is attributed to the Holy Spirit, not because there is any special presence of the Holy Spirit that is not common to Father and the Son, but because this is a work of the love of God, and the Holy Spirit is essential love in the bosom of the Trinity.

Theologians have written much and disputed much about the nature of the indwelling of the Trinity in the souls of the just. Perhaps none of the theories provides an adequate explanation; certainly no one of them has been commonly accepted. But what is important for our purposes is not so much the formality and mode of the indwelling as the fact, its purpose, and its consequences. And here we find common agreement among theologians and spiritual writers.

To acclimate ourselves to this mystery, it is well to recall that through sanctifying grace we are "begotten of God" (1 John 3:9). We live a new life, the participated divine life through which we become children of God. The doctrine of our divine filiation is constantly repeated in the pages of Scripture, as is that of the divine indwelling, to which it is closely related.

What does God do when he dwells in a soul? Nothing other than to communicate himself to that soul, to engender it as his child, which is to give it a participation in his nature and his life. And that generation is not verified, as is human generation, by a transient action through which the

child begins to be and to live independently of the father who provided the seed. Rather, it presupposes a continued act of God so long as the soul remains in his friendship and grace.

Through grace, the soul is constantly receiving from God its supernatural life, as the embryo in the womb is constantly receiving vital sustenance from the mother. For this reason did Christ come into the world, that we might live by him, as St. John says (1 John 4:9), and Christ himself says that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly (*ibid.*). Now we can see why St. Paul says: "And the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Our divine adoptive generation has some similarity with the eternal generation of the Word in the bosom of the Father, and our union with God through grace. is somewhat similar to that which exists between the Word and the Father through the Holy Spirit. No theologian would ever have dared to say this, were it not for the sublime words of Christ, spoken at the Last Supper:

I do not pray for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word, that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be (one] in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one, as we are one -- I living in them, you living in me -- that their unity may be complete. So shall the world know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me (John 17:20-23).

The Son is one with the Father by the unity of nature; we are one with God by the formal and physical participation of his divine nature, which participation is nothing other than sanctifying grace. The Son lives by the Father, and we live by participation in God. He is in the Father, and the Father is in him; we are also in God and God is in us.

Thus, through grace we are introduced into the life of the Trinity, which is the life of God, and God dwells in us and communicates his divine life to us. And it is the three Persons who dwell in us, since it is not the property of any one Person in particular to engender us as children of God, but it is an action common to the Three. They are in the just soul, all three Persons, engendering that soul supernaturally, vivifying it with their life, introducing it through knowledge and love to the most profound relationships. Here the Father engenders the Son, and from the Father and the Son proceeds the Holy Spirit, thus realizing in the soul the sublime mystery of the triune unity and the one Trinity, which is the inner life of God himself.

It is a fact testified by the mystics, that in the most profound center of their souls they experienced the august presence of the Blessed Trinity working intensely in them. And the experience of the mystics is a verification of the lofty teachings of theology. St. Thomas, writing as a theologian, makes the following startling statement: "By the gift of sanctifying grace, the rational creature is perfected so that it can freely use not only that created gift but enjoy the divine Person himself." And in the same place he writes: "We are said to possess only what we can freely use or enjoy; and to have the power of enjoying the divine Person can only be through sanctifying grace."[\(11\)](#)

Here in all its sublime grandeur is the purpose of the indwelling of the Trinity in our souls. God himself, one in essence and three in Persons, becomes the object of an intimate experience, and when this experimental joy reaches the culmination of the transforming union, the souls that have reached this summit are unable to express themselves in human language. They prefer to

taste in silence that which in no way could be explained to others. As St. John of the Cross points out:

There are no words to expound such sublime things of God as come to pass in these souls; the proper way to speak is for one that knows them to understand them inwardly and to feel them inwardly and enjoy them and be silent concerning them .... This alone can be said of it with truth, that it savors of eternal life. For although in this life we may not have perfect fruition of it, as in glory, nevertheless, this touch, being of God, savors of eternal life.(12)

In these sublime heights, where the soul experiences the divine indwelling that it believed and knew through faith, it now experiences as if by sight and touch, as St. Teresa explains:

So that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or of the soul; for it is no imaginary vision. Here all three Persons communicate themselves to the soul and speak to the soul and explain to it those words which the gospel attributes to the Lord, namely, that he and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul, which loves him and keeps his commandments.(13)

### **Actual Grace**

The process of sanctification is primarily the work of God, since it pertains to the order of grace, but it also requires human cooperation with the help of grace. Habitual or sanctifying grace, as we have seen, is the basic bond of union between God and the soul and, as such, it is meant to be permanent. Actual grace, on the other hand, is a transient stimulation or movement by which the soul is prompted to do or receive something relating to justification, sanctification, or salvation. Sanctifying grace is central to the Christian life, since it is the very principle of that life, and therefore we have treated it at length. Actual grace is more closely related to man's cooperation with God, and since it touches the freedom and choice of man's will, and the causality and intervention of God in human acts, it has given rise to many disputed questions concerning man's need of actual grace to attain justification or to perform salutary acts when justified. It is not necessary for us to enter the field of controversy, but simply to demonstrate the necessity of actual grace in the Christian life and to note the principal types.

If we accept the basic division of grace into the grace that sanctifies the recipient (*gratia gratum faciens*) and the grace that sanctifies others (*gratia gratis data*), and then divide the former into habitual grace and actual grace, we would have to say that actual grace comprises all the powers, movements, dispositions, and inspirations by which we are empowered to do or receive something on the supernatural level.. On God's part, grace is one; the divisions are made on the basis of man, and therefore theologians have further divided actual grace into *external or objective* graces, which comprise any means at all by which God's loving presence can be encountered (e.g., the liturgy, sacramentals, sermons, good example), and *internally operative graces* that touch the human will effectively.(14) It should be evident, however, that actual grace must be interiorized, that is, it must internally influence our will and arouse our cooperation; otherwise it remains ineffective.

The necessity for actual grace in the Christian life lies in the fact that even the just person needs special help from God to avoid all sin and to persevere in grace. Following the teaching of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas maintains that a person in the state of sanctifying grace still needs the further assistance of grace, first, "because no created thing can proceed to any action whatsoever except in virtue of the divine motion," and secondly, because of the actual state of human nature, subject to ignorance and weakness of the flesh and further hampered by the wounds of original sin. Moreover, even when endowed with sanctifying grace and the infused virtues, the just person needs the stimulus of actual grace to actuate those supernatural powers. Every act of an infused virtue requires a previous movement of grace to set that virtue or gift in motion. This follows from the metaphysical principle that a thing in potency cannot be reduced to act except by something already in act, and since we are dealing with the supernatural order and actions, an actuating grace is needed to initiate a supernatural act.

Actual graces have three functions: to dispose the soul for the reception of the infused habits of sanctifying grace and the virtues, to actuate these infused habits, and to prevent their loss.

Actual grace disposes the soul for the reception of the infused habits either when the soul has never possessed them or when the soul has lost them through mortal sin. In the latter case actual grace will stimulate repentance for one's sins, the fear of punishment, and confidence in the divine mercy.

Actual grace also serves to activate the infused virtues, and if the individual is in the state of sanctifying grace (for faith and hope can exist without grace), the actuation perfects the infused virtues and is meritorious of increase and growth in the supernatural life.

The third function of actual grace is to prevent the loss of sanctifying grace and the infused virtues through mortal sin. It implies a strengthening in the face of temptations, an awareness of special dangers, mortification of the passions, and inspiration through good thoughts and holy desires.

It is evident, therefore, that actual grace is a priceless treasure. It gives efficacy to sanctifying grace and the infused virtues. It is the impulse of God that places our supernatural organism in operation and prevents us from forgetting that our soul, in the state of grace, is the temple of the Blessed Trinity.

### **The Infused Virtues**

The existence and necessity of the infused, supernatural virtues follow from the nature of sanctifying grace. Although grace is classified as an accident and not a substance, its role in the supernatural life of man is similar to that of the human soul. Therefore, sanctifying grace is not immediately operative but static, although it is the remote principle of all the activities of the person in grace. And since habitual grace is the principle of the supernatural life, it needs faculties or powers as the immediate principles of operation.

If this were not the case, we would be elevated to the supernatural order only as regards our soul but not as regards our operative powers. And although, absolutely speaking, God could elevate our faculties to the supernatural order by means of continual actual graces, this would produce a violence in the human psychological structure by reason of the tremendous disproportion between the purely natural faculty and the supernatural act to be effected. And such violence

could not be reconciled with the customary suavity of divine providence, which moves all things according to their natures. As St. Thomas points out:

It is not fitting that God should provide less for those he loves, that they may acquire supernatural good, than for creatures whom he loves that they may acquire natural good. Now he so provides for natural creatures that not merely does he move them to their natural acts, but he bestows on them certain forms and powers, which are the principles of acts, in order that they may of themselves be inclined to these movements, and thus the movements whereby they are moved by God . become natural and easy to creatures .... Much more, therefore, does he infuse into those he moves toward the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities whereby they may be moved by him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good.(15)

### *Nature of the Infused Virtues*

The infused virtues may be defined as operative habits infused by God into the faculties of the soul to dispose them to function according to the dictates of reason enlightened by faith.

"Operative habits" is the generic element of the definition, common to all natural and supernatural virtues. On the purely natural level an operative habit is a quality, difficult to remove, that disposes the subject to function with facility, promptness, and delight. It gives the subject facility for operation because every habit is an increase of energy in relation to its corresponding action; it gives promptness because it constitutes, so to speak, a second nature in virtue of which the subjects quickly give themselves to action; and it causes delight in the operation because it produces an act that is prompt, facile, and connatural.

"Infused by God" is a radical difference between the infused and acquired virtues. The natural or acquired virtues are engendered in us by means of repeated acts; the only cause of the supernatural or infused virtues is the divine infusion. Their purpose is to supernaturalize the faculties by elevating them to the order of grace and making them capable of performing supernatural acts. Without them, or without the actual grace that substitutes for them (as in the case of the sinner before justification), it would be impossible for us to perform a supernatural act. St. Thomas says: "As from the essence of the soul flows its powers, which are the principles of deeds, so likewise the virtues, whereby the powers are moved to act, flow into the powers of the soul from grace."(16)

The principal difference between the acquired and infused virtues is by reason of the formal object. The infused virtues dispose the faculties to follow the dictate or command, not of reason alone, as do the acquired virtues, but of reason illumined by faith. The acquired moral virtues, however heroic and perfect, could never attain the formal object of the infused virtues. With good reason does St. Thomas say that the principal difference between the acquired and infused virtues is by reason of their formal objects:

The object of every virtue is a good considered as in that virtue's proper matter; thus the object of temperance is a good with respect to the pleasures connected with the concupiscence of touch. The formal aspect of this object is from reason, which fixes the mean in these concupiscences. Now it is evident that the mean that is appointed in such concupiscence according to the rule of human reason is seen under a different aspect

from the mean that is fixed according to the divine rule. For instance, in the consumption of food, the mean fixed by human reason is that food should not harm the health of the body nor hinder the use of reason; whereas according to the divine rule it behooves man to chastise his body and bring it under subjection (1 Cor. 9:27) by abstinence in food, drink, and the like. It is therefore evident that infused and acquired temperance differ in species; and the same applies to the other virtues.[\(17\)](#)

Nor does it change matters to object that the act of infused temperance is identical with that of acquired temperance (namely, the moderation or control of the pleasures of touch) and that therefore there is no specific difference between them. St. Thomas admits the identity of the material object but insists on the specific and radical difference by reason of the formal object: "Both acquired and infused temperance moderate desires for pleasures of touch, but for different reasons as stated: wherefore their respective acts are not identical."[\(18\)](#)

But the infused virtues lack something of the perfect definition of habits because they do not give complete facility in operation, which is characteristic of true habits. They confer, it is true, an intrinsic inclination and promptness for good, but they do not give an extrinsic facility because they do not remove all the obstacles to good, as is evident in the case of converted sinners who experience great difficulty in the performance of good because of their past acquired vices. St. Thomas distinguishes clearly the facility proper to the two kinds of virtue: "Facility in performing the acts of virtue can proceed from two sources: from custom (and the infused virtue does not give this facility from its beginning) and from a strong inhesion as regards the object of the virtue, and this is found in the infused virtue at its very beginning."[\(19\)](#)

The principal differences between the acquired and infused virtues can be summarized as follows:

*By reason of their essence.* The natural or acquired virtues are habits in the strict sense of the word. They do not give the power to act (for the faculty has that already), but they give facility in operation. The supernatural or infused virtues give the power to act supernaturally (without them it would be impossible, apart from an actual grace), but they do not give facility in operation.

*By reason of the efficient cause.* The natural virtues are acquired by our own proper acts; the supernatural virtues are infused by God together with sanctifying grace.

*By reason of the final cause.* The acquired, natural virtues enable us to conduct ourselves rightly in regard to human acts in accordance with our rational nature. The supernatural virtues, on the other hand, give us the ability to conduct ourselves rightly in regard to our condition as adopted children of God, destined for eternal life, and to exercise the supernatural acts proper to the life of grace:

*By reason of the formal object.* The natural virtues work for the good according to the dictate and light of natural reason; the supernatural virtues work for the good according to the dictate and supernatural light of faith.

There are four properties that the infused virtues have in common with the acquired natural virtues: (1) they consist in the mean or medium between the two extremes (except for the theological virtues, and even these do so by reason of the subject and mode); (2) in the state of

perfection they are united among themselves by prudence (and the infused virtues by charity also); (3) they are unequal in perfection or eminence; and (4) those that imply no imperfection endure after this life as to their formal elements.

The characteristics or properties that are exclusive to the infused virtues are the following:

1. They always accompany sanctifying grace and are infused together with grace. This doctrine is common among the theologians, although it is not exactly defined by the Church.
2. They are really distinct from sanctifying grace. It suffices to recall that grace is an entitative habit infused into the essence of the soul, while the infused virtues are operative habits infused into the potencies, which are really distinct from the soul.
3. They are specifically distinct from the corresponding acquired natural virtues. This has been previously demonstrated.
4. They are supernatural in their essence but not in their mode of operation.
5. They increase with sanctifying grace. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Rather let us profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head" (Eph. 4:15). To the Philippians he says: "My prayer is that your love may more and more abound, both in understanding and wealth of experience" (Phil. 1:9). And he prays for the Romans "that through the power of the Holy Spirit you may have hope in abundance" (Rom. 15:13). St. Peter writes: "Grow rather in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).
6. They give us the intrinsic power for supernatural acts but not the extrinsic facility for those acts. This explains why the repentant habitual sinner experiences great difficulty in the practice of virtue. The difficulty can be overcome by perfecting the acquired virtues. The acquired virtues cannot assist the infused virtues intrinsically, of course, because a natural, acquired habit cannot perfect a supernatural, infused virtue. However, it can help extrinsically by removing obstacles or by correcting disordered concupiscence. When the obstacles are removed, the infused virtues can begin to work promptly and delightfully.
7. Except for faith and hope, they are all lost as a result of mortal sin. The reason is that the infused virtues are like properties flowing from sanctifying grace, and when grace is destroyed they also are destroyed. Only faith and hope can remain, and they in an unformed and imperfect state.<sup>(20)</sup> But if a person sins directly against these two virtues, they also are destroyed, and the soul is then deprived of every trace of the supernatural.
8. They cannot diminish directly. This diminution could be caused only by venial sin or by the cessation of the acts of virtue. But they cannot be diminished by venial sin because this sin leaves intact the orientation to the supernatural end proper to the infused virtues. Nor can they be diminished by the cessation of the acts of the virtues, for these virtues were not acquired by human effort and hence do not depend on repeated acts. Nevertheless, the infused virtues may be diminished indirectly by venial sins so far as these sins stifle the fervor of charity, impede progress in virtue, and predispose to mortal sin.

### *Division of the Infused Virtues*

Some of the infused virtues ordain the faculties to the end or goal; others dispose them in regard to the means. The first group is the theological virtues; the second group is the moral virtues. The first corresponds, in the order of grace, with the principles of the natural order that direct us to our natural end; the second corresponds with the acquired virtues of the natural order that perfect us in regard to the means. Once again the close similarity and analogy between the natural and the supernatural orders are evident.

**Theological Virtues.** The existence of the theological virtues seems to be clearly indicated in several texts of St. Paul, including:

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5); "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Moreover, the Church has stated in equivalent formulas that we receive with sanctifying grace the gifts of faith, hope, charity, and the other virtues.[\(21\)](#)

The existence of the theological virtues is postulated by the very nature of sanctifying grace. Since grace is not immediately operative, it requires operative principles to grow and develop to perfection. Among these principles, some must refer to the supernatural end (theological virtues), and others must refer to the means that lead to that end (moral virtues). This argument takes its force principally from the divine economy and the workings of divine providence, made known to us through revelation.

The theological virtues are operative principles by which we are ordained directly and immediately to God as our supernatural end. They have God himself as their material object and one of his divine attributes as their formal object. Since they are strictly supernatural, only God can infuse them into the soul.

There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. The reason for this number is that, by these three, immediate union with God is realized perfectly. Faith enables us to know God as First Truth; hope makes us desire him as the Supreme Good for us; charity unites us to him by the love of friendship, so far as he is infinite Goodness. There are no other aspects of union with God, for although the divine perfections are infinite, they cannot be attained by human acts except under the aspect of truth (by the intellect) and goodness (by the will). And only this latter admits of a twofold aspect, namely, good for us (hope) and goodness in itself (charity).

That the theological virtues are distinct among themselves is something beyond doubt, since they can actually be separated. Faith can subsist without hope and charity (as in one who commits a mortal sin of despair without losing his faith); charity will perdure eternally in heaven, separate from faith and hope, which will have disappeared (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8); and finally, in this life faith and hope can subsist without charity, as always happens when one commits a mortal sin not directly opposed to faith or hope. In these instances faith and hope remain in the soul in an unformed state, since charity is the form of the virtues.

In the order of generation or of origin, the first is to know (faith), then to desire (hope), and lastly to attain (charity). According to the order of perfection, charity is the most excellent of the



theological virtues ("and the greatest of these is love" -- (1 Cor. 13:13) because it unites us most intimately with God and is the only one of the three that perdures in eternity. As to the other two virtues, faith is superior to hope because it bespeaks a relation with God in himself, whereas hope presents God as a good for us. Moreover, faith is the foundation of hope. On the other hand, hope is more closely related to charity, and in this sense it is more perfect than faith.

**Moral Virtues.** The existence of the infused moral virtues was denied by numerous ancient theologians, but today it is admitted by almost all theologians, in accordance with the doctrine of St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Thomas. The basis of this doctrine is to be found in Scripture. Thus, in the Book of Wisdom we are told that nothing is more useful in the life of a person than temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice: "If one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues; for she teaches moderation and prudence, justice and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful for men than these" (Wis. 8:7).

St. Peter, immediately after speaking of grace as a participation in the divine nature of God, states: "For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love" (2 Pet. 1:5-7). In these and other texts we have the scriptural basis that was later elaborated by the Fathers and theologians to give us a body of doctrine that is perfectly organized and systematic. It is true that the Church has not expressly defined anything on this question, but today the doctrine on the existence of the infused moral virtues is generally accepted.

The theological virtues are demanded by the very nature of grace so that it can be dynamically orientated to the supernatural end; the moral virtues are demanded by the theological virtues because to be ordained to the end requires a proper disposition to the means. Hence, the infused moral virtues are habits that dispose the faculties of man to follow the dictate of reason illumined by faith in relation to the means that lead to the supernatural end. They do not have God as their immediate object -- and in this they are distinguished from the theological virtues -- but they rightly ordain human acts to the supernatural end, and in this way they are distinguished from the corresponding acquired natural virtues.

The infused moral virtues regulate all the acts of man, including (at least on the part of prudence) the very acts of the theological virtues, in spite of the fact that these latter virtues are superior to the moral virtues. For although the theological virtues, considered in themselves, do not consist in the mean .or medium as do the moral virtues, one can nevertheless go to excess in the manner of operation, and it is that manner or mode that falls under the moral virtues. So it is that the moral virtues must be numerous, as St. Thomas points out: "For every act in which there is found a special aspect of goodness, man must be disposed by a special virtue."[\(22\)](#) Accordingly, there will be as many moral virtues as there are species of good objects that serve as means leading to the supernatural end. St. Thomas studies and discusses more than fifty moral virtues in the *Summa theologiae*, and perhaps it was not his intention to give a complete and exhaustive treatment.

However, since ancient times it has been the custom to reduce the moral virtues to four principal ones, namely, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are expressly named in Sacred Scripture, as we have already seen, and they are called the virtues most profitable for man in this life. Among the Fathers of the Church, St. Ambrose is apparently the first to call them cardinal

virtues. (23) The Scholastic theologians unanimously subdivided the moral virtues on the basis of these four virtues.

St. Thomas maintains that these virtues can be called cardinal from two points of view: in a less proper sense, because they designate general conditions or characteristics necessary for any virtue (every virtue calls for prudence, justice, fortitude, and moderation); more properly, because they pertain to special activities that require the control of virtue. Hence, the cardinal virtues are special virtues, not merely general virtues that comprise all the other virtues.

The principality of the cardinal virtues can be seen in the influence they exercise over their subordinated virtues. The latter virtues function in secondary related matters, leaving the principal matter to the corresponding cardinal virtue. Hence, each of the cardinal virtues can be divided into integral parts, subjective parts, and potential parts.

The *integral parts* refer to conditions or characteristics necessary for the perfect exercise of the virtue. Thus, patience and constancy are integral parts of fortitude.

The *subjective parts* are the various species of the principal virtue. Thus, sobriety and chastity are subjective parts of temperance.

The *potential parts* are those annexed virtues that do not have the full force and power of the principal virtue but are in some way related to it. Thus, the virtue of religion is annexed to justice because it has to do with rendering to God the cult that is due, although this can never be done perfectly, because one cannot achieve the equality required for strict justice.

But does the principality of the cardinal virtues make them superior to the secondary related virtues? Evidently not, for religion and penance are superior to justice, since their object is nobler. Humility is related to temperance, but is more excellent than temperance.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to preserve the principality of the cardinal virtues as hinges of the others, because they comply more fully with their definitions as virtues. For example, commutative justice has more of the aspect of justice than religion or penance. An annexed or related virtue may be superior, by reason of its object, but the cardinal virtue is superior precisely as a cardinal virtue.

We shall treat of particular virtues when we discuss the positive means for growth in grace and holiness (Chapter 9). Now, however, we shall investigate the last and crowning element of the supernatural organism, namely, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Gifts of the Holy Spirit**

In general usage, a gift signifies anything that one person gives to another out of liberality and with benevolence. We say "out of liberality" to signify that on the part of the giver a gift excludes any notion of debt or obligation. And we say "with benevolence" to signify the love that prompts the gift. Nevertheless, the notion of a gift does not exclude gratitude on the part of the one receiving the gift; even more, it sometimes demands the good use of the gift, depending on the nature of the gift and the intention of the giver, as when one gives something in order that the receiver be perfected by its use. Such are the gifts that God bestows on his creatures.

The first great gift of God is the Holy Spirit, who is the very love by which God loves himself and loves us: The Holy Spirit is, therefore, the first gift of God, not only because he is the substantial love in the intimate life of the Trinity, but also because he dwells in us through sanctifying grace. From this first gift proceed all other gifts of God. In the last analysis, whatever God gives to his creatures, both in the supernatural and in the natural order, is a completely gratuitous effect of his liberal and infinite love.

### *Existence of the Gifts*

The existence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit can be known to us only through revelation, since they are supernatural realities that completely transcend the light of natural reason. St. Thomas begins with this supposition in the treatise on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the *Summa theologiae*, and says that in the doctrine on the gifts we should follow the mode of speaking as found in Sacred Scripture, where they are revealed to us.[\(24\)](#)

The classical text of Isaiah is usually quoted as the scriptural foundation for the doctrine on the gifts of the Holy Spirit: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:1-3).

This text is clearly messianic and properly refers only to the Messiah. Nevertheless, the Fathers of the Church and the Church herself have extended the meaning to the faithful of Christ in virtue of the universal principle of the economy of grace that St. Paul enunciated: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). From this it is inferred that whatever perfection is found in Christ, our Head, if it is communicable, is found also in the members united to him through grace. And it is evident that the gifts of the Holy Spirit pertain to communicable perfections, if we bear in mind the need we have of them. Hence, we may rightly conclude that the seven spirits that the prophet saw descend and rest upon Christ are also the patrimony of all those who are united to him in charity.

In addition to this text, which the Fathers and the Church have interpreted as a clear allusion to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, authors are wont to cite other texts from the Old and New Testaments.[\(25\)](#) However, the doctrine on the gifts of the Holy Spirit rests almost exclusively on the text from Isaiah.

The teaching of the Church is explicit in the liturgy. In the Divine Office for Pentecost Sunday the hymn at evening prayer addresses the Holy Spirit as follows: "Thou who art sevenfold in thy grace"; and in the prayer for the feast the Church asks God to "pour out the gifts of the Spirit on all mankind." In the Sequence for the Mass of Pentecost we sing: "On the faithful, who adore and confess you, evermore in your sevenfold gifts descend." Lastly, in the administration of the sacrament of confirmation, the bishop extends his hands over those to be confirmed and prays:

All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and

reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent says that "from these gifts of the Holy Spirit .... we derive the rules for Christian living, and through them we are able to know whether the Holy Spirit dwells in us."[\(26\)](#) In his encyclical, *Divinum Illud Munus*, Pope Leo XIII recalls and reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

More than this, the just man, that is to say, he who lives the life of divine grace and acts by the fitting virtues as by means of faculties, has need of those seven gifts which are properly attributed to the Holy Spirit. By means of these gifts the soul is furnished and strengthened so as to be able to obey more easily and promptly his voice and impulse. Wherefore, these gifts are of such efficacy that they lead the just man to the highest degree of sanctity; and of such excellence that they continue to exist even in heaven, though in a more perfect way. By means of these gifts the soul is excited and encouraged to seek after and attain the evangelical beatitudes which, like the flowers that come forth in the springtime, are signs and harbingers of eternal beatitude.

The number of the gifts presents two principal difficulties: (1) in Sacred Scripture the number seven is classically interpreted to signify a certain indefinite plenitude; (2) in the text of Isaiah only six distinct gifts are enumerated, for the gift of fear is mentioned twice.

Some exegetes think that the text of Isaiah refers to an indefinite plenitude and therefore to more than seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Theologians who accept this exegesis will likewise hold for an indefinite number of gifts.

An indefinite plenitude may refer to a number that is left undetermined, or it may signify a definite number that contains all possible applications. It is this second sense that St. Thomas seems to accept, for he says that "it is evident that these gifts extend to everything to which the moral and intellectual virtues also extend."[\(27\)](#) Consequently, just as the seven infused virtues suffice for all the needs of the Christian life, but admit of a certain indefinite plenitude (especially the moral virtues, which can be divided into integral, subjective, and potential parts), so also it would seem logical to say that the gifts are seven in number but admit of an indefinite plenitude because they perfect the infused virtues. Therefore, the indefinite plenitude can be understood as a determined number of gifts possessing multiple modalities.

Various explanations have been offered for the omission of the gift of piety in the text of Isaiah, but it is explicitly mentioned in the patristic tradition, in the official teachings of the Church, and in the unanimous teaching of theologians. To prescind from this weight of authority because of certain textual obscurities would seem to be unwarranted. Many things formally revealed in Sacred Scripture did not appear in their fullness except through the interpretation of the Fathers and the Magisterium of the Church. Whatever the text of Isaiah, St. Paul describes the reality when he writes to the Romans: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, 'Abba!' (that is, 'Father'). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:14-16).

*The Nature of the Gifts*

St. Thomas studies the metaphysical nature of the gifts of the Holy Spirit by asking whether they are habits,<sup>(28)</sup> in order to determine the proximate genus in the essential definition of the gifts. The reply is in the affirmative, and theologians of all schools hold for the same response, with few exceptions.

Two objections have been raised against the classification of the gifts as habits. Their solution will enable us to see more clearly the nature of the gifts.

First, for a person to be moved by the inspiration or instinct of the Holy Spirit an actual grace suffices. Therefore, the gifts are not habits but actual graces.

To this we respond that insofar as the supernatural movement proceeds from the Holy Spirit, it could be classified as an actual grace. On the part of the soul, however, a distinction is necessary. If the Holy Spirit acts upon the soul by bestowing some grace by way of an impulse (and such a grace can be offered even to sinners) or as a charism (*gratia gratis data*), these graces, as received, are also actual graces. But if the Holy Spirit's action on the soul requires a previous disposition so that the soul may be moved easily and promptly, then the soul needs habits that can be actuated in a supernatural mode, and such are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it is commonly taught by theologians that the gifts are the perfection of the infused virtues; therefore, the gifts must, like the virtues, be operative habits.

Secondly, it is objected that the Holy Spirit is an infinite agent of operation and needs no previous disposition on the part of the soul. Therefore the gifts are not habits.

We reply that we have already admitted that the Holy Spirit can act on a soul however and whenever he wishes. But the ordinary working of divine providence is smooth and connatural. Moreover, we are faced with the fact of the existence of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as infused habits, as we have already seen.

### *The Gifts and the Infused Virtues*

There are numerous characteristics common to both the gifts and the virtues. The principal ones are as follows:

1. They are generically the same because both are operative habits.
2. They have the same efficient cause, namely, God, and therefore they are both infused supernatural habits.
3. They have the same subject of inhesion: the human faculties.
4. They have the same material object: all moral matter.
5. They have the same final cause: the supernatural perfection of man, incipient in this world and consummated in the world to come.

The differences between the gifts and the virtues are likewise numerous, but we can list them briefly in a series of statements.

1. The motor cause of the infused virtues is human reason-reason illumined by faith and

prompted by an actual grace. The gifts operate under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, who actuates the gifts by direct contact. For that reason, the habits of the infused virtues can be used when we wish, presupposing an actual grace, but the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate only when the Holy Spirit so desires.

2. Because the infused virtues function under the direction and control of reason illumined by faith, their operations are restricted to a human mode of action. The gifts, on the other hand, have the Holy Spirit as their motor cause; therefore they operate in a divine or supernatural mode.

3. In the exercise of the infused virtues, the soul is fully active; its acts are produced in a human manner or mode, and the soul is fully conscious that it works when and how it pleases. The exercise of the gifts is entirely different. The Holy Spirit is the unique motor cause of the gifts; the soul is receptive, though conscious and free. Thus we preserve freedom and merit under the operation of the gifts, but the soul merely seconds the divine motion, which belongs entirely to the Holy Spirit.

Such are the principal differences between the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The first one establishes the radical and specific differences between the virtues and the gifts; the others are logical consequences of the first one.

#### *Necessity of the Gifts*

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are in no sense extraordinary or purely charismatic graces. They are given with sanctifying grace and form part of the supernatural organism. Moreover, the gifts are necessary for the perfection of the infused virtues and also for salvation.

First of all, if the gifts are said to perfect the virtues, this signifies that even the infused virtues are subject to imperfection.

Now there are five principal reasons or occasions of imperfection in any given habit or virtue:

1. When a habit does not attain its complete material object. Such is the case of students of theology who have not yet studied certain tracts. They know something of theology, and they have the habit of theology, but incompletely and imperfectly.

2. When the habit lacks the intensity by which it should attain its object. For example, the student who has gone over an entire assignment, but superficially and carelessly.

3. When the habit is weakly rooted in the subject (e.g., through lack of sufficient use).

These three imperfections can be found in the infused virtues but can be corrected by the virtues themselves. They do not need the influence of the gifts to be extended to the total object of the virtue, to increase in intensity, or to multiply their acts.

4. When there is an intrinsic imperfection that pertains to the nature of the habit itself. This occurs, for example, in the habit of faith (of things not seen) and hope (of things not yet possessed). Neither the virtues themselves nor the gifts can correct these imperfections without destroying the virtues in question.

5. Because of the disproportion between the habit and the subject in which it resides. This is

precisely the case with the infused virtues. They are supernatural habits, but the subject in which they are received is the human faculties. Consequently, on being received into the soul, the infused virtues operate in a human mode. They accommodate themselves to the psychological operations of man. This is why the infused virtues do not give facility in operation; that is provided by the acquired virtues.

Now, if we possess imperfectly the habits of the infused virtues, the acts that proceed from them will also be imperfect unless some superior agent intervenes to perfect them. This is the purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Moved and regulated, not by human reason, as are the virtues, but by the Holy Spirit, they bestow on the virtues, and especially the theological virtues, that divine atmosphere that they need in order to develop all their supernatural virtuality.

The theological virtues give us a participation in the supernatural knowledge that God has of himself (faith) and of his very love of himself (charity), and make us desire him as our supreme good (hope). These lofty objects, absolutely transcendent and divine, are necessarily constrained to a modality that is human so long as they remain under the rule and control of reason, even though enlightened by faith. They demand a regulation or rule that is also divine—that of the gifts.

This argument is also valid for the infused moral virtues. Although they do not transcend the rule of reason as regards their immediate objects, they are directed to a supernatural end and receive from charity their form and their life in that transcendent order. Therefore, to be perfect, they must receive a divine mode that will adapt and accommodate them to this orientation to the supernatural end. Therefore, the gifts embrace all the matter of the infused virtues, both theological and moral.

Secondly, the necessity of the gifts for salvation is a logical consequence of the need of the gifts for the perfection of the infused virtues. St. Thomas Aquinas gives the following theological proof:

The gifts are perfections by which a person is disposed to be amenable to the promptings of God. Hence in those matters where the promptings of reason do not suffice and there is need for the prompting of the Holy Spirit, there is consequently need for a gift.

Now human reason is perfected by God in two ways: first, with its natural perfection, namely, the natural light of reason; secondly, with a supernatural perfection, the theological virtues. And though the latter perfection is greater than the former, the former is possessed by us in a more perfect manner than the latter; for we have the former in our complete possession, but we possess the latter imperfectly, because we know and love God imperfectly ....

Accordingly, in matters subject to human reason and directed to our connatural end, we can work through the judgment of our reason; and if we receive help even in these things by way of special promptings from God, it will be out of God's superabundant goodness .... But in matters directed to the supernatural end, to which reason moves insofar as it is imperfectly informed by the theological virtues, the movement of reason does not suffice; there must be present in addition the prompting and movement of the Holy Spirit. This is in accord with Romans 8:14: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"; and Psalm 143:10 states: "May your good Spirit guide me on level ground"; because no one

can ever receive the inheritance of the blessed unless he be led and moved thither by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in order to accomplish this end, it is necessary to have the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[\(29\)](#)

Some theologians have considered this doctrine excessive, but that is because they confuse the question *de jure* with the question *de facto*. It is true that many are saved without any operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but never without the habits of the gifts. On the other hand, the actuation of the gifts is morally and sometimes physically necessary in order to preserve grace, and in this case the actuation of the gifts would be necessary for salvation. The reason is the insufficiency of human reason, even enlightened by faith, to lead us to the supernatural end without obstructions. But there is still another reason, based on the corruption of human nature as a consequence of original sin. The infused virtues do not reside in a sound nature but in a nature inclined to evil, and although the virtues have sufficient power to conquer all temptations opposed to them, they cannot *de facto* overcome some of them without the help of the gifts, especially the violent temptations that arise unexpectedly. In those circumstances in which resistance or a fall is a decision of the moment, a person must act quickly, as if by a supernatural instinct, that is, under the influence and movement of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

### *The Gifts in Particular*

The difficulty in establishing an exact correlation between the virtues and the gifts is twofold. First, the virtues cover such a wide range of human acts that one virtue may relate to several gifts; for example, the virtue of faith relates to both understanding and knowledge. Second, some of the gifts, such as knowledge, counsel, and fear of the Lord, apply to more than one virtue; thus, fear of the Lord relates to the virtues of hope and temperance. We shall divide the gifts according to the faculties in which they reside and describe the function of each gift. Then, in treating of the virtues in particular (Chapters 10-11), we shall discuss briefly the gift or gifts that perfect each virtue.

Two important points should be stressed before we discuss the gifts in particular. First, our participation in the divine life is not a transitory thing; rather, we are meant, through sanctifying grace, to share in a permanent manner in the very life and nature of God, beginning here in time and continuing through all eternity in glory. Moreover, our operations under grace are meant to become "connatural" to us and for that reason we receive the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit as habits in the original sense of the Latin word *habitus*. When we speak of the movement or *instinctus* of the Holy Spirit in relation to the gifts, we are referring to the *actuation* of the gifts, but the gifts as habits are our possession so long as we remain in grace.

Second, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, unlike the infused virtues, operate in a *supernatural mode* or manner. The reason for this is that even our highest virtues, the theological virtues, operate imperfectly in us. Precisely because they function under our direction, their mode of operation is always human and hence imperfect. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, therefore, are not simply emergency measures used by the Holy Spirit when we are in special difficulty, they are the means by which an individual attains the "divinization" that is the goal of sanctification. The supernatural modality of the gifts must be kept in mind especially when we discuss the gifts in relation to the virtues, for we may easily overlook the fact that though the names are sometimes identical or the material objects are the same, the operation of the gifts is always a movement in which the Holy Spirit is the primary agent.



Like the virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit can be divided according to the faculties through which they operate and then specifically by their formal objects. The human faculties are classified in general as either *cognitive*, relating to knowledge, or *appetitive*, relating to orexis. Now, human knowledge may be either speculative or practical, while human orexis may involve the operations of the will or the emotions. And just as there are virtues to perfect the operations of all these faculties, so there are gifts of the Holy Spirit to perfect the virtues, as we have already seen. Consequently, we can divide the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as follows:

Cognitive faculties:

*speculative intellect:*

deeper insight into divine truths: **Understanding**

proper judgment concerning truths of faith: **Knowledge**

judgment according to divine norms: **Wisdom**

*practical intellect:*

decisions regarding human actions: **Counsel.**

Appetitive powers:

*volitional appetite* (the will):

in relation to others: **Piety**

*sensitive appetites* (the emotions):

proper use of the irascible emotions: **Fortitude**

proper use of pleasure emotions: **Fear of the Lord**

*Understanding:* to give a deeper insight and penetration of divine truths held by faith, not as a transitory enlightenment but as a permanent intuition.

*Knowledge:* to judge rightly concerning the truths of faith in accordance with their proper causes and the principles of revealed truth.

*Wisdom:* to judge and order all things in accordance with divine norms and with a connaturality that flows from loving union with God.

*Counsel:* to render the individual docile and receptive to the counsel of God regarding one's actions in view of sanctification and salvation.

*Piety:* to give filial worship to God precisely as our Father and to relate with all people as children of the same Father.

*Fortitude:* to overcome difficulties or to endure pain and suffering with the strength and power infused by God.

*Fear of the Lord:* to avoid sin and attachment to created things out of reverence and love of God.

### **Fruits of the Spirit and Beatitudes**

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul provides a listing of the fruits of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit. The latter fruits are nine in number: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, fidelity, meekness, and continence.*<sup>(30)</sup> Theologians from the time of St. Augustine have maintained that St. Paul's enumeration of the gifts is by no means a complete list, but only a

sampling, as it were, of the fruits of the Spirit. This is indicated by the fact that St. Paul lists fifteen fruits of the flesh and makes it clear that the list is not complete.

The first thing to be noted about the fruits of the Spirit is that they are virtuous acts or works performed by those who are "guided by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:18). These works are in opposition to those that proceed from the flesh, as St. Paul states: "My point is that you should live in accord with the Spirit and you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh. The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; the two are directly opposed" (Gal. 5:16-17). Consequently, the works of the spirit give testimony that one is being guided by and is obedient to the Holy Spirit.

The second observation is that St. Paul demands of Christians that they be detached from the things of the flesh and of this world. He says, after enumerating the fruits of the spirit: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us follow the, spirit's lead" (Gal. 5:24-25).

Thirdly, though the fruits of the Spirit are highly perfected virtuous acts, they are called fruits precisely because of the spiritual delight that they produce. "If these works are so perfect, abundant and permanent," says John Arinterro, "that one is found to be in the state of producing them with facility and perfection, then they are so joyful and delightful that they constitute, as it were, a prelude to eternal happiness. Although they may be performed at the cost of annoyance and tribulation, yet they produce in us an ineffable joy to which nothing in this life can be compared. They are truly comparable to the joys of heaven."[\(31\)](#)

Still more perfect than the fruits are the *beatitudes*. Like the fruits, they are acts that flow from the virtues and the gifts, but they are so perfect that they are more closely related to the operations \_ of the gifts than of the infused virtues. In a strict sense there is only one Gift and one Fruit - the Holy Spirit; and there is only one beatitude -the beatific vision in glory. But the beatitudes enunciated by Christ are a foretaste of the delights of heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3-10).

Each beatitude contains two parts; the first part refers to a meritorious act, and the second part refers to a reward. The reward applies primarily to the life to come, and yet there is likewise the promise of happiness even in this life.

St. Thomas discusses the beatitudes by linking them with the three types of life in which we hope to find happiness: the life of pleasure, the active life, and the contemplative life. But the life of pleasure is false happiness; therefore the first three beatitudes refer to the detachment required from worldly pleasures and satisfactions if one is to receive the reward that is promised. The active life, on the other hand, is a disposition for the happiness to come, since it consists in the

practice of virtue; therefore the fourth and fifth beatitudes refer to the active life, and the sixth and seventh beatitudes refer to the effects of the active life that are proximate dispositions for the contemplative life. The eighth beatitude, according to St. Thomas, is a manifestation and confirmation of all those that precede it.[\(32\)](#)

The beatitudes provide a summary of the magnificent ideals proposed for Christian living. They also provide a contrast between the life of those attached to the things of this world and the life of those who follow Christ. This is clearly manifested in Luke 6:17-26, where we are told that Jesus came down from the mountain to a stretch of level ground and, fixing his gaze on his disciples amid the crowd, he said:

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.

Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Denz.-Schön. 902.

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2.

Denz.-Schön. 1561: "If anyone say that men are justified only by the imputation of the justice of Christ, or simply by the remission of sins, thus excluding the grace and charity that are infused in hearts by the Holy Spirit and inhere in them, or that the grace by which we are justified is simply the favor or benevolence of God, let him be anathema."

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 112, a. 1.

*Ibid.*, q. 110, a. 2, ad 2.

Denz.-Schön. 1561.

*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 62, a. 1.

*Ibid.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 3, ad 2.

*In Joan.*, tr. 21, n. 3 (M.L. 35:1565).

Denz.-Schön. 1528.

*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 43, a. 3, corpus and ad 1.

St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), stanza 2.

St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Chap. 1, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946).

In relation to the act of the will, which is the first principle of human acts, actual graces are divided into the following types: operating grace, the movement or prompting from God; cooperating grace, movement of the soul in conjunction with God's assistance; prevenient grace, offered prior to the response of the will; concomitant grace, accompanies the human action in response to prevenient grace; sufficient grace, offered in view of a work or goal; efficacious grace, producing its effect in accomplishing the act or attaining the goal.

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 110, a. 2.

*Ibid.*, q. 110, a. 4, ad 1.

*Ibid.*, q. 63, a. 4.

*Ibid.*, ad 2.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent.*, dist. 14, q. 2, a. 2, ad 5; *De virtutibus*, a. 10, ad 15.

Cf. Denz.-Schön. 1578; 2457; *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 4.

*Ibid.*, 1528; 1529; 1561.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 109, a. 2.

*Expositio in Lucam* (M.L., 15:1738).

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 68, a. 1.

Old Testament texts: Gen. 41:38; Exod. 31:3; Num. 24:2; Deut. 34:9; Judg. 6:34; Ps. 31:8; 32:9; 118:120; 142:10; Wis. 7:28; 9:17; 10:10; Sir. 15:5; Isa. 11:2; 6:1; Micah 3:8. New Testament texts: Luke 12:12; 24:25; John 3:8; 14:17 and 26; Acts 2:2; Rom. 8:14 and 26; 1 Cor. 2:10; 12:18; Rev. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6.

See *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. J. Donovan (Baltimore: J. Myres, 1833), Part I, art. 8.

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 68, a. 4.

*Ibid.*, a. 3.

*Ibid.*, a. 2.

See Gal. 5:22-23. In the Greek text of Scripture only nine fruits of the Spirit are listed. By the time of St. Thomas Aquinas there were twelve fruits named in the Clementine Vulgate version, due perhaps to errors made by the scribes.

John G. Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949), Vol. I, pp. 275-76.

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 69, a. 3, corpus and ad 5.

## 5

### Perfection of the Christian Life

The word *perfection* signifies the state or condition of being completed or finished, without any excess or defect. In its Latin origin the word connotes the term of a process or activity (*per factum*), but in philosophy and theology the word has a wider application. The emphasis is rather on the aspect of totality or plenitude, and consequently a thing is said to be perfect when it has all the fullness of being that is due to it by reason of its essence or nature.

But anything is perfect to the extent that it is in act, and since existence is the "actuality of all acts," the concept of perfection is eminently existential. It applies to all things that exist and is therefore a transcendental concept. As such, it applies to beings that differ in species or degree, and therefore it is also an analogous term.

We need not discuss further distinctions of analogy, but we should note that in the existential order all analogous perfections are either dependent on the same source or are ordained to the same goal, however much they differ in other respects. Thus, all the perfection, of the created universe derive from God as their first cause; all morally good human acts are perfect in the measure that they are directed to God as ultimate end.

Although the term *perfection*, taken in the abstract, is an analogous and transcendental concept, as soon as we speak of a particular kind or type of perfection, such as perfection of the Christian life, we are dealing with a concept that is restricted to that particular type of perfection. But the term is still an analogous one, and therefore if we are to define Christian perfection we must review the types of perfection that apply to the Christian life.

The first distinction regarding perfection in general is that between *absolute* perfection and *relative* perfection. Absolute perfection is attributed to the being that has the plenitude of perfection to such an extent that it not only has the fullness of being proper to itself, but that it also possesses in an eminent degree all possible perfections. Such perfection is found only in God, who is for that reason called Pure Act by the philosophers and infinitely perfect by the theologians.

Relative perfection, as its name indicates, is attributed to finite beings, and since they were created by God, their perfections derive from the Primary Analogate who is God. Thus, we read in Genesis that God created us in his own image (Gen. 1:27).

Relative perfection has a threefold meaning, as St. Thomas explains in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book V, Chapter 18. It signifies, first, that a being lacks nothing due to its nature; second, that there is neither excess nor defect in its faculties of operation; and third, that it has attained its proper goal or end. Later, in the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas classifies this threefold perfection as essential perfection (*perfectio in esse*), operative perfection (*perfectio in operatione*), and final perfection (*perfectio in assecutione finis*). [\(1\)](#)

Note that operative perfection is not always a middle state between essential perfection and final perfection. Sometimes the perfection consists in an operation, and sometimes it consists in the attainment of an extrinsic goal. In the first case the operation is the goal; for example, the perfection of a violinist is to play the violin. In the second case the perfection consists in reaching a goal, as when a student receives a diploma. Both types of perfection may be found in one and the same person. Thus our formal beatitude consists in the operative perfection of the beatific vision; our objective beatitude consists in the final perfection of union with God in glory. In this respect beatitude and perfection are synonymous terms.

But we have not yet finished with the divisions of perfection. It can also be divided into primary perfection (*simpliciter*) and secondary perfection (*secundum quid*). The former signifies that which belongs to the very nature of a thing and, indeed, constitutes the very basis and source of its perfection. The latter perfection applies to the related but integral parts of the perfection of a thing; for example, docility is a secondary but integral perfection of prudence. Lastly we can distinguish between that which constitutes perfection essentially (*per se*) and that which constitutes perfection instrumentally, depending upon whether the element in question is necessary for perfection or serves as a means to foster perfection.

### **The Nature of Christian Perfection**

We are now in a position to apply the various members of the division of perfection to Christian perfection. It is common teaching that essential or substantial perfection consists in *sanctifying grace*, since sanctifying grace is the very soul of the supernatural life. Operative perfection, as we know from Scripture and theology, consists in *charity*, either in its elicited act or as imperating the other virtues. Final perfection consists in the most intimate union with God through charity that is possible in this life, usually described as the mystical marriage or transforming union. Secondary perfection comprises the elicited acts of the virtues other than charity, while instrumental perfection is attributed to the evangelical counsels. Having seen the division of Christian perfection, we shall examine each element theologically.

#### *Charity -- The Primary Element in Perfection*

Christian perfection does not consist exclusively in the perfection of charity, but charity is its principal element, the most essential and characteristic element. In this sense the measure of charity is the measure of supernatural perfection so that one who has attained the perfection of the love of God and of neighbor can be called perfect in the truest sense of the word. This doctrine can be verified by testimony from Scripture, the Magisterium, and theology.

**From Sacred Scripture.** Christ himself tells us that upon the love of God and of neighbor depends the whole law and the prophets (Matt. 22:35--40; Mark 12:28-31). The texts from St. Paul are explicit and abundant: "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect" (Col. 3:14); "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10); "There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Even faith, according to St. Paul, receives its value from charity: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor the lack of it counts for anything; only faith, which expresses itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). Not even the charisms are of any value without charity (1 Cor. 13:1-3.).

**From the Magisterium of the Church.** The same doctrine has been amply commented upon

and developed by the Fathers of the Church and has been sanctioned by the Magisterium. Pope John XXII stated that "the perfection of the Christian life consists principally and essentially in charity, which is called the bond of perfection by the Apostle (Col. 3:14) and which unites or joins man in some way to his end."[\(2\)](#)

**Theological Argument.** The proof given by St. Thomas is that the perfection of a being consists in the attainment of its ultimate end, beyond which there is nothing more to be desired. But it is charity that unites us with God, the ultimate end of man. Therefore, Christian perfection consists especially in charity.[\(3\)](#)

The fundamental reason is that charity alone unites us entirely with God as the ultimate supernatural end. The other virtues prepare or initiate that union, but they cannot complete it. The moral virtues bring us to God only indirectly, by establishing the proper order in the means that lead to God. Faith and hope unite us with God, since they are theological virtues, but they do not unite us with him as the ultimate end or as the Supreme Good infinitely lovable in himself -the perfect motive of charity. Charity relates to God and unites us to him as our ultimate end; faith and hope relate to God and unite us to him as a principle. Faith gives us a knowledge of God that is necessarily obscure and imperfect, and hope is also radically imperfect, but charity unites us with God even in this life.

Charity establishes the mutual love of friendship between God and ourselves. For that reason, charity is inseparable from grace, while faith and hope are compatible even with mortal sin (unformed faith and hope). Beyond all doubt, therefore, charity constitutes the very essence of Christian perfection; it is the form and director of all the other virtues.

### *Charity and the Virtues*

However, it is necessary to understand this doctrine correctly. From the fact that Christian perfection consists especially in charity, it does not follow that the role of the other virtues is purely accidental, or that they are not essential to Christian perfection. The moral virtues -- and with greater reason faith and hope -- have their proper excellency even when considered in themselves, independently of charity. For although all the acts of the Christian life can and should be imperated by charity, many of them are acts *elicited* by the other infused virtues. As a matter of fact, when the Church wishes to judge the sanctity of a servant of God in view of possible beatification, she does not consider charity only but also the exercise of other virtues to a heroic degree. This means that the infused virtues are *integral* parts of Christian perfection.

Christian perfection must be considered as a moral whole, integrated by the conjunction of those conditions that perfect the life of the Christian. It connotes a plenitude that presupposes the perfect rectification of our entire moral life. But this total rectification is not achieved by charity alone, which refers only to the end; it also involves the operations of the infused moral virtues that regulate the proper use of the means to the end. Therefore the infused moral virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection considered in an integral manner.

Nevertheless, one must not lose sight of the fact that the acts of the other infused virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection so far as they are imperated by charity, which is the form of all the other virtues. The proper function of charity as the form of all the virtues is to direct and ordain the acts of all the virtues effectively to the ultimate supernatural end, even those of

faith and hope.

### *Growth in Christian Perfection*

*Christian perfection increases in the measure that charity produces its own elicited act more intensively and imperates the acts of the other virtues in a manner that is more intense, actual and universal.* This statement constitutes a basic and crucial principle for understanding the role of charity in Christian perfection. First, Christian perfection increases in the measure that charity produces its proper elicited act more intensively. If Christian perfection consists primarily in the perfection of charity, it follows that, in the measure that this virtue produces its elicited act with greater intensity, the perfection of the Christian life is likewise intensified. Hence, the degree of sanctity coincides with the degree of love. The greater the love of God and neighbor, the greater the holiness of the individual.

Secondly, as the form of all the virtues, charity should imperate and direct the acts of all the virtues to the ultimate supernatural end. In the measure that it does so, the influence of charity on the other infused virtues will be more intense, actual, and universal. It will be more intense because charity imparts its fervor to them. The influence of charity will be more actual because the acts elicited by those virtues will be motivated by charity. There is a great difference between an act performed simply for the specific motive of a given virtue, such as humility, and that same act performed for the love of God, which is the perfect motive of charity. Lastly, the influence of charity will be more universal because to the extent that charity imperates more and more acts of more and more virtues, the integral perfection of the Christian life will likewise be extended and increased.

### *Love of God and Neighbor*

*The perfection of the Christian life is constituted by the perfection of the double act of charity -- primarily in relation to God and secondarily in relation to one's neighbor.* There is only one virtue and one infused habit of charity, by which we love God for himself and our neighbor and ourselves for God. All the acts that proceed from charity are specified by the same object, namely, the infinite goodness of God.

Whether we love God directly in himself or whether we love our neighbor or ourselves directly, if it is a question of the love that is charity, the formal motive of this love is always the same: the infinite goodness of God. There cannot be any true charity for our neighbor or ourselves if it does not proceed from the supernatural motive of the love of God, and it is necessary to distinguish this formal act of charity from any love of neighbor that proceeds from a purely natural inclination.

An increase of the infused habit of charity will provide a greater capacity in relation to the double act of charity. Indeed, the capacity to love God is not increased in the soul without a corresponding increase in the capacity to love one's neighbor. This truth constitutes the central argument of the first Epistle of St. John, in which he explains the intimate connection and inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor.

Nevertheless, in the exercise of love there is a priority that is demanded by the very nature of things. The perfection of charity consists primarily in the love of God, infinitely lovable in himself; secondarily it consists in the love of neighbor and ourselves for God. And even among



ourselves and our neighbors it is necessary to establish a priority. The reason is that God is loved as the principle of the good on which the love of charity is based; man is loved with a love of charity so far as he shares in that supernatural good. One must therefore first of all love God, who is the source of that good, and secondly oneself, who shares directly in that good, and lastly one's neighbor, who is a companion in the sharing of that good.[\(4\)](#)

### *Affective and Effective Charity*

Christian perfection consists primarily in affective charity and secondarily in effective charity. This is the way in which St. Francis de Sales explains it:

There are two principal exercises of our love of God: one affective and the other effective or active, as St. Bernard says. By the first we are attached to God and to everything that pleases him; by the second we serve God and we do whatever he commands. The former unites us to the goodness of God; the latter makes us do the will of God. The one fills us with complacency, benevolence, aspirations, desires, longings, and spiritual ardors, so that our spirit is submerged in God and blended with him. The other places in us the firm resolution, the decided intention, and the unswerving obedience by which we fulfill the mandates of his divine will and by which we suffer, accept, approve, and embrace whatever comes from his divine will. The one makes us take pleasure in God; the other makes us please God.[\(5\)](#)

Since Christian perfection will be greater in the measure that charity produces its elicited act more intensively and imperates the acts of the other virtues in a more intense, actual, and universal manner, it is evident that perfection depends primarily on affective charity and only secondarily on effective charity. The reasons are as follows:

1. Unless charity informs the soul, the internal or external acts of any acquired natural virtue, however perfect they may be in themselves, have no supernatural value, nor are they of any avail in relation to eternal life.
2. The acts of an infused supernatural virtue that are motivated by a charity that is weak and remiss have a meritorious value that is equally weak and remiss, however difficult the acts may be in themselves. The difficulty of an act does not of itself add any essential merit to the act. Merit depends on the degree of charity with which the act is performed. If the difficulty causes an increase of merit, it is because of the greater impulse of charity that is needed to perform the act.[\(6\)](#)
3. On the other hand, the acts of an infused virtue, however easy and simple in themselves, have great meritorious value if performed with a more intense movement of charity. As St. Teresa says: "The Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it."[\(7\)](#)
4. The same conclusion follows from the fact that Christian perfection consists especially in the elicited act of charity (affective charity) and only integrally in the acts of the other virtues imperated by charity (effective charity).

Nevertheless, the perfection of charity should be manifested by the practice of effective charity; that is, in the exercise of the Christian virtues for the love of God. Affective love, although more

excellent in itself, may be subject to illusion or falsification. It is easy to tell God that we love him with all our heart, that we desire to be holy, and then fail to observe some precept. The genuineness of our love of God is much less suspect when it leads to the fulfillment of the duties of our state in life, in spite of obstacles and temptations.

Christ himself teaches us that a tree is known by its fruits (Matt.7:15-20) and that they will not enter the kingdom of heaven who merely say, "Lord, Lord," but only they who do the will of his heavenly Father (Matt. 7:21). The same doctrine is found in Christ's teaching on the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

### *Charity and the Gift of Wisdom*

In its complete expansion and development, charity is perfected by the gift of wisdom. This is a simple application of the general doctrine of the necessity of the gifts for the perfection of the infused virtues. Without the influence of the gifts, the infused virtues operate according to the rules of natural reason illumined by faith, according to a human mode. So long as the gifts of the Holy Spirit do not impart to the virtues the divine mode that should be characteristic of them and that they lack of themselves, it is impossible that the infused virtues should attain their perfect expansion and development.

Although this is true of all the infused virtues, it is especially true of charity. Being the most excellent of all the virtues, charity demands by a kind of inner necessity the divine atmosphere of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to give all that it is capable of giving. And in order that charity have a divine modality, the habit itself must be converted into a passive subject that receives without resistance the influence of the divine impetus that proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

### *Perfection and the Mystical State*

It follows from this that the mystical state is necessary for Christian perfection, since the mystical state consists precisely in the actuation and predominance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is not and cannot be any perfection or sanctity that is purely ascetical and based on the human mode of the infused virtues. The full perfection of the Christian life is attained in the mystical state (see Chapter 6).

Moreover, the perfection of the Christian life requires the passive purgations. This question will also be treated later (see Chapter 8). For the time being, it suffices to quote the teaching of St. John of the Cross, the doctor of the dark nights of the soul: "However much the beginner in mortification exercises himself in controlling his actions and passions, he cannot ever control them perfectly until God mortifies the soul passively through the purification of the night." [\(8\)](#)

### *The Increase of Charity*

Charity can increase indefinitely in man as a wayfarer; consequently, Christian perfection has no definite terminus in this life. St. Thomas Aquinas states that there are three ways in which the increase of any form may have a limit or terminus. The first is on the part of the form itself, when it has a limited capacity beyond which it cannot advance without the destruction of the form itself. The second is by reason of the agent, when it does not have sufficient power to continue increasing the form in the subject. And the third is on the part of the subject, when it is

not susceptible of a greater perfection.[\(9\)](#)

But none of these three manners of limitation can be attributed to charity in this life. As a participation in divine love and therefore a virtue supernatural in substance, the nature or form of charity is not limited. The agent or efficient cause of charity is God, and there is no limit to charity in that respect. Lastly, the human will, which is the subject of charity, has an unlimited obediential potency, and hence in the measure that charity increases, the capacity of the will for a further increase is likewise enlarged. Therefore, there is no terminus to the development of charity in this life, and it can for that reason increase indefinitely.

It will be quite different in heaven. There the soul will have reached its goal, and at the moment of its entrance into heaven its degree of charity will be permanently fixed according to the measure of the intensity it has attained up to the last moment on earth. It is true that even in heaven charity could increase indefinitely as regards the three points we have just enumerated, since in heaven the nature of charity does not change, the power of God is not diminished, nor is the obediential potency of the creature limited. But we know that charity will not increase in heaven because it will have been fixed in its degree by the immutable will of God and because the time of meriting will have passed.

#### *Perfection and the Precepts and Counsels*

Christian perfection consists essentially in the precepts and secondarily or instrumentally in the counsels. St. Thomas invokes the authority of Sacred Scripture to prove this doctrine.[\(10\)](#) We are told in Deuteronomy (6:5): "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Again in Leviticus (19:18) it is stated: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two precepts, says the Lord, depend all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:40). Therefore, the perfection of charity, in which Christian perfection consists, is demanded of us by precept.

Moreover, Christian perfection consists principally in the love of God and secondarily in the love of neighbor. But both the love of God and the love of neighbor constitute the first and the greatest of all the commandments. This is confirmed by the authority of Christ, who stated that love of God is the first and greatest commandment, and love of neighbor is placed on a similar level (Matt. 22:37-39).

St. Thomas then shows that perfection consists secondarily and instrumentally in the counsels. All of them are ordained to charity, as are the precepts, but in a different way. The precepts legislate against the things contrary to charity; the counsels remove the obstacles that impede the facile exercise of charity, although these things are not incompatible with charity. It is evident, therefore, that the counsels do not constitute Christian perfection, but are only instruments for attaining Christian perfection.

The counsels do not oblige all Christians, but all Christians ought to sanctify themselves by the conscientious observance of the precepts in the spirit of the counsels. The *effective* practice of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) is not universally obligatory, but the *affective* practice or spirit of the counsels obliges everyone who desires to be perfect. The first is usually verified by public vows (as in the consecrated life); the second affects all Christians in a manner compatible with their state in life.

It should also be noted, that, in addition to the three evangelical counsels, there are many other particular or private counsels that proceed from interior inspirations of the Holy Spirit and pertain to works of supererogation. Such counsels represent a particular invitation or a concrete manifestation of the will of God for an individual person, and as such they cannot be ignored without committing an act of infidelity to grace, which is difficult to reconcile with the concept of Christian perfection.

### *The Universal Call to Perfection*

If the striving for Christian perfection is of precept, it follows that it obliges all Christians. It is not restricted to priests and religious, but is rooted in the *fundamental* obligations assumed at baptism in the commitment to God.

All Christians are *obliged*, and not simply "invited," although this obligation is to *aspire* or *strive*. By this we mean that one is not obliged to be already perfect at the beginning of the Christian life or even at any determined moment in that life, but simply to aspire positively to Christian perfection as an end that one seriously proposes to reach. Moreover, the perfection to which we refer is not simply the substantial perfection of the state of grace but the eminent development of the entire supernatural organism of sanctifying grace, the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Let us recall the words of Christ: "You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect". (Matt. 5:48). These words are addressed to all who believe in Christ. The apostles insisted on the commandment of the divine Master. St. Paul stated that God has chosen us in Christ, that we should "be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). He says likewise: "It is God's will that you grow in holiness" (1 Thess. 4:3).

The Church has proclaimed this teaching through the documents of Vatican Council II:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) .... The followers of Christ called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God ....

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.[\(11\)](#)

Love is commanded of us in all its extension: "with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37). Of all the spiritual elements in the Christian life, charity alone has the role of end or goal. Not only is it the goal of all the other precepts, but it is also a goal for us because by charity we are united to God, our ultimate end.

An important conclusion follows from the foregoing doctrine. The perfection of charity is commanded as an end or goal to which one must tend and not as something to be achieved at once. Consequently, those who have not yet reached perfection do not transgress the precept so

long as they possess grace and charity and do not deliberately refuse to advance in holiness. The doctrine can be summarized in the following statements:

1. All Christians are commanded to love God above all things and, consequently, to tend to perfection by using the means offered them in their state of life.
2. In addition to this general obligation, religious or members of a secular institute contract a special obligation by reason of their public vow, which obliges them to strive for perfection by the practice of the evangelical counsels in the manner determined by their constitutions.
3. The diocesan priest, although not in the canonical "state of perfection," is obliged, in virtue of his priestly ordination and his ministerial office, to tend to perfection and to surpass in perfection ("the nonclerical or lay religious."[\(12\)](#))

### **Special Questions**

The perfection of the Christian life raises some "special" problems, such as choosing the better good, imperfection and venial sin, grades of perfection, the possibility of attaining perfection, and God's will and Christian perfection.

#### *Choosing the Better Good*

A person would transgress the precept of charity if, satisfied with possessing charity in its lowest degree, he would disdain the higher grades and the total perfection of charity.[\(13\)](#) "If one does not wish to love God more than he [already] loves God, he does not fulfill the precept of charity."[\(14\)](#) Is it then necessary to aspire to the greater good and to practice it in reality? St. Thomas replies:

We are not obliged to the greater good on the level of action, but we are obliged to it on the level of love. The reason is simple. Every rule of action demands a determined and precise material. But if one were obliged to practice the greater good, he would be obliged to that which is undetermined. Therefore, as regards external actions, since we cannot be obliged to that which is undetermined, neither are we obliged to the greater good in all its extension.[\(15\)](#)

Does this mean that the aspiration to the more perfect is limited to a simple affective tendency on the level of love, without ever reaching the energetic and definitive "I will"? Let us turn again to the Angelic Doctor: "The will is not perfect unless it be such that, given the opportunity, it realizes the operation. But if this proves impossible, as long as the will is so perfected as to realize the operation if it could, the lack of perfection to be derived from the external action is simply involuntary."[\(16\)](#)

This principle gives us the key to the solution of the problem. There are many things we could do each day that are better than the things we actually do. But they are so numerous and indefinite that we cannot be obliged to do them. As a result, we frequently choose to do that which is objectively a less perfect act. However, the less good or less perfect act is still a good act.

On the other hand, if something presents itself to us as a particular better good, and, taking into account all the circumstances, as a concrete good to be chosen here and now, we are obliged to practice that good. Not to do so would be to resist grace, and to resist grace without a reasonable

cause constitutes a fault, however light. Therefore, the obligation to choose the better good applies only when a particular good is presented here and now, and in view of all the circumstances one considers that the choice of that good is morally imperative.

### *Imperfection and Venial Sin*

There are two theological opinions on moral imperfections. The first opinion holds that all positive imperfections are true venial sins. The second opinion maintains that venial sin and imperfection (even positive imperfection) are distinct and that there are imperfections that are not venial sins.

Imperfection is the omission of a good act that is not of obligation or the remiss performance of an act, that is, with less perfection than that of which one is capable. For example, if he possesses the habit of charity with an intensity of sixty degrees, but performs an act of only thirty degrees of intensity, he has performed a remiss act and has on that account committed an imperfection. But it does not follow necessarily that the individual has committed a venial sin. Venial sin is evil, but the act performed is good, even though it is less good than it could have been. In this case we have to look for another element that would make the act a venial sin, for example, contempt, sinful sloth, or deliberate resistance to grace.

Moreover, we should not demand perfection in each and every human action, but should take into account the weakness of our human condition. The most that can be demanded is that individuals do the best they can under the circumstances and then leave the rest to God.

Cardinal Mercier has written as follows on the distinction between mortal sin, venial sin, and imperfections:

Mortal sin is the repudiation of the ultimate end. Venial sin is the fault of a will that does not depart completely from the end but deviates from it. Imperfections are not opposed to the end nor do they depart from it, but they are merely a lack of progress in the direction of the end.

Venial sin is the failure to do a good that could and ought to be a, done; it is, therefore, the privation of a good and for that reason it is an evil, since evil is by definition the privation of good.

Imperfection is the nonacquisition of a good, the simple absence of a good, the negation of a good; and hence, in a strict sense, it is not an evil.[\(17\)](#)

### *Grades of Perfection*

Christian perfection consists formally and primarily in the perfection of charity; therefore, to speak of the grades of Christian perfection is to speak of the degrees of charity. In discussing the various degrees of charity, St. Thomas uses the classical division that is based on the three ways or stages of the spiritual life, but he uses the terms beginners, proficient and perfect rather than the more common division into purgative, illuminative, and unitive.

In the physical and psychological growth and development of human life, one can distinguish three basic stages: infancy, adolescence, and maturity. These are characterized by the appearance

and exercise of vital activities that are more and more perfect. Something similar occurs in the growth of charity, although one could distinguish in this growth an indefinite number of degrees.

The various degrees of charity are distinguished according to the different pursuits to which man is brought by the increase of charity. For at first it is incumbent on man to occupy himself chiefly with avoiding sin and resisting his concupiscences, which move him in opposition to charity. This concerns beginners, in whom charity has to be fed or fostered lest it be destroyed.

In the second place, man's chief pursuit is to aim at progress in good, and this is the pursuit of the proficient, whose chief aim is to strengthen their charity by adding to it.

Man's third pursuit is to aim chiefly at union with and enjoyment of God, and this belongs to the perfect, who desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ.[\(18\)](#)

The three stages or degrees of charity are nothing more than divisions that characterize in a general way the infinite variety of aspects in the Christian life. The path of the supernatural life is a winding path, and its stages offer a variety of transitions and levels that will differ with each individual. We must never think that the three basic stages are self-contained compartments, and that those who are at a given time in one stage will never participate in the activities of another stage.

A soul in the purgative stage may experience the graces of the illuminative stage. Sometimes God gives to souls in the ascetical state the graces that are proper to the mystical state. Likewise, advanced souls may sometimes find it necessary to return to the exercises and practices proper to a lower stage through which they have already passed. The Spirit breathes where he will and therefore one should avoid rigid classification.

### *The Possibility of Attaining Perfection*

The doctrine that states that charity can increase indefinitely in this life is certainly sublime, and it appeals to the aspirations of generous souls; but it seems to imply a serious contradiction. If charity never reaches its terminus in this life, then Christian perfection is impossible of attainment in this life, where there is no degree of charity so perfect that it could not be more perfect.

This difficulty did not escape the attention of St. Thomas. He establishes the thesis of the possibility of perfection by using a proof from authority. The divine law cannot command the impossible; but Christ commands us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48); therefore, it is certain that perfection is attainable in this life:

The perfection of the Christian life consists in charity. But perfection implies and presupposes a certain universality, since, as the Philosopher says, that is perfect to which nothing is lacking. Hence we may consider a threefold perfection. One is absolute, and answers to a totality not only on the part of the lover but also on the part of the object loved, so that God be loved as much as he is lovable. Such perfection as this is not possible to any creature, but is [appropriate] to God alone, in whom good [exists] wholly and essentially.

Another perfection answers to an absolute totality on the part of the lover, so that the affective faculty, always actually tends to God as much as it possibly can; and such perfection as this is not possible so long as we are on the way, but we shall have it in heaven.

The third perfection answers to a totality neither on the part of the object loved nor on the part of the lover as regards his always actually tending to God, but on the part of the lover as regards the removal of obstacles to the movement of love toward God, in which sense Augustine says, "Carnal desire is the poison of charity; to have no carnal desires is the perfection of charity." Such perfection as this can be had in this life, and in two ways. First, by the removal from man's affections of all that is contrary to charity, such as mortal sin; and since there can be no charity apart from this perfection, it is necessary for salvation. Secondly, by the removal from man's affections, not only of whatever is contrary to charity, but also of whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God. Charity is possible apart from this perfection, for instance in those who are beginners and in those who are proficient.[\(19\)](#)

Consequently, to be perfect in this life requires the exclusion of anything that impedes the totality of the affective movement toward God. At first glance, it would seem that St. Thomas is content with requiring very little, but if one penetrates the meaning of his words, it becomes evident that he is referring to a sublime perfection. The totality of the affective tendency toward God demands that the soul work to its full capacity. It does not mean a constant and ever actual manner of operation, which is not possible in this life, but the habitual tendency to the practice of the more perfect, excluding, so far as human weakness permits, the voluntary imperfections and remiss acts.

It does not follow from this that, if there exists the slightest voluntary imperfection, one could not be said to be perfect. Christian perfection does not demand this much. Even in the heights of perfection there are voluntary faults and failures, and theologians who admit the confirmation in grace of those souls who have attained the transforming union are accustomed to make the reservation that this confirmation refers only to mortal sins and not to venial sins, and much less to positive imperfections. As St. James (3:2) states: "We all make many mistakes," and St. John adds: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Only the beatific vision completely exhausts the capacity of the soul and thereby prevents it from the slightest deviation or distraction to anything other than God. Even the slightest imperfection is impossible in heaven, but on earth it is impossible to avoid all imperfection.

It is clear that these imperfections and venial sins do not cause the transformed soul to descend from its lofty state, because they are transitory actions that leave no trace in the soul and are rapidly consumed by the fire of charity. They are like drops of water that fall into a blazing fire and are evaporated in an instant; they may even cause the fire to burn more brightly, because on encountering something contrary to itself the act of charity comes forth with greater force to destroy it.

### *God's Will and Christian Perfection*

If the degree of charity that constitutes perfection is not limited by the nature of charity itself, by its relation to its proper object, or by its relation to the subject, what is it that determines the



degree of charity for each soul? No other answer is possible but the will of God.

We are dealing now with one of the most hidden aspects of divine predestination. God distributes his graces among creatures in various degrees and without any other determination but his own free will, as St. Paul teaches: "' Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph. 4:7).

There can be no doubt about this. According to St. Paul, the unequal distribution of graces has a finality that pertains to the totality of the Mystical Body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:11-13). Everything is subordinated and orientated to Christ in order that the whole Christ -- both Head and members -- may give glory to God, the supreme finality, the alpha and omega of the works of God ad extra. As St. Paul says: "All things are yours... and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21, 23). "When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son, he will then subject himself to the One who made all things subject to him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Granting the inequality of the distribution of graces, is there any way in which we can verify the degree of perfection and charity determined by God for a particular soul? In no way. Since there is neither on the part of the creature nor on the part of grace itself any title that would require a determined degree of perfection, it is utterly impossible to verify that degree or even to conjecture what it might be. It depends entirely and exclusively on the free will of God, which cannot be known except by divine revelation.

God does not predestine all of us to one and the same degree of perfection. Moreover, it is a fact that many Christians die without having reached Christian perfection. Indeed, some die impenitent and showing the signs of reprobation. Does this mean that they were not called by God to perfection or to eternal life? Not at all. To hold this would be an obvious error in regard to perfection, and it would be close to, heresy in regard to eternal life. St. Paul expressly tells us that God "wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). This same teaching has been taught by the Church,<sup>(20)</sup> and is the unanimous doctrine of all Catholic theologians. Moreover, we have already established the doctrine that all are called to the perfection of the Christian life.

Then how can one explain the fact that many Christians die without having attained Christian perfection? The key to the solution lies in the distinction between the call and predestination, and between the antecedent and the consequent will of God. Prescinding from the problem of predestination to glory (which is not the purpose of our study but can be resolved with the same principles that we are going to lay down) and confining our investigation to the universal call to Christian perfection, we find that the solution seems to be as follows.

It is certain that we are all called to sanctity and perfection in a remote and sufficient manner by the antecedent will of God. But in a *proximate* and *efficacious* manner, as an effect of the *consequent* will of God (to which predestination pertains), each person is assigned a degree of perfection by God, and the person's degree of glory in heaven will correspond to this degree. Those who are predestined to the summit of perfection will infallibly reach that degree, since the consequent will of God cannot be frustrated. Those who do not reach the heights of perfection have failed, for one reason or another, to correspond with the remote and sufficient call to perfection. In other words, according to the antecedent will of God, all are called, to Christian perfection and to all are offered sufficient graces to obtain it if they freely cooperate with the

divine action. But according to the consequent will of God, all souls are not predestined to the heights of Christian perfection. It is one thing to be called, and it is another thing to be selected, as we read in the Gospel: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

This mystery in no way compromises the teaching that all are called to Christian perfection and that this perfection is the eminent development of the initial grace received in baptism. The majority of Christians die without reaching Christian perfection, but this does not mean that they were not called to perfection, according to the antecedent will of God, or were not offered the graces to attain perfection. It is not God's fault if Christians resist those sufficient graces and do not attain the degree of perfection that they could have reached.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 6, a. 3; q. 73, a. 1.

Cf. Joseph de Guibert, *Documenta ecclesiastica christianae perfectionis studium spectantia* (Rome: Gregorianum, 1931), n. 266.

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 1.

*Ibid.*, q. 26, a. 4; q. 184, a. 3.

St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. B. Mackey (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1942), Chap. 6.

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 27, a. 8, ad 3.

St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4.

St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book I, Chap. 7.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 7.

*Ibid.*, q. 184, a. 3.

Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 40.

Pope Pius XI, *Rerum Omnium*. January 16, 1923, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, XV (1923), p. 50.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 8.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 6:1.

*Ibid.*, In Evangelium Matth., 19:12.

*Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 4.

Cardinal Mercier, *La vie intérieure, appel aux âmes sacerdotales* (1919).

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9.

*Ibid.*, q. 184, a. 2.

Council of Valence (855), *De praedestinatione* (Denz.-Schön. 625-633).

## 6

### Christian Perfection and Mystical Experience

Most controversies on the mystical question arise from a lack of agreement on the terminology to be used. Therefore, the central problem is to come to an understanding concerning the definition of mysticism. And the surest way to arrive at a definition is by the application of theological principles. The data of experience and descriptions by mystics themselves have not proved to be satisfactory, nor will they ever solve the problem. The reason is that the data of mystical experience are vague and lack precision because the experience itself is indescribable.

In fact, the data from the mystics must be evaluated by theological principles and conclusions. Any statements that are at variance with these theological truths will have to be rejected *a priori*, regardless of their author, since it is impossible that one truth should contradict another and still proceed from the one source of eternal truth in whom there can be no contradiction. If one must choose between a certain theological conclusion and a contrary statement from mystical experience, one will have to choose the first, because the theological principle from which the conclusion follows has its ultimate basis in divine revelation. To do otherwise would be to run the risk of all types of illusions.

#### Mystical Experience

The question of mysticism or the mystical experience has been the source of controversy since the early days of the Church, when St. Paul and the Apostolic Fathers attempted to distinguish between Christian and pagan gnosis. With the passage of time and the deeper investigations of later theologians, the term *mysticism* became more refined, so that with Pseudo- Dionysius it signified the experience of the divine, passively received. This concept remained stable throughout the centuries but in modern times, because of more accurate methods of investigation and more precise distinctions, the mystical question has again become an occasion of discussion.

There is a great variety of definitions among modern authors, but through them all one can perceive a basis of common agreement concerning the constitutive element of Christian mysticism. They dispute at great length as to whether mysticism is necessary for Christian perfection, and they argue about many other questions related to this one, but as regards the nature of mysticism they are for the most part in agreement. Many identify mysticism with infused contemplation, which is not quite exact,<sup>(1)</sup> but all agree on one thing: as a psychological fact, mysticism is an awareness of the divine activity on the soul. Mysticism is a passive and not an active experience because -- and here also there is a general agreement among theologians -- only the Holy Spirit can produce this experience in us by the actuation of his gifts.

*Mystical Experience and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*

The constitutive element of mystical experience is the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the divine or supernatural mode, which normally produces a passive experience of God or of his divine activity in the soul. We are not referring to any external characteristic or psychological manifestation that may accompany the mystical experience. We are speaking of the essential note that intrinsically constitutes mysticism.

The actuation of the gifts constitutes the very essence of mysticism. Whenever a gift of the Holy Spirit operates, there is a mystical act that is more or less intense. And when the actuation of the gifts is so frequent and repeated that it predominates over the exercise of the infused virtues, which operate in a human manner -- characteristic of the ascetical state -- the soul has entered into the mystical state. This is always relative, of course, since the gifts never operate, even in the great mystics, in a manner that is absolutely continuous and uninterrupted.

Since the actuation of the gifts is the primary and essential element of mysticism, it is never lacking in any of the mystical states or mystical acts. The experience of the divine is one of the most frequent and ordinary manifestations in the activity of the gifts, but it is not absolutely essential. It can be lacking; and, as a matter of fact, it is lacking during the dark nights of the soul or passive purifications that are nevertheless truly mystical.<sup>(2)</sup> What can never be lacking is the supernatural manner in which the soul operates as a result of being moved by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and its awareness that it is being acted upon by a divine power.

On the other hand, in the midst of the sufferings of the passive purgations, which cause a feeling of the total absence of God,<sup>(3)</sup> the soul continues to practice the virtues to a heroic degree and in a manner that is more divine than ever. Its faith is most vivid, its hope is superior to all hope, and its charity is above all measure.

The awareness of the divine action is also one of the basic differences between the mystical state and the ascetical state. The ascetical soul lives the Christian life in a purely human manner, though under the guidance of faith and charity. Its awareness of the divine is restricted to reflection and discursus. The mystics, on the other hand, experience in themselves, except in those cases mentioned, the ineffable reality of the life of grace. They are the witnesses of the loving presence of God in us.

Passivity is another typical note. Mystics are fully aware that what they are experiencing is not produced by themselves. They did not cause the experience and cannot retain it for a second longer than is desired by the one who produces it.

The descriptions written by mystics reveal that a psychological passivity of love dominates their life. They have the impression, more or less sensible, of an intervention from outside themselves that rises from the depths of their being to unite them to God and to enjoy a certain fruition of God. We are referring, of course, to a relative passivity; that is, the principal agent is the Holy Spirit, but the soul reacts in a vital manner to his movement. As St. Teresa says, "the will consents" by cooperating with the divine action in a free and voluntary manner. And thus liberty and merit are preserved under the activity of the gifts.

But how do the gifts of the Holy Spirit produce this passive experience of the divine, and why do they cease to give this experience during the passive purgations? It is the constant teaching of St. Thomas and theologians of all schools that the union of the soul with God, begun essentially

through sanctifying grace, is actuated and perfected by the acts of supernatural knowledge and love, that is, by the exercise of faith and of charity.(4) But, although supernatural as regards their essence, faith and charity are not supernatural in their manner of operation.

The nature and function of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are far different, as we have already seen. The gifts are supernatural not only in their essence, but even in their manner or mode of operation. They are not subject to the movement and control of human reason as the infused virtues are, for the Holy Spirit himself directly and immediately moves the gifts to operation. In this respect they are superior to all the infused virtues.

The intensity of the mystical experience will depend on the intensity with which the gift has been actuated. When mystical acts occur in the ascetical state, the gifts will usually be actuated with less intensity because the imperfect disposition of the subject will not permit more. The gift produces an experience of the divine, but it is so weak that the soul scarcely notices it. If it is a question of one of the intellectual gifts, there will be a transitory act of infused contemplation, but in a very incipient degree that is almost imperceptible. St. John of the Cross explains this as follows:

It is true, however, that when this condition first begins, the soul is hardly aware of this loving knowledge. The reason for this is twofold. First, this loving knowledge is apt at the beginning to be very subtle and delicate, so as to be almost imperceptible to the senses. Secondly, when the soul is used to the exercise of meditation, which is wholly perceptible, it is unaware and hardly conscious of this other new and imperceptible condition, which is purely spiritual; especially when, not understanding it, the soul does not allow itself to rest in it, but strives after the former, which is more readily perceptible. The result is that, however abundant the loving, interior peace may be, the soul has no opportunity of experiencing and enjoying it.(5)

Such is the nature of the mystical experience. At the beginning it is subtle and delicate and almost imperceptible because of the imperfect actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; but the actuation is gradually intensified and becomes more frequent until the activity of the gifts predominates in the life of the soul. Then the soul has entered into the mystical state, whose essential characteristic is the predominance of the activity of the gifts in a divine mode over the simple exercise of the infused virtues in a human mode, as was proper to the ascetical state.

During the passive purgations, however, the divine motion of the gifts has as its purpose the purification of the soul from all its attachments. It not only deprives the soul of any delightful awareness of God but also gives the soul a contrary experience of absence and abandonment by God, which is of great purgative value. In these cases the gift is limited to its essential and primary effect, which is to provide a supernatural modality to the exercise of the virtues, but it lacks its secondary and accidental effect, the experience of the divine.

If to this difference on the part of the divine movement we add the dispositions of the soul during the passive purgation of the senses, it will be evident why the soul does not perceive the divine movement of the gifts during that period. As St. John of the Cross explains in the text that we have cited, when the first light of contemplation begins to dawn, the soul is not yet accustomed to that subtle, delicate, and almost insensible light that is communicated to it. And since, on the other hand, the soul is incapacitated for the exercise of the discursive meditation to which it was accustomed, it is left apparently without the one or the other and in complete obscurity.

During the passive purgation of the spirit, however, the suffering of the soul is much more intense and it is painfully aware of imperfections and miseries that it had been incapable of perceiving before the divine light illumined and purged the soul of its ignorance. St. John of the Cross describes the passive purgation in terms of "dark contemplation":

God strips their faculties, affections and feelings, both spiritual and sensual, both outward and inward, leaving the intellect dark, the will dry, the memory empty and the affections in the deepest affliction, bitterness and straitness, taking from the soul the pleasure and experience of spiritual blessings which it had aforesaid .... All this the Lord works in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation ....

But the question arises: Why is the divine light (which, as we say, illumines and purges the soul from its ignorances) here called by the soul a dark night? To this the answer is that for two reasons this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of divine wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of the soul's vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark.[\(6\)](#)

St. John of the Cross dedicates approximately twenty pages of Book II of *The Dark Night* to a detailed explanation of the purgative contemplation that brings darkness and affliction to the soul in order to lead it into the light and dispose it for the divine inflowing. He states repeatedly that this purgation of the dark night of the spirit is the work of the Lord and that the soul is passive under the action of the dark ray of contemplation. The entire activity is therefore a mystical purification that will lead the soul eventually to the transforming union.

### *Mysticism and the Perfection of Charity*

The mystical experience is not an extraordinary grace similar to charismatic graces but is the normal consequence of the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We have already implied this in the previous explanation, but it is well to emphasize the fact that mysticism is the flowering of the life of grace and the crowning achievement of the perfection of charity. For many centuries there were theologians who maintained that all mysticism was an extraordinary grace and therefore should not be expected or desired.[\(7\)](#) Thanks to the efforts of John Arintero[\(8\)](#) and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrangé,[\(9\)](#) the traditional doctrine of mysticism has been restored.

Today this thesis has been so firmly established that few spiritual theologians of any competence would consider mysticism an extraordinary grace reserved only for a few select souls. Asceticism and mysticism do not constitute two distinct paths to Christian holiness; they are two stages on the same path to the perfection of charity.

The normalcy of mystical experience in relation to the life of grace and the perfection of charity is readily admitted by all who admit that the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit constitutes the mystical act. But there is also another theological argument to substantiate the foregoing thesis; it is based on the fact that all Christians are called to the perfection of charity.

We have already discussed the vocation of all Christians to the perfection of charity, but it is well to recall the distinction between the ontological or objective degree of grace and charity to which the individuals are called, in accordance with God's will, and the subjective degree of radicalization of grace and charity in the soul, from which proceeds the perfection of charity in its affective and

effective intensity. There are differences among individuals in regard to their objective degree of grace, willed for them by God, both on earth and in glory ("In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" -- John 14:2), but each individual is called to the full perfection of charity made operative by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the fruits, and the beatitudes. In other words, all are called to the subjective and intensive plenitude of charity in accordance with the objective degree or measure of grace that God has decreed for each one. But to exercise charity with such intensive perfection will necessarily require the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is a mystical act.

### *Mystical Activity and Contemplative Prayer*

Mystical activity does not necessarily include infused contemplative prayer.

It can readily be admitted that all infused contemplative prayer is a mystical operation since, as we shall see later, it necessarily involves the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The question is whether mystical activity and contemplative prayer are so intimately connected that the two can be considered as concomitant elements of all mystical experience. Some authors, especially those who vigorously defend infused contemplation as the logical consequence of perfect charity actuated by the gifts, seem at times to imply that infused contemplation is a necessary component of all mystical activity. However, mystical activity and infused prayer are not only distinct but also separable. It is true that there can be no infused contemplative prayer without mystical activity, since infused prayer requires the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; but there can be mystical activity without infused contemplation.

The theological reason for making a distinction between infused contemplative prayer and mystical activity is readily grasped when we recall the nature of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their division. Since the gifts operate in a supernatural mode and the soul is therefore passive or receptive under their movement, they constitute the essential element in mystical activity. Consequently, every operation of a gift is a mystical act, whether the gift operates in a cognitive faculty or in an appetitive faculty. But one of the affective gifts could be actuated and produce a mystical act without producing infused contemplative prayer, which is caused by the intellectual gifts of wisdom and understanding. Consequently, the mystical act and infused contemplative prayer are distinct and separable.

Moreover, there is an argument drawn from the experience and testimony of the mystics themselves. St. John of the Cross states that during the passive purgation the soul feels as if abandoned and rejected by God.<sup>(10)</sup> There is no experience whatever of God as present and united to the soul, and yet the passive purgations are mystical operations. It follows, therefore, that infused contemplation is not a necessary component of all mystical activity but is only one type of mystical activity.

Finally, the same conclusion is reached if we consider that the Christian life, as lived by the individual, is both contemplative and active. There are virtues to perfect the individual in contemplative and active pursuits, and there are gifts of the Holy Spirit that can raise the contemplative and active operations to the mystical level. But we know from experience that contemplative pursuits are not only distinct from those of the active life but are also sometimes incompatible with them. So also, although the gifts, like the virtues, are in one sense interrelated, the operation of one gift, such as the gift of fortitude or piety, may impede the simultaneous

operation of another gift, such as wisdom or understanding. Therefore, infused contemplation is not necessarily an element of each mystical activity.

It should be noted that the distinction we are making is between the *mystical act* and infused contemplative prayer, and not between infused contemplation and the mystical state. That is another question entirely, and we shall treat it in the following section. For the moment it suffices to say that the life of any individual Christian will be predominantly either contemplative or active, and if he reaches the degree of perfection in which the gifts become operative, he will be characterized by the mystical acts of the contemplative or the active life. Thus, the saints, who were canonized not only for their perfection in charity but also for the heroic degree of other virtues, provide a beautiful variety of the ways in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate in the Christian life.

### *Mystical Experience, Grace, and Charity*

Mystical activity is a normal concomitant of the perfection of grace and charity.

Sanctifying grace by its very nature demands an increase and a growth. This is so clear that it is admitted by all the different schools of Christian spirituality. If grace were infused in the soul already perfectly developed, the obligation to strive for perfection would be meaningless and absurd. Mystical activity is the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a divine mode, usually producing a passive experience of the divine. This point is also admitted by all theologians -- with certain differences, to be sure, but these do not affect the substance of the matter. There is also perfect agreement concerning the meaning of the normal development of sanctifying grace. Whatever falls within the exigencies of grace evidently falls within the normal and ordinary development. And whatever is outside the exigencies of grace will be extraordinary in its development. On this all theologians are in agreement.

All the schools of Christian spirituality recognize that the simple actuation of a gift of the Holy Spirit cannot be classified among the extraordinary phenomena (as one would classify, for example, the charismatic graces -- *gratiae gratis datae*), but that it is something perfectly normal and ordinary in the life of grace. We have already demonstrated that the gifts of the Holy Spirit do not and cannot act in a human mode; this human manner of operation is absolutely incompatible with the nature of the gifts. Consequently, either the gifts do not operate, or they necessarily operate in a divine manner - and then we are in the domain of the mystical because that actuation in a divine mode, necessarily produces a mystical act.

### **The Mystical State and Christian Perfection**

The mystical experience is distinct and separable from the mystical state. The mystical experience is produced by the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their divine modality. Consequently, there is a mystical act, more or less intense, as often as any gift of the Holy Spirit operates in the soul. The actuation of a gift will give to the soul, if nothing prevents it, a passive experience of the divine that is more or less intense; from a psychological point of view it is an ordinary phenomenon in mysticism.

But an isolated actuation of a gift of the Holy Spirit does not suffice to constitute the mystical state. A state is something fixed, stable, permanent, and habitual. Consequently there is no mystical state until the actuation of the gifts is so intense and frequent that this operation



habitually predominates over the simple exercise of the infused virtues in a human mode.

However, the expression *mystical state* must be understood correctly. The mystical state consists in the predominance of the rule of the gifts, but this does not signify a psychological state that is habitual in the proper sense of the word. The gifts of the Holy Spirit do not act continuously and uninterruptedly in any mystic; to be sure, they operate in the soul of the mystic in a manner that is increasingly intense and more frequent, but never in a permanent and uninterrupted manner.

The reason is evident: for the operation of the gifts a special motion of the Holy Spirit is required in each case, because he alone can actuate them directly and immediately. This motion corresponds to the movement of the actual graces that are of themselves transitory. Therefore, when theologians and mystics speak of the mystical state, they use the words in a wide sense, meaning that the soul is habitually so attentive and responsive to the Holy Spirit that ordinarily the acts of the gifts will replace the personal initiative that is exercised through the infused virtues.

Reducing this distinction to precise formulas, we would offer the following definitions: The *mystical act* is the simple actuation, more or less intense, of a gift of the Holy Spirit operating in a divine manner. The *mystical state* is the manifest predominance of the activity of the gifts, operating in a divine manner, over the simple exercise of the infused virtues, operating in a human manner.

#### *Ascetical and Mystical Activity*

Asceticism is not confined to the ascetical state, nor is mysticism reserved to the mystical state. What determines either state is the habitual predominance of ascetical or mystical activity.

This statement follows from what we have already stated regarding mystical activity in general. An isolated mystical act and mystical experience do not constitute the mystical state. On the other hand, persons in the ascetical state may be moved by the Holy Spirit through his gifts, while those who are already in the mystical state may sometimes need to proceed in the manner of ascetics. Such is the teaching of St. Teresa when she tells her nuns that souls that have reached the sublime heights of the seventh mansions must sometimes return to the human mode of operation.[\(11\)](#)

John Arintero explains this doctrine as follows:

All souls in the state of grace, possessing as they do the gifts of the Holy Spirit, ... already possess the seeds and rudiments of the mystical life and can develop and manifest them little by little .... Therefore the true ascetic, even the lowliest Christian, who takes seriously the *unum necessarium* which is the work of sanctification, ... will frequently work under the divine impulses, although he may not clearly advert to it .... So the soul which as yet proceeds along the ascetical way sometimes produces truly mystical acts, just as the mystic on many occasions produces ascetical acts .... The mystics, however elevated they may be, when the Holy Spirit withdraws his action for some time ... must proceed and do proceed after the manner of ascetics ....

When the soul habitually produces acts of virtue and, denying itself, ordinarily permits itself to be moved without resistance by the touchings and breathings of the sanctifying Spirit,... then we

can say that the soul is now in the full mystical state, although from time to time it will still have to return to the ascetical state.[\(12\)](#)

At this point a question naturally arises: when does the soul enter definitively into the mystical state? The best reply to this question is a tentative one, an estimation. The reason is that the transition from the ascetical state to the mystical state is not like passing through a door from one room to another; it is a gradual process wherein the virtue of charity develops to the point of total abandonment of self to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Absolutely speaking, however, God could place,,a soul in the mystical state at the very beginning of the spiritual life.

But in order to give at least a tentative reply to the question, we would say that the mystical state begins when the soul habitually (though not exclusively) acts under the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If we judge from the active and passive purgations, the mystical state begins during the passive night of the senses; if we use the grades of prayer as a measure, the mystical state begins in the prayer of union. However, as Father Arintero points out, the mystical state may actually begin much earlier:

The habitual mystical state begins fully with the prayer of union, although there are still great interruptions until the soul reaches full and stable union. But the mystical state is initiated in the stage of affective prayer and then, in the night of the senses, however much the soul is able to recognize the fact, it is accentuated more and more.[\(13\)](#)

We can conclude, therefore, that the mystical life is in some way already present in the ascetical life. It embraces the whole development of the Christian life and the whole path to union with God, but is clearly and habitually manifested in the unitive way.

### *Complete Perfection and the Mystical State*

Complete Christian perfection is found only in the mystical state. This is another conclusion that follows from the theological principles we have already established. Christian perfection consists in the full development of the sanctifying grace received at baptism as a seed. This development is verified by the increase of the infused theological and moral virtues, and especially that of charity, the virtue whose perfection coincides with the perfection of the Christian life.

But the infused virtues cannot attain their full perfection except under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for without the gifts they cannot go beyond the human modality under the rule of reason to which they are restricted in the ascetical state. Only the divine modality of the gifts gives the infused virtues the atmosphere that they need for their perfection. It is this predominance of the activity of the gifts of the Spirit operating in a divine mode that characterizes the mystical state. Therefore it follows that complete Christian perfection necessarily requires the mystical state.

Let us review the teaching of two authorities in experimental mysticism: St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, whose doctrines are in complete accord with the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The teaching of St. John of the Cross is orientated to the transforming union, and this union constitutes complete Christian perfection. But the transforming union is attained through the passive purgations that enable the love of God to become perfect. The following two texts clearly

indicate his thought:

However assiduously the beginner practices the mortification in himself of all these actions and passions, he can never completely succeed-very far from it-until God works it in him passively by means of the purgation of the said night . . . .

But neither from these imperfections nor from those others can the soul be perfectly purified until God brings it into the passive purgation of that dark night of which we shall presently speak .... For however greatly the soul itself labors, it cannot actively purify itself so as to be prepared in the least degree for the divine union of perfection of love if God does not take its hand and purge it in that dark fire, in the way and manner that we have yet to describe.[\(14\)](#)

The teaching of St. Teresa of Avila is in conformity with that of St. John of the Cross, although she traces the path to perfection along the grades of prayer rather than that of the active and passive purgations. Not only does she describe the various degrees of prayer of union that are proper to the mystical state, but she also states expressly that she is wilting for those souls desirous of attaining the heights of the mystical life.

I seem to have been contradicting what I had previously said, since, in consoling those who had not reached the contemplative state, I told them that the Lord had different roads by which they might come to him, just as he also had many mansions. I now repeat this: his Majesty, being who he is and understanding our weakness, has provided for us. But he did not say: "Some must come by this way and others by that." His mercy is so great that he has forbidden none to strive to come and drink of this fountain of love.[\(15\)](#)

Remember, the Lord invites us all; and since he is Truth itself, we cannot doubt him. If his invitation were not a general one, he would not have said: "I will give you to drink." He might have said: "Come, all of you, for after all you will lose nothing by coming; and I will give drink to those whom I think fit for it." But since he said that we were all to come, without making this condition, I feel sure that none will fail to receive this living water unless they cannot keep to the path.[\(16\)](#)

This concludes our examination of the theological principles that constitute the systematic part of spiritual theology. We now focus our attention on the application of the theological conclusions, which comprises the practical part of spiritual theology.

Most manuals of spiritual theology treat the practical questions within the framework of the three stages: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. This method is closer to the experience and evolution of the spiritual life, but it has the disadvantage of making separate and isolated categories of the three stages. A person does not definitively leave the lower stages as he passes to the higher ones; the spiritual life is normally a complex pattern of purgation, illumination and union, a blending of ascetical and mystical elements.

Since spiritual theology relates to all the parts of theology and since the spiritual life is a combination of many diverse elements, perhaps there is no method of procedure that eliminates all the disadvantages. Nevertheless, it is necessary to adopt one or another method, if only because we cannot study everything at once. Keeping in mind that the primary agent in the spiritual life is the Holy Spirit, who is not in any way restricted to our theological conclusions and directives, we shall use a topical method, dividing the material into homogeneous parts but

following at least in general the stages of development from conversion to the perfection of charity.

Accordingly, we shall now treat of conversion and progressive purgation, positive growth in holiness, the practice of prayer and, finally, mystical phenomena and the discernment of spirits.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Jacques Maritain was one of the first theologians to explain the distinction between infused contemplation and mystical experience. See "Une question sur la vie mystique," in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Paris, VII (1923), pp. 636-50.

To say that the passive purgations are mystical activity only to the extent that the soul is passive under their influence and they dispose the soul for infused contemplation, is an attempt to save the opinion that considers the experience of the divine to be an essential element of mystical activity. But this is contrary to the teaching of St. John of the Cross and the traditional doctrine.

"What the sorrowful soul feels most in this condition is its clear perception that God has abandoned it and, abhorring it, has cast it into darkness, and this is for the soul a serious and pitiful suffering for it to believe that God has abandoned it" (St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book II, Chap. 6.

*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 6, a. 6, ad 1; *De Caritate*, q. 2, ad 7.

St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957) Book II, Chap. 17.

See St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chap. 3-5, *passim*.

The Italian Jesuit John Baptist Scaramelli (1688-1752) was one of the first to break away from the traditional doctrine: Basically the difficulty stems from the inability to see the distinction between the remote call to Christian perfection and the fact that relatively few persons seem to reach the mystical state. Another difficulty arises when all mystical phenomena are classified as extraordinary graces.

See John G. Arinterro, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949), 2 vols.

See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947), 2 vols.; *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1944).

St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chap. 6.

St. Teresa of Avila, *The Life*, Chap. 13; *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946).

John Arintero, *Cuestiones Místicas* (Madrid: B.A.C., 1956), pp. 502, 663.

Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution*, Vol. 2, p. 427.r

St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Chap. 3, n. 3; Chap. 7, n. 5.

St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 20, n. 1.

St. Teresa, *op. cit.*, Chap. 19, n. 15.

## **PART TWO**

### **Growth in Holiness**

#### **7**

#### **Conversion From Sin**

It is a truism in psychology that no two persons are absolutely identical. The same thing is true in the spiritual life: no two souls will follow the same path to perfection, identical in every respect. On the spiritual level the differences are rooted in the predominant moral predispositions of individuals as well as the particular graces that God gives to each one.

But grace does not destroy or replace nature; it works through and perfects nature. Consequently the body-soul composite of the individual person can be a help or hindrance to the operations of the virtues infused with sanctifying grace. It is therefore necessary, especially for spiritual directors, to understand the ways in which the psychosomatic structure can affect the work of sanctification.

This need is all the more evident when we realize that in this practical, applied part of spiritual theology we are not dealing with human nature in a vague and transcendental sense we are discussing the spiritual life of individual persons who are striving to die to sin and live the fullness of charity. We must therefore consider the human person in terms of temperament and character, which are the basic elements that constitute personhood.

#### **The Psychosomatic Structure**

According to G. W. Allport, personality can be defined as "the dynamic organization, within the individual, of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought."[\(1\)](#)

Most psychologists and social scientists maintain that the human personality is influenced primarily by two factors: heredity and environment. Heredity is the fundamental source of temperament, and environment is the basic causal factor in character. It should be noted, however, that environment is used in the widest possible sense; it includes the domestic environment of the family and school, culture, economic and social status, and religious influences.

But to avoid a blind determinism of personality we must add a third factor that is most important

of all -- the free will by which we make choices. The way in which we use our capabilities, respond to our inner drives, and relate to our environment depends ultimately on our own free choice or volition.

### *Types of Temperament*

There is a diversity of opinion among psychologists concerning the classification of temperament. For our purposes we may define temperament as the pattern of inclinations and reactions that proceed from the physiological constitution of the individual. It is a dynamic factor that determines to a great extent the manner in which an individual will react to stimuli of various kinds. Rooted as it is in the physiological structure, temperament is something innate and hereditary; it is the natural inclination of the somatic structure. It is, therefore, something permanent and admits of only secondary modification; it can never be totally destroyed. The axiom "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it" has its most obvious application in the area of temperament.

The classification of the temperaments is based on the predominant characteristics of the physiological constitutions. It is by no means exclusive or definitive, nor does it signify that there are "pure" temperaments. As a matter of fact, individuals generally manifest a combination of several temperaments, but one or another will usually predominate. We shall use the emotions as the basis of our definition and classification of temperaments because the emotions are psychosomatic reactions of the individual and hence closely related to temperament. But we discuss the four temperaments according to the ancient classification of (1) sanguine, (2) melancholic, (3) choleric, and (4) phlegmatic.

**Sanguine Temperament.** A person of sanguine temperament reacts quickly and strongly to almost any stimulation or impression, but the reaction is usually of short duration. The stimulation or impression is quickly forgotten, and the remembrance of past experiences does not easily arouse a new response.

Among the good qualities of the sanguine temperament, we may list the following: affability and cheerfulness; sympathy and generosity toward others; sensitivity and compassion for the sufferings of others; docility, sincerity, and spontaneity. There may at times be a vehement reaction to injuries received, but all is soon forgotten and no rancor remains. Others are attracted by the individual's goodness of heart and contagious enthusiasm.

Sanguine persons usually have a serene view of life and are optimists. They are gifted with a great deal of common sense and a practical approach to life; they tend to idealize rather than criticize. Since they possess an affectionate nature, they make friends easily and sometimes love their friends with great ardor or even passion. Their intellects are alert, and they learn quickly, although often without much depth. Their memory dwells on pleasant and optimistic things, and their imagination is active and creative. Consequently, they readily excel in art, oratory, and the related fields, though they do not often attain the stature of the learned or the scholars. Sanguine persons could be superior types of individuals if they possessed as much depth as they do facility, and if they were as tenacious in their work as they are productive of new ideas and projects.

But each temperament will also be characterized by certain defects or predispositions to evil. The

principal defects of the sanguine temperament are superficiality, inconstancy, and sensuality. The first defect is due primarily to their immediate perception of ideas and situations, their retentive memory, and the creative activity of their imagination. While they appear to grasp in an instant even the most difficult problem or subject, they sometimes see it only superficially and incompletely. As a result, they run the risk of hasty judgments, of acting with insufficient reason, and of formulating inaccurate or false conclusions. They are more interested in breadth of knowledge than depth.

The inconstancy of sanguine persons is the result of the short duration of their impressions and reactions. They may pass quickly from joy to sorrow. They quickly repent of their sins but may return to them on the first occasion that presents itself. Being readily moved by the impression of the moment, they easily succumb to temptation. As a rule they abandon any effort that is of long duration. They have great difficulty in observing custody of the external senses and the imagination and are easily distracted in prayer. Their occasional periods of great fervor are often followed by discouragement or indifference.

From the foregoing it follows that sensuality finds easy access to the sanguine temperament. Such persons are often victims of gluttony and lust. They may react strongly and with great sorrow after they have fallen, but they lack the energy and perseverance to fight against the inclinations of the flesh when the passions are again aroused. The entire organism is quickly alerted when the occasion is offered for sensual pleasure, and the strong tendency of the individual to sensuality causes the imagination to produce such phantasms very easily.

Sanguine persons should utilize their good qualities, such as energy, affection, vivacity, and sensitivity, but they should take care that these qualities are directed to objects that are good and wholesome. For them more than others the advice of St. Augustine has special significance: "Choose wisely and then love with all your heart."

To overcome superficiality they will acquire the habit of reflection and of thinking a matter through before they act. Against their inconstancy they will strengthen their will to carry through resolutions that have been made and be faithful in the practice of prayer and the performance of good works, even in periods of ~ aridity or in times of hardship and difficulty. Lastly, sensuality can be combatted by constant vigilance and immediate flight from the occasions of sin, custody of the external senses and the imagination, the practice of recollection, and practices of mortification.

**Melancholic Temperament.** The melancholic temperament is weak as regards reaction to stimulus, and it is difficult to arouse; however, after repeated impressions the reaction is strong and lasting, so that the melancholic temperament does not forget easily.

As regards good qualities that serve as predispositions to virtue, persons of melancholic temperament are inclined to reflection, piety, and the interior life. They are compassionate toward those who suffer, attracted to the corporal works of mercy, and able to endure suffering to the point of heroism in the performance of their duties. They have a sharp and profound intellect and, because of their natural bent to solitude and reflection, they generally consider matters thoroughly. They may become detached and dry intellectuals or contemplatives who dedicate themselves to the interior life of prayer. They usually appreciate the fine arts but are more drawn to the speculative sciences.

When they love, it is with difficulty that they detach themselves from the object of their love. They suffer greatly if others treat them with coldness or ingratitude. The power of their will is greatly affected by their physical strength and health. If their physical powers are exhausted, their will is weak, but if they are in good health and spirits they are energetic workers. Normally they do not experience the vehement passions that may torment persons of a sanguine temperament. We may say in general that this temperament is opposed to the sanguine temperament as the choleric temperament is opposed to the phlegmatic temperament.

The unfavorable traits of the melancholic temperament are an exaggerated tendency to sadness and melancholy; an inclination to magnify difficulties and thus to lose confidence in self; excessive reserve and timidity, with a propensity to scrupulosity. Persons of melancholic temperament do not show their feelings as do the sanguine; they suffer in silence because they find it difficult to reveal themselves. They tend to be pessimistic, and many enterprises are never begun because of their lack of confidence.

Those who are in charge of educating or training the melancholic temperament should keep in mind their strong tendency to concentrate excessively on themselves. It is important to inculcate in these persons a strong confidence in God and in themselves, as well as a more optimistic view of life. Since they have good intellects and tend to reflection, they should be made to realize that there is no reason for them to be timid or irresolute. At all costs the director must destroy their indecision and get them to make firm resolutions and to undertake projects with enthusiasm and optimism. Sometimes it is necessary to give them a special regimen of rest and nourishment and to forbid them to spend long hours in prayer and solitude or to observe fasts.

**Choleric Temperament.** Persons of a choleric temperament are easily and strongly aroused, and the impression lasts for a long time. Theirs is the temperament that produces great saints or great sinners, and while all the temperaments can contribute to sanctity, the choleric temperament is outstanding.

The good qualities of the temperament can be summarized as follows: great energy and activity, sharp intellect, strong and resolute will, good powers of concentration, constancy, magnanimity, and liberality. Choleric persons are practical rather than theoretical; they are more inclined to work than to think. Inactivity is repugnant to them, and they are always looking forward to the next labor or to the formulation of some great project. Once they have set upon a plan of work, they immediately set their hand to the task. Hence this temperament produces many leaders, superiors, apostles. It is the temperament of government and administration.

These persons do not leave for tomorrow what they can do today, but sometimes they may try to do today what they should leave for tomorrow. If difficulties and obstacles arise, they immediately set about to overcome them and, although they often have strong movements of irascibility and impatience in the face of problems, once they have conquered these movements they acquire a tenderness and sweetness of disposition that are noteworthy.

The tenacity of the choleric temperament sometimes produces the following evil effects: hardness, obstinacy, insensibility, anger, and pride. If choleric persons are resisted, they may easily become violent, cruel, arrogant, unless the Christian virtues moderate these inclinations. If defeated by others, they may nurture hatred in their hearts until they have obtained their vengeance. They easily become ambitious and seek their own glory. They have greater patience



than do the sanguine, but they may lack delicacy of feeling, are often insensitive to the feelings of others, and therefore lack tact in human relations. Their passions, when aroused, are so strong and impetuous that they smother the tenderer emotions and the spirit of sacrifice that spring spontaneously from more sympathetic hearts. Their fever for activity and their eagerness to execute their resolutions cause them to disregard others, to thrust all impediments aside, and to give the appearance of being egoists. In their treatment of others they sometimes display coldness and indifference, not to mention impatience with persons who are less talented. It is evident from the foregoing that if the choleric person pursues the path of evil, there is no length to which he or she will not go in order to achieve a goal.

Choleric persons can be individuals of great worth if they succeed in controlling and guiding their energies. They could arrive at the height of perfection with relative facility. In their hands even the most difficult tasks seem to be brought to an easy and ready solution. Therefore, when they have themselves under control and are rightly directed, they will not cease in their efforts until they have reached the summit. Above all, they need to cultivate true humility of heart, to be compassionate to the weak and the uninstructed, not to humiliate or embarrass others, not to flaunt their superiority, and to treat all persons with tenderness and understanding. They should be taught how to be detached from themselves and to manifest a generous love toward others.

**Phlegmatic Temperament.** The phlegmatic is rarely aroused emotionally and, if so, only weakly. The impressions received usually last for only a short time and leave no trace.

The good characteristics of phlegmatic persons are that they work slowly but assiduously; they are not easily irritated by insults, misfortunes, or sickness; they usually remain tranquil, discreet, and sober; they have a great deal of common sense and mental balance. They do not possess the inflammable passions of the sanguine temperament, the deep passions of the melancholic temperament, or the ardent passions of the choleric temperament. In their speech they are orderly, clear, positive, and measured, rather than florid and picturesque. They are more suited to scientific work which involves long and patient research and minute investigation than to original productions. They have good hearts, but they seem to be cold. They would sacrifice to the point of heroism if it were necessary, but they lack enthusiasm and spontaneity because they are reserved and somewhat indolent by nature. They are prudent, sensible, reflective, and work with a measured pace. They attain their goals without fanfare or violence because they usually avoid difficulties rather than attacking them. Physically phlegmatics are usually of robust build, slow in movements, and possessing an amiable face.

The defective qualities of the phlegmatic temperament are their slowness and calmness, which cause these persons to lose many good opportunities because they delay so long in putting works into operation. They are not interested in events that take place around them, but they tend to live by and for themselves, almost to the point of egoism. They are not suitable for government and administration. They are not usually drawn to corporal penances and mortification, and there is no fear that they will kill themselves by penance and self-abnegation. In extreme cases they become so lethargic and insensible that they become completely deaf to the invitation or command that would raise them out of their stupor.

Phlegmatics can avoid the bad effects of their temperament if they are inculcated with deep convictions and if they demand of themselves methodical and constant efforts toward greater perfection. They will advance slowly, to be sure, but they will advance far. Above all, they must

not be allowed to become indolent and apathetic but should be directed to some lofty ideal. They, too, need to gain control of themselves, not as the choleric, who must restrain and moderate themselves, but to arouse themselves and put their dormant powers to good use.

### *Factors Affecting Character*

Character can be understood in an ethical or a psychological sense. Ethically, it comprises the pattern of habits cultivated by an individual in accordance with his or her accepted principles and values: Psychologically, it is the organized totality of the tendencies and predispositions of an individual, grouped around and directed by a predominant tendency. Our interest is in the ethical aspect of character, which is largely influenced by education, environment, and, above all, by one's personal effort. The formation of character and the development to maturity as a person will depend ultimately on the cultivation and perfection of the virtues.

Rather than physiological at basis, as is temperament, character is psychological and ethical. Consequently, temperament is immutable, but it is the material out of which character is made, much in the same way as the clay or marble or wood will be the material out of which a particular statue is fashioned. It is character that gives the formal distinction to the personality.

**Education.** Under education we would include all factors that, from birth to the maturation of character (usually between twenty-four and thirty), have influenced one's attitudes and habits of life. During the early years, from infancy to the beginning of formal education and even beyond, the child will be greatly affected by such factors as nationality, religious training, parental discipline, and instruction. Once the child begins a formal education, the school assumes a major role in the formation of character, especially if it is a school in which there is insistence on moral instruction and discipline. During these years and through adolescence the educational influence can usually be broken down into several categories: family, school, church, and associates. Although the effects of these educative factors are not always immediately evident in the young, they leave impressions that form attitudes and value judgments that come into play when the individual reaches maturity and takes a place as a responsible member of society.

**Environment.** The environmental factors are almost too numerous to mention, and they exert an especially strong influence on the individual during the formative years. The influence of example on children is too obvious to be denied.<sup>(2)</sup> While the most forceful environmental influences are to be found in the lives of other human beings, such commonplace things as nutrition, climate, neighborhood environment, and home life also exert a subtle but definite influence. Here again, the effects are not immediately evident in a growing child, but environment during youth is responsible to a large extent, for those attitudes and evaluations that are most deeply rooted in the personality.

**Personal Effort.** By personal effort as a cause of character we mean especially the free choice whereby through the repetition of acts, certain habits are formed and developed until they become a second nature.

Personal effort is by far the most important factor in the formation of character, and it is so potent an instrument that it can modify, correct, or nullify the effects of education and environment.

We are masters of ourselves by means of our free will, and we are responsible for the formation

of character by reason of the fact that any acquired habit is ultimately rooted in a deliberate choice of action that was repeated until the habit was formed. In this sense we can say that, whereas temperament is to a large extent what our ancestors have made us, character is what we have made ourselves. In its moral aspect a character will be good or evil according to whether the habits that predominate in an individual are virtues or vices.

Consequently, the formation of character is closely associated with the psychology of habit formation and the theology of the virtues and vices. We have the power within ourselves to become sinners or saints, but whatever our choice we will have to exert personal effort to achieve our goal.

According to the ancient philosophers, a life of virtue was a guarantee of a life of happiness and perfection. The same is true in reference to the ideal character: in the purely natural order it requires the balance and integration that are provided by the moral and intellectual virtues. For the perfect Christian, however, there is further required, as a superstructure built upon the natural foundation, the theological and moral infused virtues, as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

From what has been said, it should be evident that it is no easy task to form a perfect character. It is for many the work of a lifetime, for although the majority of persons are set in their characters before they reach the age of thirty, it is most rare that any character does not suffer modification and alteration during the entire lifetime of the individual. In the formation of character we would stress the necessity of proper education, good will, and the assiduous cultivation of those virtues that pertain to the state and duties of life of the individual person.

### **The Struggle Against Sin**

Once we have seen the good qualities and the defects of the various temperaments and have understood that the formation of character is primarily a personal responsibility, we are in a position to investigate the problem related to conversion from sin and growth in virtue. At the outset we cannot emphasize too strongly the powerful influence of those predispositions to good and to evil that are rooted in the very temperament of the individual, but at the same time we must stress with equal emphasis the ability of everyone, aided by God's grace, to attain the perfection and fulfillment of Christian maturity. Unfortunately, as a result of original sin we are wounded in our very nature, and the predisposition to moral evil seems to incline us to sin, as Scripture says, from our youth. Hence the tension and the struggle that ensue between the love of God that leads to perfection and sanctification, and the love of self that turns us back upon ourselves in an egoistic love that is incompatible with the generous love that is charity.

#### *Nature of Sin*

Various definitions have been given to describe sin. St. Augustine's description is classical: any thought, word, or deed against the law of God. The Old Testament refers to sin as a spiritual adultery (breaking the covenant with God), a kind of idolatry (serving the false gods of self-love), or simply not measuring up to the demands of religion and charity. The New Testament, however, while still retaining the notion of sin as a breach in the covenant between God and man, places more emphasis on sin as a failure in love of God and love of neighbor. It brings a new perspective to sin, stressing offenses against fraternal love (the social aspect of sin) and showing that some sins are sins of omission or nonaction. St. Thomas Aquinas is fully in the

Gospel tradition when he states that every sin is a deviation from man's true ultimate end; that sin is formally in the will; and that therefore every sin, whatever its name, is fundamentally an act of self-love in opposition to the love of God.(3)

In modern times an attempt has been made to formulate a new theology of sin that takes as its starting point not God, but man. In fact, for many persons the term *anthropology* has almost replaced the word *theology*. But sin, both in Scripture and in traditional theology, is primarily a defect in man's relationship with God. Nevertheless, to understand sin theologically, that is, from God's point of view, we have to translate it into things of our own experience. That is why we speak of sin as sickness or death.

The difficulty is that some theologians use the anthropological sciences to reject sin completely; others imply that once a man makes his fundamental option for God, he cannot sin mortally and, as a result, he cannot fail to attain his ultimate end; still others see God as all-merciful, and exclusively so, or they maintain that so long as a person loves God, he need not resort to the sacrament of reconciliation for forgiveness of serious sins.

All three opinions are erroneous, and they are destructive of any true progress in holiness, much less any authentic conversion from sin.

According to the new morality, the only absolute principle is to love. While we have no intention of discussing all the complexities posed by this position, we can note that, on the popular level, there is a fear that there are no more objective moral standards and that no actions can be proposed as outright sinful. In the catechesis of sin, this could result in refusing to mention, for example, the Ten Commandments or to accept any objective sinful actions .... It has been claimed often that Christianity is not a new moral code but a new life in Christ. But this is an oversimplification that could lead to moral laxity .... A catechesis of sin, specifying certain actions as morally reprehensible, is a necessary aspect of the presentation of Christianity.(4)

God is love, but he is also many other things besides. For instance, reverence might justly be called the first law of creation. This reverence, or reverential fear, if you wish, is based on God's holiness and power .... If we think of God only as love, we will fall into a sentimental attitude by which God adopts our way of looking at things .... We are leading God instead of his leading us. We are really indulging in self-love and self-will under a spiritual disguise. We make God an indulgent father, but God will have none of this. He loves us too much to spoil us. And then, too, he cannot renounce that part of himself which is truth. Truth is as much a part of him as love, and truth never changes to suit our subjective outlook and wishful thinking.(5)

We repeat that the central element of our new life in Christ is love -- love of God, and love of self and neighbor in God. Sin is a rejection, a failure, or a distortion of that love that is charity. And while we distinguish between objective sin and subjective sin, the only actual sin is always a personal sin. Moreover, personal actual sin requires sufficient knowledge (deliberation) and freedom of choice and action (voluntariness). Finally, sin admits of degrees of gravity, and consequently we speak of serious sins (mortal) and light sins (venial). The details of the theology of sin, such as the various precepts that bind under sin, the various acts or non-acts that are sinful, and the degree of culpability and guilt, are matters for the moral theologian.

## *Mortal Sin*

The expression *mortal sin* is still a useful one because it designates that sin that is deadly; it destroys the life of sanctifying grace in the soul or deepens the individual's alienation from God. Mortal sin is therefore the worst enemy of the Christian life and- the only thing that can separate us from God by destroying the life of grace in us. If one serious sin can cause such devastating effects, it is not difficult to imagine the deplorable state of those who live in habitual mortal sin. Eventually the habit of sin, like all habits, becomes like a second nature to the sinner, so that it is very difficult to convert to a life of virtue. Rather, the individual will be characterized by one or more of the capital sins: pride, gluttony, lust, avarice, sloth, envy, anger.

In general we can distinguish four classes of sinners, and it is well for confessors and preachers to be aware of the differences so that they can use the methods best suited to lead these sinners to conversion. The first type sins because of ignorance. We are not referring to a total and invincible ignorance, which would excuse entirely from sin, but to the ignorance that results from a completely indifferent education or from an environment that is devoid of religious influence. Those who live in such surroundings usually have some awareness of the malice of sin. They are conscious of the fact that certain actions are not morally right, and from time to time they even feel a certain remorse. In any case, they are capable of committing deliberate mortal sin.

At the same time the responsibility of such persons before God is greatly lessened. If they have an aversion to that which seems unjust or sinful to them; if, in spite of external influences, they have remained basically upright; and if, especially at the hour of death, they raise their heart to God, full of remorse and confident in his mercy, there is no doubt that they will be judged with mercy at the divine tribunal. If Christ advises us that much more will be asked of those to whom much has been given (Luke 12:48), it is reasonable to think that less will be asked of those who have received little.

Souls such as these often turn to God with comparative readiness if the opportunity presents itself. Since their careless life did not proceed from true malice, but from ignorance, any situation that makes a strong impression on the soul and causes it to enter in upon itself may suffice to cause them to turn to God. The death of a member of the family, a sermon heard at a mission, the introduction to a religious environment, often suffices to lead such souls to the right path. The priest charged with their care should conscientiously complete their religious formation lest they return to their former state.

The second type of sinners comprises those who are weak, lacking in will power, strongly inclined to sensual pleasure, intellectually dull, listless, or cowardly. They lament their faults, they admire good people and would like to be one of them, but they lack the courage and energy to be so in reality. These dispositions do not excuse them from sin; on the contrary, they are more culpable than those who sin through ignorance, because they sin with a greater knowledge. But basically they are weak rather than evil. The person in charge of their spiritual welfare should be especially concerned with strengthening them in their good resolutions, leading them to the frequent reception of the sacraments, to reflection, and avoidance of the occasions of sin.

The third type of sinners are those who sin with cold indifference, without remorse of conscience, silencing the faint voice of conscience in order to continue their life of sin without

reproach. They do not want to give up their sin and are not concerned that their conduct offends God.

The conversion of these persons is very difficult. Their constant infidelity to the inspirations of grace, their indifference to the basic norms of morality, their systematic disdain for the advice given them by those who wish to help them—all this hardens their hearts to such an extent that it would require a veritable miracle of grace for them to return to the right path.

Perhaps the most efficacious means of leading them back to God would be to encourage them to practice certain spiritual exercises with a group of persons of the same profession or social condition as themselves; for example, to make a retreat, a parish mission, or a *cursillo*. It is not unusual for this type of person to try some spiritual exercise out of curiosity, especially if it is suggested in a friendly manner, and it frequently happens that a great grace from God awaits them there. At times astounding conversions are effected, radical changes of life, and the beginning of a life of piety and fervor in persons who formerly lived completely forgetful of God. The priest who has the good fortune to be the instrument of, such divine mercy should watch over the convert and by means of a wise and prudent direction try to assure the definitive and permanent return to God.

The fourth class of sinners is the most culpable. These people sin through a refined malice and diabolical obstinacy. They may have begun as good Christians, but little by little they degenerated, yielding more and more to evil until their souls were definitively conquered. Then came the inevitable consequence of defection and apostasy. The last barriers have been broken, and now these people are susceptible to every kind of moral disorder. They attack religion and the Church and may even join a non-Catholic sect and propagate its doctrines with zeal and ardor. One such person deliberately closed the door to any possibility of a return to God by saying to his friends and relatives: "If at the hour of death I ask for a priest to hear my confession, do not bring him, because I shall be delirious."

It is useless to try to win these people by persuasion or advice. It will make no impression on them and may even produce contrary effects. The only method to be used is strictly supernatural: prayer, fasting, constant recourse to the Blessed Virgin. Their conversion requires a special grace from God, and God does not always grant the grace, in spite of many prayers and supplications. It is as if these sinners had exhausted the patience of God and are destined to be for all eternity the living testimony of rigorous divine justice, because they have abused divine mercy.

We conclude with a statement by St. Teresa on the gravity of mortal sin:

I once heard a spiritual man say that he was not so much astonished at the things done by a soul in mortal sin as at the things not done by it. May God, in his mercy, deliver us from such great evil, for there is nothing in the whole of our lives that so thoroughly deserves to be called evil as this, since it brings endless and eternal evils in its train.[\(6\)](#)

### *Venial Sin*

As distinct from mortal sin, venial sin consists in a simple deviation and not a total aversion from the ultimate end. It is a sickness, but not unto death. The sinner who commits a mortal sin is like the traveler who turns his back on the goal and begins to travel in the opposite direction. But the person who commits a venial sin merely departs from the straight path without abandoning the

journey toward the goal.

We can distinguish three classes of venial sins: (1) those that *by their very nature* involve a disorder or deviation, although only a slight one, such as a small lie that does no damage to anyone; (2) those that, because of the *smallness of the matter involved*, constitute only a light disorder, such as stealing a small amount of money; (3) those that *lack complete deliberation or full consent of the will* in matters that would otherwise be serious sins, such as the taking of God's name in vain.

There is a great difference between the malice of a mortal sin and that of a venial sin, but venial sin does constitute a true offense against God. St. Teresa says in this regard:

From any sin, however small, committed with full knowledge, may God deliver us, especially since we are sinning against so great a Sovereign and realize that he is watching us. That seems to me to be a sin of malice aforethought; it is as though one were to say: "Lord, although this displeases thee, I shall do it. I know that thou seest it and I know that thou wouldst not have me do it; but although I understand this, I would rather follow my own whim and desire than thy will." If we commit a sin in this way, however slight, it seems to me that our offense is not small but very, very great.(7)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish between venial sins committed out of weakness, surprise, or lack of advertence and deliberation, and those that are committed coldly and with the complete awareness that one thereby displeases God. We can never completely avoid the former, and God, who knows very well the clay of which we are made, readily forgives us these sins of weakness. The only thing that one can do about these faults is to try to diminish their number so far as possible and to avoid discouragement. St. Francis de Sales says in this respect:

Although it is reasonable to feel discouragement and to be sorry for having committed any faults, this discouragement should not be sour, angry, acrimonious, or choleric; and this is the great defect of those who, seeing themselves angry, become impatient with their own impatience and become angry at their own anger ....

Just as the sweet and cordial reproaches of a father make more of an impression on a son than his rage and anger, so also, if we reproach our heart when it commits some fault with sweet and peaceful reproaches, using more compassion than anger and arousing the heart to amend, we shall succeed in arousing a repentance which is much more profound and penetrating than that which could be aroused with resentment, anger, and anxiety .... Nevertheless, detest with all your heart the offense which you have committed against God and, filled with courage and confidence in his mercy, begin again the practice of that virtue which you have abandoned.(8)

If one acts in this way, reacting promptly against the faults of weakness with a profound repentance full of meekness, humility, and confidence in the mercy of God, these weaknesses will leave scarcely any trace in the soul, and they will not constitute a serious obstacle in the path of our sanctification. But when venial sins are committed coldly, with perfect deliberation and advertence, they constitute an obstacle to perfection. The French Jesuit Louis Lallemant says:

One is astonished to see so many religious who, after having lived forty or fifty years in the state of grace, ... and, consequently, possessing all the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a very high

degree-one is astonished, I say, to see that ... their life is completely natural; that, when they are corrected or when they are discouraged, they show their resentment; that they show so much concern for the praise, the esteem, and the applause of the world; that they delight in it, and they love and seek its comfort and everything that will appeal to their self-love.

There is no reason to be astonished. The venial sins which they commit continuously bind the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it is no wonder that the effects of the gifts are not evident in them. It is true that these gifts grow together with charity habitually and in their physical being, but they do not grow actually and in the perfection which corresponds to the fervor of charity and increases merit in us, because venial sins, being opposed to the fervor of charity, impede the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

If these religious would strive for purity of heart, the fervor of charity would increase in them more and more and the gifts of the Holy Spirit shine forth in their conduct; but this will never be very apparent in them, living as they do without recollection, without attention to their interior life, letting themselves be led and guided by their inclinations, and avoiding only the more grave sins while being careless about little things.[\(9\)](#)

Venial sin has four effects that are especially detrimental to the spiritual life:

1. It deprives us of many actual graces that God would otherwise have given us. This privation sometimes results in our falling into a temptation that we could have avoided by means of that actual grace of which we were deprived. At other times it may result in the loss of a new advance in the spiritual life. Only in the light of eternity -- and then there is no remedy -- shall we realize what we have lost as a result of deliberate venial sins.
2. It lessens the fervor of charity and one's generosity in the service of God. This fervor and generosity presuppose a sincere desire for perfection and a constant striving for it, which are totally incompatible with voluntary venial sin because the latter implies a rejection of the lofty ideal and a deliberate halt in the struggle for greater holiness.
3. It increases the difficulties in the exercise of virtue. This is a result of the two previous effects. Deprived of many actual graces that are necessary to keep us on the path of the good, and weak in fervor and generosity in the service of God, the soul gradually loses more and more of its spiritual energy. Virtue appears to be more difficult, the effort required for growing in holiness becomes more and more demanding, and the experience of past failures disheartens the soul.
4. It predisposes for mortal sin. This is clearly testified in Scripture when it is stated that he who wastes the little he has is gradually stripped bare (Sir. 19:1). Experience confirms that the ultimate fall of many souls has been started in this way. Little by little the soul has lowered its defenses until the moment arrives in which the enemy, in one furious assault, conquers the city.

In order to avoid sin and overcome the habit of venial sin, one should be faithful to the examination of conscience, both general and particular; increase one's spirit of sacrifice; be faithful to the practice of prayer; safeguard external and internal recollection to the extent that the duties of one's state permit; cultivate a filial devotion to Mary; and remember the example of the saints. It is not an easy task to avoid venial sin, but however difficult, it is possible to approach that ideal by means of a constant struggle and humble prayer.



## *Imperfections*

We have already discussed the theology of imperfections and have stated our opinion that moral imperfection is distinct from venial sin. An act that is good in itself does not cease to be good even though it could have been better. Venial sin, on the other hand, is something intrinsically evil, however light an evil it may be. Nevertheless, the imperfections are detrimental to the spiritual life and impede the flight of the soul to sanctity. St. John of the Cross treats of this matter when he distinguishes between venial sin and imperfection:

Some habits of voluntary imperfections, which are never completely conquered, prevent not only the attainment of divine union but also progress in perfection.

These habitual imperfections are, for example, a common custom of much speaking, or some slight attachment which we never quite wish to conquer .... A single one of these imperfections, if the soul has become attached and habituated to it, is of as great harm to growth and progress in virtue as though one were to fall daily into a great number of other imperfections and casual venial sins ....

For as long as it has this, there is no possibility that it will make progress in perfection, even though the imperfection be extremely slight. For it comes to the same thing whether a bird be held by a slender cord or by a stout one since, even if it be slender, the bird will be as well held as though it were stout, for so long as it breaks it not and flies not away. It is true that the slender one is the easier to break; still, easy though it be, the bird will not fly away if it be not broken. And thus the soul that has attachment to anything, however much virtue it possesses, will not attain to the liberty of divine union."[\(10\)](#)

This doctrine finds confirmation in the Thomistic teaching on the increase of habits. According to St. Thomas, charity and all the other infused habits increase only by a more intense act that flows from an actual grace, itself more intense than the habit. It follows from this that prayer is of extreme importance in this regard, because the only way in which we can obtain actual grace is by petition, since it does not fall under merit in the proper sense of the word. Now imperfection is by its very nature a remiss act or the voluntary negation of a more intense act. Consequently, it is impossible to proceed in perfection if one does not renounce habitual voluntary imperfections.

This is the reason why in practice so many potential saints are frustrated and why there are so few true saints. Many souls live habitually in the grace of God, never commit mortal sins, and even exert every effort to avoid venial sins. Nevertheless, they remain for many years in the same state and make no progress in holiness. How can we explain this phenomenon? The answer is that they have not endeavored to root out their voluntary imperfections; they have not tried to break that slender cord that keeps them tied to the earth and prevents them from rising in flight to the heights.

It is therefore necessary to wage an unceasing battle against our voluntary imperfections if we wish to arrive at perfect union with God. The soul must tend always toward greater perfection and try to do all things with the greatest possible intensity. Naturally, we do not mean that one should be in a state of constant tension. We are referring primarily to the perfection of one's motives that lead one to act: doing all things with the greatest possible purity of intention, with

the greatest possible desire of glorifying God, with total abandonment to God so that the Holy Spirit can take complete control of our soul and do with us as he wishes. Our goal is complete transformation in Christ, which will enable us to say with St. Paul: "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (Gal. 2:20).

## **Temptations**

According to St. Thomas, the proper office of the devil is to tempt.<sup>(11)</sup> Nevertheless, he immediately adds that not all temptations that we suffer proceed from the devil. Some of them are the result of our own concupiscence, as St. James says: "The tug and lure of his own passion tempt every man" (James 1:14). It is true, however, that many temptations do proceed from the devil. St. Peter compares the devil to a roaring lion who goes about, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

St. James teaches that God never tempts anyone by inciting him to evil (James 1:13). When Scripture speaks of temptations from God, it uses the word to designate a simple test of a person. God permits us to be tempted by our spiritual enemies to give us an occasion for greater merit. As St. Paul says: "You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

There are countless advantages to a temptation that has been conquered with the help and grace of God. Victory over temptation humiliates Satan, makes the glory of God shine forth, purifies our soul, fills us with humility, repentance, and confidence in the divine assistance. It reminds us to be always vigilant and alert, to mistrust ourselves, to expect all things from God, to mortify our personal tastes. It arouses us to prayer, helps us grow in experience, and makes us circumspect and cautious in the struggle against our enemy. With good reason does St. James say: "Happy the man who holds out to the end through trial! Once he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). But to obtain all these advantages, it is necessary to know how to obtain victory with the help of God. To this end, it will be of great help to consider the threefold source of temptations: the devil, the world, and the flesh.

### *The Devil*

Perhaps in no other page of Scripture is the strategy of the devil as a tempter depicted so clearly as in the description of the temptation of Eve, which resulted in the ruin of all humanity. Let us examine the biblical account and draw from it some important conclusions.

Thus he said to the woman: "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" (Gen. 3:1). As yet he is not tempting the woman, but the conversation is already in the area of the matter he has in mind. His tactics are the same today as always. To persons particularly inclined to sensuality or to doubts against the faith, he will ask in general terms and without as yet inciting them to evil.

If the soul recognizes that the simple posing of the question represents a danger, it will refuse to converse with the tempter but will turn its thoughts and imagination to other matters. Then the temptation is thwarted, and an easy victory is won. But if the soul imprudently enters into conversation with the tempter, it is exposed to the great danger of succumbing.

This was Eve's mistake; she answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die' " (Gen. 3:2-3).

The soul recognizes that God strictly forbids it to perform that action, to arouse that desire, or to nourish that thought. The soul does not wish to disobey God, but it is wasting time in recalling its moral obligations at all. It could destroy the temptation at the very start, without bothering to weigh the reasons why it ought to do so.

The soul has yielded ground to the enemy, and now the enemy gathers his forces to make a direct attack: "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' " (Gen. 3:4-5).

The devil presents an enchanting possibility. He would not suggest to our soul that it will be as God, but he tells us that the soul will be happy if once more it abandons itself to sin. "In any case," the tempter may add, "God is merciful and will readily forgive you. Enjoy the forbidden fruit once again. Do you not remember your past experiences, how great was your enjoyment then and how easy it was to depart from sin by immediate repentance?"

There is still time to withdraw because the will has not yet given its consent, but if the soul does not terminate this conversation, it is in the proximate danger of falling. Its forces are gradually being weakened, and sin is presented as more and more desirable and fascinating.

"The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom" (Gen. 3:6). The soul begins to vacillate and to be deeply disturbed. It does not wish to offend God, but the temptation is so alluring that a struggle ensues and sometimes is prolonged for a long period of time. If the soul, in its supreme effort and under the influence of an actual grace, decides to remain faithful to its duty, it will be victorious; but only too often a soul that vacillates to this extent will take the fatal step to sin.

"So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Gen. 3:6). The soul has succumbed to the temptation. It has committed sin, and often, either because of scandal or complicity, it has caused others to sin.

As soon as the sin is committed, the soul realizes the great deception: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen. 3:7). The soul is now aware of the fact that it has lost everything. It stands completely naked before God, without sanctifying grace, without the infused virtues, without the gifts of the Holy Spirit, without the indwelling of the Trinity. It has lost all the merits that it has ever acquired during its whole life. All that remains is bitter deception and the sneering laughter of the tempter.

Immediately the soul hears the terrible voice of conscience that reproaches it for the sin that has been committed. "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Gen. 3:8-9). This question, which the sinner's conscience also formulates, has no answer. The only thing the sinner can do is fall to his knees and ask pardon of God for his infidelity, and learn from sad experience how in the future to resist the tempter from the very first moment, when

victory is easy and triumph is assured under the loving gaze of God.

Let us now investigate what the soul ought to do before, during, and after temptation. The fundamental strategy for preventing temptation was suggested by our Lord when he told the disciples to watch and pray lest they enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41). Vigilance and prayer are necessary even before temptations arise.

Vigilance is necessary because the devil never completely abdicates in his battle to win our soul. If sometimes he seems to leave us in peace, it is only to return to the attack when we least expect it. During periods of calm we must be convinced that the battle will be resumed and perhaps with greater intensity than before. Therefore, we must be vigilant lest we be taken by surprise. We do this by avoiding the occasions of sin, by trying to anticipate unexpected assaults, by practicing self-control, by making use of the particular examen, by frequently renewing our firm resolution never to sin again, and by avoiding sloth.

But vigilance alone is not enough. To remain in the state of grace and to be victorious against all temptations require an efficacious grace from God, obtainable only through prayer. The most careful vigilance and the most earnest efforts would be totally inefficacious without the help of God's grace. But with his grace, victory is certain. God has given us his word that he will grant us grace if we ask for it with prayer that fulfills the necessary conditions. This shows how important is the prayer of petition. Christ taught us to ask the Father: "Lead us not into temptation." It is also reasonable that we should invoke the Blessed Mother, who crushed the serpent's head with her virginal heel; and our guardian angel, who has as one of his principal duties to defend us against the assaults of the devil.

During temptation the conduct of the soul can be summarized in one important word: *resist*. It does not suffice merely to remain passive in the face of temptation; positive resistance is necessary. This resistance can be either direct or indirect. Direct resistance is that which faces up to the temptation itself and conquers it by doing the precise opposite from that which is suggested. For example, to begin to speak well of a person when we are tempted to criticize him, to give a generous alms when our selfishness would prompt us to refuse, to prolong our prayer when the devil suggests that we shorten it or abandon it altogether. Direct resistance can be used against any kind of temptation, except those against faith or purity, as we shall see now.

Indirect resistance does not attack the temptation but withdraws from it by distracting the mind to some other object that is completely distinct. This is the type of resistance to be used in temptations against the faith or against purity, because in these cases a direct attack would very likely increase the intensity of the temptation itself. The best practice in these cases is a rapid but calm practice of a mental exercise that will absorb our internal faculties, especially the memory and imagination, and withdraw them from the object of the temptation. It is also helpful to have some hobby or pastime or activity that is interesting enough to absorb one's attention for the moment.

Sometimes the temptation does not immediately disappear, and the devil may attack again with great tenacity. One should not become discouraged at this. The insistence of the devil is one of the best proofs that the soul has not succumbed to the temptation. The soul should resist the attacks as often as necessary but always with great serenity and interior peace, being careful to avoid any kind of anxiety or disturbance. Every assault repulsed is a source of new merit before

God and greater strength for the soul. Far from becoming weakened, the soul gains new energies. Seeing that he has lost, the devil will finally leave the soul in peace, especially when he sees that he has not been able to disturb the interior peace of the soul, which sometimes is the only reason he caused the temptation in the first place.

It is also helpful to manifest these things to one's spiritual director or confessor, especially if it is a question of tenacious temptations or those that occur repeatedly. The Lord usually recompenses this act of humility and simplicity with new and powerful helps. The masters of the spiritual life say: "A temptation that is declared is already half conquered."

If the soul has conquered and is certain of it, it has done so only with the help of God's grace. It should therefore give thanks and ask for a continuation of divine help on other occasions. This could be said very briefly and simply, as in the following short prayer: "Thanks be to you, O God; continue to help me on all dangerous occasions and have mercy on me."

If the soul has fallen and has no doubt about it, it should not become disheartened. It should remember the infinite mercy of God and the lesson of the prodigal son, and then cast itself in all humility and repentance into the arms of the heavenly Father, asking him for forgiveness and promising with his help never to sin again. If the fall has been serious, the soul should not be content with a simple act of contrition, but should approach the sacrament of reconciliation and use this sad experience of sin to redouble its vigilance and to intensify its fervor in order not to sin again.

If the soul remains in doubt as to whether or not it has given consent, it should not examine its conscience minutely and with scrupulosity, for this may provoke the temptation anew and even increase the danger of falling. Sometimes it is better to let a certain period of time pass until the soul becomes more tranquil, and then examine one's conscience carefully as to whether or not sin has been committed. In any event, it is well to make an act of contrition and to make known to the confessor at the proper time the temptation that has been encountered, admitting one's guilt as it appears in the sight of God.

What should be done, however, in the case of those persons who receive Communion daily? May they continue to receive Communion until the day of their confession, even if they are in doubt as to whether they have consented to a temptation?

It is impossible to give a categorical answer that will apply to all souls and to all possible circumstances. For example, if the habitual attitude of a soul is to avoid sin, or if the soul has a tendency to scrupulosity, the person should continue to receive Communion, ignore the doubts, and make an act of contrition for any guilt that could have been incurred. If, on the other hand, it is a question of a soul that is accustomed to fall readily into mortal sin, or of a lax conscience that is in no way scrupulous, the presumption is against the soul, and it is probable that the soul has consented to the temptation. Then one should not receive Communion without sacramental absolution.

### *The World*

As they came from the hands of the Creator, the world and all things in it were good. At each new phase of the six stages of creation recorded in Genesis we are told that God looked upon what he had made and he saw that it was good. Therefore, the world as such is no obstacle to

sanctification and salvation. It all depends on how we react to the things of the world and the manner in which we use them -- which can be for good or for evil. Many Christians who lived in the world and were very much a part of the world became great saints. The world becomes an enemy of the Christian only when we become so attached to the things of the world that we fail to advance in the love and service of God. In such cases, the world becomes a source of almost irresistible temptation and a formidable enemy of the spiritual life.

When we speak of the world as an enemy of Christians and an obstacle to sanctification, we are referring to the worldly or mundane spirit manifested by those who have an excessive attachment to created things. Entire cities or nations can be infected with a mundane spirit, living only for the pleasures and satisfactions that can be drawn from creature things. This environment presents a great obstacle to the Christian who is in earnest about making progress in holiness through detachment and the positive practice of virtue.

The worldly spirit is generally manifested in four principal ways. The first and most deceptive is that of the false maxims directly opposed to the precepts of Christ. The world exalts pleasure, comfort, riches, fame, violence, and might. It advises its followers to enjoy life while they can, to make the most of what the world has to offer, to find security and the maximum bodily comfort. So far has this perversion of values been carried that thieves are considered to be efficient and adept in business; agnostics or atheists are people who think for themselves; persons who reject all authority and objective morality are champions of personal freedom; and people of loose morals are considered sophisticated and mature.

The second manifestation of the mundane spirit is found in the ridicule and persecution of those who strive to live honestly and decently. Sensate people declare themselves free of all moral restrictions and live as they please, and they make a mockery of any authority or law that would guide people along the path of self-control and obedience. Not wanting to observe the law themselves, they cultivate a special disdain for those who honestly strive to lead good lives.

The third manifestation of a worldly spirit is found in the pleasures and diversions of those who observe no control in regard to their lower appetites. Excesses in sex and in the use of drugs, alcoholic drinks, and food are accepted as being in good taste socially. The theater, magazines, and other media of entertainment know no restriction except the strong arm of the law or the startled indignation of the public. The abnormal becomes normal in the lives of these persons.

The fourth mark of a mundane spirit is the scandal and bad example that confront the earnest Christian at every turn. It is not a question merely of persons who give scandal by their evil lives, but what is even worse, scandal is sometimes given by those who, because of their Christian belief or state in life, should be examples of virtue. With good reason could St. John complain that "the whole world is under the evil one" (1 John 5:19). And Jesus himself warned: "Woe to that man through whom scandal comes!" (Matt. 18:7).

The most efficacious remedy against the influence of the world and worldly persons is to flee, but since the majority of Christians must live in the world and still pursue Christian perfection, it is necessary that they strive to acquire the mind and spirit of Christ, who also lived in the world but was opposed to its spirit.

**Avoid Occasions of Sin.** "He who loves danger will perish in it." Whether it be a question of

worldly possessions, mundane pleasures, or creature attachments, Christians must keep themselves from temptation. The occasions that are sinful for one may not be so for another, and for that reason it is difficult to make any universal laws in this matter.

Nevertheless, some occasions are so poisonous that they would be harmful to any Christian. As for the rest, each of us must learn by experience where our weaknesses lie and then take the necessary steps by way of self-denial and self-control. And when in doubt, honest Christians will base their practical judgment on whether or not the occasion in question would be dangerous for the average good Christian. If so, they also should avoid it. Still another rule of thumb is simply to ask oneself: "What would Jesus do?" It is likewise helpful to remember the admonition of St. Paul, to the effect that not all things that are lawful are prudent.

**Vivify One's Faith.** St. John says: "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 John 5:4). Faith is an intellectual assent to certain dogmas and mysteries; when it is perfected it gives us an attitude of mind or a way of judging things in a divine manner. It enables us to see things through the eyes of God, so to speak. A strong faith will enable the Christian to see God in all things and to walk through great dangers unharmed because he is able to rise above those things that are temptations for others. A strong faith will enable the Christian to withstand the taunts and ridicule of worldly persons. In many works of art the martyred saint is surrounded by persecutors who wear a cynical smile or a leer on their faces. But the saint remains steadfast and tranquil amidst all manner of attack and suffering because the eyes of his soul, through the light of faith, can peer into eternity and be focused on the divine.

**Meditate on the Vanity of the World.** The world passes quickly, and life passes even more quickly. There is nothing stable and permanent in the world's judgment and friendships; there is nothing completely satisfying in its delights. Those who are applauded today are criticized tomorrow; the evil prosper, for they have their reward in this world. But Christians, who realize that they have not here a lasting city but are travelers to the eternal fatherland, know that only God is changeless and only his justice and truth will remain forever. For that reason, only those who do the will of God "abide forever" (1 John 2:17).

**Ignore What the World Thinks.** To be concerned about "what they will say" is an attitude unworthy of a Christian. Jesus said explicitly that he would deny before his heavenly Father anyone who denies him before men (Matt. 10:33). It is therefore necessary for the Christian to take a firm stand in this matter and to follow the injunction of Christ to the letter: "He who is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30). And St. Paul warns that he is not a disciple of Christ who would be concerned about pleasing men (Gal. 1:10).

One who desires to reach sanctity must be absolutely indifferent to what the world may think or say. One's only concern must be to do the will of God, cost what it may. And it is best to make this decision from the very first, so that all may know at the outset where one stands. We have been warned by Christ that the world will hate and persecute us (John 15:18-20), but if the world sees that we stand firm in our decision to follow Christ and his laws, it will ultimately leave us in peace and consider the battle lost. The best way to conquer the world is not to yield a single pace, but to take an unswerving stand in renouncing its false maxims and its vanities.

*The Flesh*

The world and the devil are our principal external enemies, but we bear within ourselves an internal enemy that can be much more terrible. The world can be conquered with relative ease by disdain its pomps and vanity; the devil cannot withstand the supernatural power of a little holy water; but our flesh wars against us without ceasing. It wages war against us in two distinct manners: by its instinctive horror of suffering and by its insatiable desire for pleasure. The first is an obstacle to sanctification; the second can compromise our eternal salvation. It is therefore essential to know how to counteract and nullify those two dangerous tendencies.

### *Desire for Pleasure*

We shall begin with the latter, which is a characteristic tendency of our sensuality, while the horror of suffering is a logical consequence and the negative aspect of this desire. We flee from pain because we love pleasure, and the tendency to pleasure is what is known as concupiscence.

Sensate bodily pleasure is not evil of itself. As the author of nature, God has placed pleasure in the exercise of certain natural operations, and especially those that pertain to the conservation of the individual and of the species. He does this in order to facilitate the use of those faculties and to stimulate us to their exercise. But as a result of original sin the appetite for pleasure often rises against the demands of reason and impels us to sin. St. Paul has described vividly the combat between the flesh and the spirit that all of us have to wage against ourselves in order to subject our bodily instincts to the control of reason illumined by faith (Rom. 7:14-25; 1 Cor. 12:1-7).

A difficulty arises in attempting to designate the boundary that separates honest pleasure from disordered and forbidden pleasure, and how to keep oneself within the boundaries of the former. The enjoyment of lawful pleasures frequently becomes an occasion or incentive to disordered and unlawful pleasures. For that reason, Christian mortification has always advocated that one deprive oneself of many lawful things and of many honest pleasures, not to put sin where there is no sin, but as a defense of good, which is endangered if one imprudently approaches the borderline of evil.

The satisfactions granted to one sense awaken the appetite of other senses. The reason for this is that sense pleasure is diffused throughout the entire body, and when one or another of the senses is stimulated, the whole organism vibrates. This is particularly true of the sense of touch, which is present in every part of the body and tends to animal pleasure with a much greater intensity than the other senses.

The principal struggle revolves around the two tendencies that are necessary for the conservation of the individual and of the species: nutrition and generation. The other sensitive inclinations are almost always placed at the service of these two, in which concupiscence seeks pleasure without any concern for the conservation of the individual and the species. If reason does not intervene to keep these instinctive appetites within just limits, they can easily lead to the ruin of the individual and the species.

It is incredible how much harm an unmortified appetite can cause in us, not only as regards perfection, which is absolutely impossible without mortification, but even as regards our eternal salvation. Sensual people not only are not united with God, but they also lose the taste for divine things, as St. Paul teaches (1 Cor. 2:14).

Reason itself suggests certain remedies that are useful in controlling sensuality, but the most



efficacious remedies proceed from faith and are strictly supernatural. The following are the principal remedies, both natural and supernatural: ,,

**Custody of the Senses.** This is the most important and decisive of all the purely natural remedies. Even the strongest will is likely to succumb when subjected to the stimulation of the senses. Sincere resolutions and unswerving determination are of no avail; everything is lost in the face of the fascination of an occasion of sin. The senses are aroused, the imagination is excited, passion is strongly stirred, self-control is lost, and the fatal fall takes place. It is especially necessary that one exercise scrupulous vigilance over the sense of vision, according to the axiom: "What the eyes do not see, the heart does not desire."

**Self-denial.** Another precaution that must be taken in the struggle against sensuality is that of never going to the limit in regard to satisfactions that are permitted. This requires self-denial, and sometimes even in regard to lawful pleasures, especially if one is inclined to sensate satisfactions. With good reason does Clement of Alexandria say that those who do everything that is permitted will very readily do that which is not permitted. On the other hand, the mortification of one's tastes and desires will not damage one's health; rather it will usually benefit both body and soul. If we wish to keep ourselves far from sin and walk toward perfection in giant strides, it is necessary to reject a great number of sensate satisfactions.

**Beneficial Occupation.** The seed of sensuality finds fertile ground in a soul that is unoccupied and slothful. Sloth is the mother of all vices, as we read in Scripture, but in a special way it is fertile ground for sins of the flesh. Those who wish to preserve themselves from the demands of concupiscence must endeavor to keep themselves occupied in some useful and beneficial exercise. And of all occupations, those of an intellectual type are particularly apt for controlling sensuality. The reason is that the application of one faculty weakens the exercise of the other faculties, in addition to the fact that intellectual operations withdraw from the sensual passions the object on which they feed. The sins of the flesh weaken the spirit, whereas temperance and chastity admirably predispose one for intellectual work.

**Sense of Christian Dignity.** Because of our rational nature we are far superior to the animal. It is debasing, then, to let ourselves be carried away by the sensuality that we share in common with beasts. And far superior to our human dignity in the natural order is our Christian dignity, which is strictly supernatural. Through grace we are elevated in a certain manner to the level of divinity. We share in the nature and life of God, and this makes us God's children by adoption. So long as we remain in this state we are heirs of heaven by proper right (Rom. 8:17).

For that reason, St. Thomas states that the supernatural good of an individual soul, proceeding as it does from sanctifying grace, is of more value than the natural good of the entire universe.<sup>(12)</sup> St. Paul found no other argument of greater force than this one to lead the early Christians from the disorders of the flesh: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? ... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:15, 19-20).

**Consideration of Sin's Punishment.** If the previous remedies for sensuality make no impression on persons habituated to sin, perhaps other correctives will make an impact. The first of these is

the consideration. of the punishment of hell. Sacred Scripture offers abundant examples. The psalmist asks God to make the fear of his judgment penetrate into his flesh so that he will remain faithful to God's commandments (Ps. 118:120).

Against the impulse of the flesh in pursuit of pleasure, the thought of the torments of hell can serve as an effective deterrent. And even if a person repents of sin and obtains forgiveness, there still remains the debt of temporal punishment that must be paid either in this life with penance, or in the next life with the pain of purgatory. In either case, the suffering that will have to be endured far exceeds the pleasure that the individual enjoyed in sinning. From this point of view alone it is a very poor exchange.

**Remembrance of the Passion of Christ.** Motives inspired by love and gratitude are much nobler than those that originate in fear. Jesus was nailed to the Cross because of our sins. Basic gratitude toward the Redeemer ought to help keep us from sin. The consideration of the suffering Savior ought to make us ashamed of seeking our bodily delight. St. Paul insists on this argument and makes mortification of the flesh the decisive proof of truly belonging to Christ (Gal. 5:24). And St. Peter reminds us that, since Christ suffered in the flesh, it is necessary to break with sin (1 Pet. 4:1).

**Humble and Persevering Prayer.** Without the grace of God it is impossible to triumph completely over our concupiscence. This grace is promised to prayer that fulfills the required conditions, as is evident from the teaching of Sacred Scripture. The author of the Book of Wisdom acknowledges that he cannot remain continent without the help of God, which he implores with humility (Wis. 8:21). Sirach begs to be preserved from concupiscence and lustful desires (Sir. 23:6).

**Devotion to Mary.** The Immaculate Virgin Mary is also the Mediatrix of all graces and the refuge of sinners. A tender devotion to our Blessed Mother can be a constant reminder to live a life of virtue, and it can be a basis for hope in her maternal protection.

**Reception of the Sacraments.** This is a certain and efficacious remedy against all types of sin, but especially against the attacks of concupiscence. The sacrament of penance not only erases our past sins but also gives us strength to protect ourselves from future sins. The soul that is habituated to sins of the flesh should approach this fountain of purification and should regulate the frequency of confession according to the strength it needs in order not to fall again. The practice of waiting until one has fallen and then to approach confession simply to rise again is a mistaken one, because in this way the individual will never completely uproot the vicious habit. Rather, the habit will become more deeply rooted by the repetition of acts.

It is necessary to anticipate possible falls and to approach the sacrament of penance when we note that we are weakening and are losing strength. In this way we can regain strength and thereby avoid the fall that threatened us. It will also prove helpful to have a definite confessor to whom we can reveal our soul completely and from whom we can receive the necessary advice. Giving an account of the soul to a particular confessor will bind the wings of our imagination and will act as a brake on the impetus of the passions.

Holy Communion has a supreme efficacy against the concupiscence of the flesh. Our Lord diffuses over us the graces of fortitude and resistance against the power of the passions. His most

pure flesh is placed in contact with our sinful flesh to spiritualize it. It is not in vain that the Eucharist has been called the Bread of Angels. The young especially need this divine remedy to counteract the ardor of their passions. Experience in the direction of souls shows clearly that there is nothing so powerful and efficacious for keeping a young person in temperance and chastity as daily or frequent Communion.

### *Horror of Suffering*

While the desire for pleasure is a great obstacle to our eternal salvation, the horror of suffering is a great impediment to sanctification. Many souls who halt along the way to perfection do so because they have not dominated their dread of suffering. Only those who have determined to combat this tendency with an unswerving energy will arrive at the height of sanctity. This, says St. Teresa, is an absolutely indispensable condition for reaching perfection. Those who do not have the spirit for this can renounce sanctity, because they will never reach it. St. John of the Cross gives to the love of suffering an exceptional importance in the process of our sanctification, both to make amends for sin and for the sanctification of the soul.

As regards reparation, the balance of divine justice, which has been disturbed by original sin and was reestablished by the blood of Christ, is again disturbed by actual sins. Actual or personal sin places the weight of pleasure on the scale of justice, for every sin carries with it some pleasure or satisfaction. It is therefore necessary that the equilibrium of divine justice be reestablished by the weight of sorrow placed on the other scale.

The principal reparation was effected by Christ's sorrowful passion and death, whose infinite value is applied to us by the sacraments; but we Christians, as members of Christ, cannot separate ourselves from the divine Head. Something is lacking to the passion of Christ, as St. Paul dared to say (Col. 1:24), which must be contributed by the members of Christ cooperating in their own redemption. Sacramental absolution does not free us from all the guilt of punishment due to our sins, except in the case of perfect sorrow, and therefore it is necessary to pay back either in this life or in the next unto the last farthing (Matt. 5:26).

Sanctification consists in the ever more intense incorporation with Christ. When all is said and done, the saints are faithful reproductions of Christ; they are another Christ. Now the way to unite ourselves with Christ and to be transformed in him was traced for us by Christ himself. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). There is no other way; it is necessary to embrace suffering, to take up one's cross, and to follow Christ to the height of Calvary; not to see there how they crucified him, but to be crucified at his side. There is no sanctification without crucifixion with Christ. St. John of the Cross was so convinced of this that he wrote the following strong words: "If at any time, my brother, anyone should persuade you, be he a prelate or not, of a doctrine that is wider and more pleasant, do not believe him, and do not accept the doctrine even if he were to confirm it with miracles, but rather penance and more penance and detachment from all things. And never, if you wish to possess Christ, seek him without the cross."

The excellence of Christian suffering is evident from a consideration of the great benefits it brings to the soul. If well considered, sorrow and suffering ought to be more attractive to the Christian than pleasure is to the pagan. The suffering passes, but that one has suffered well will never pass; it leaves its mark for all eternity.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I treat my body hard and make it obey me" (1 Cor. 9:27). The flesh tends to dominate the spirit. Only by means of privations can we reverse the order and make the flesh serve the soul. The more comforts and pleasures we give to the body, the more demanding the body becomes.

There is nothing that more readily detaches us from created things than the pains of suffering. Through the crystal of our tears the atmosphere of this world appears dark and gloomy. The soul raises its eyes to heaven, it sighs for the eternal fatherland, and it learns to disdain the things of this world.

God never ignores the tears and sighs of a heart that is afflicted with sorrow and suffering. Omnipotent and infinitely happy in himself, he can be overcome by the weakness of one who suffers. He himself declares that he does not know how to refuse those who come to him with tearful eyes. Jesus worked the stupendous miracle of raising the dead to life because he was moved by the tears of a widow who mourned the death of her only son (Luke 7:11-17), of a father at the corpse of his daughter (Matt. 9:18-26), and of two sisters who were desolate at the death of their brother (John 11:1-44). And he proclaimed those blessed who weep and mourn because they shall be comforted (Matt. 5:5).

One of the most tremendous marvels of the economy of divine grace is the intimate solidarity of all people through the Mystical Body of Christ. God accepts the suffering offered to him by a soul in grace for the salvation of another soul or for sinners in general. It is impossible to measure the redemptive power of suffering offered to divine justice with a living faith and an ardent love through the wounds of Christ. When everything else fails, there is still recourse to suffering to obtain the salvation of a sinful soul. The Curé of Ars said once to a priest who lamented the coldness of his parishioners and the sterility of his zeal: "Have you preached? Have you prayed? Have you fasted? Have you taken the discipline? Have you slept on boards? Until you have done these things, you have no right to complain."

The supreme excellence of Christian suffering is that suffering souls are configured with Christ in his sufferings and in his death (Phil. 3:10). And at the side of Jesus, the Redeemer, stands Mary, the co-Redemptrix of the human race. Souls enamored of Mary feel a particular inclination to accompany her and to imitate her in her ineffable sorrow. Before the Queen of Martyrs they feel ashamed that they have ever thought of their own comfort and pleasure. They know that, if they wish to be like Mary, they must embrace the Cross.

We should note the special sanctifying efficacy of suffering from this last point of view. Suffering configures us with Christ in a perfect manner; and sanctity does not consist in anything else but configuration with Christ. There is not, nor can there be, any way to sanctity that ignores or gives little importance to the crucifixion of self. It is simply a question of repeating what St. Paul says to the Galatians: "If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him" (Gal. 1:8).

This is one of the principal reasons why there are so few saints. Many souls who strive for sanctity do not wish to enter upon the way of suffering. They would like to be saints, but with a sanctity that is comfortable and easy. And when God tests them with some painful affliction of spirit or persecutions and calumny or any other cross that, if well carried, would lead them to the heights of sanctity, they draw back and abandon the way of perfection. Perhaps they have even

reached the point where they asked God to send them some cross, but it is evident that what they wanted was a cross of their own choosing and, when they did not find it, they considered that they had been deceived and gave up the road to perfection.

It is therefore necessary to decide once and for all to embrace suffering as God wishes to send it to us: sickness, persecution, calumny, humiliation, disappointment-whatever he wishes and in the manner he wishes. The attitude of soul must be one of a personal fiat, a total abandonment to God without reserve, a complete subjection to God's loving providence so that he may do with the soul as he wishes, both in time and in eternity.

But it is not easy to reach these heights. Frequently, the soul has to advance gradually from one step to another until ultimately it acquires a love for the Cross. The following are the principal degrees manifested by a soul in its progress toward a thirst for suffering:

**Acceptance of Duties.** Never omit any of our duties because of the suffering or difficulty. This is the initial grade or degree, and it is absolutely necessary for all. One who neglects a serious obligation without any reason other than the inconvenience or slight difficulty involved commits a serious sin. But even in the matter of light obligation, it is necessary to perform our duties in spite of our natural repugnance for them. Some persons neglect the duties of their state in life and nevertheless ask permission of their confessors to practice certain penances and mortification of their own choosing. The exact fulfillment of all our duties and obligations according to our state in life is absolutely indispensable for the crucifixion of self.

**Resignation to Crosses.** The crosses that God sends us directly or permits to befall us have a great value for sanctification if we know how to accept them with love and resignation as coming from the hands of God. These things are utilized by divine providence as instruments of our sanctification. St. John of the Cross speaks of this to a religious in his *Cautions*:

The first caution is that you should understand that you have come to the convent only in order that others may polish and exercise you. Thus ... it is fitting that you should think that all are in the convent to test you, as they truly are; that some have to polish you by words, others by works, others by thoughts against you; and that in all these things you must be subject to them as the statue is to the artist who sculpts it, and the painting to the painter. And if you do not observe this, you will never know how to conquer your own sensuality and sentimentality, nor will you know how to conduct yourself well with the religious in the convent, nor will you ever attain holy peace, nor will you ever free yourself from your many evils and defects.

**Voluntary Mortification.** More perfect yet is the soul who takes the initiative and, in spite of the repugnance that nature feels, advances in the love of suffering by voluntarily practicing Christian mortification in its various forms. It is not possible to give a universal rule for all souls in this regard. Voluntary mortification will be determined in each case by the state and condition of the soul being sanctified. In the measure that the soul corresponds more and more with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he will be more and more demanding, but at the same time he will increase the strength of the soul so that it can accept and carry out these inspirations. It is the duty of the spiritual director to watch over the soul and never impose sacrifices beyond the strength of the soul. He should also take care lest he limit the soul's desire for immolation and oblige it to be retarded, instead of letting it fly on the wings of the eagle.

**Preferring Suffering to Pleasure.** However contrary this may seem to our weak nature, the saints succeeded in reaching these heights. A moment arrived in which they felt an instinctive horror for anything that would satisfy their tastes and comfort. When everything went badly with them and the whole world persecuted and calumniated them, they rejoiced and gave thanks to God. If others applauded or praised them, they trembled as if God had permitted those things as punishment for their sins. They hardly took any account of themselves at all or of the heroism that such an attitude presupposes. They were so familiar with suffering that it seemed to them the most natural thing in the world to endure pain. St. John of the Cross has given us a rule for reaching this state. His words seem severe and are a torment to sensual ears, but it is only at this price that one can attain the treasure of sanctity:

To endeavor always to incline oneself, not to that which is easier, but to that which is more difficult; not to that which is tasty, but to that which is more bitter; not to that which is more pleasing, but to that which is less pleasing; not to that which gives rest, but to that which demands effort; not to that which is a consolation, but to that which is a source of sorrow; not to that which is more, but to that which is less; not to the lofty and precious, but to the lowly and despicable; not to that which is to be something, but to that which is to be nothing; not to be seeking the best in temporal things, but the worst, and to desire to enter in all nakedness and emptiness and poverty through Christ in whatever there is in the world.[\(13\)](#)

**Offering Oneself as Victim.** It would seem that it is impossible to go further in love of the Cross than to prefer sorrow to pleasure. Nevertheless, there is still another more perfect degree in the love of suffering: the act of offering oneself as a victim of expiation for the sins of the world. At the very outset, we must insist that this sublime act is completely above the ordinary way of grace. It would be a terrible presumption for a beginner or an imperfectly purified soul to place itself in this state. "To be called a victim is easy and it pleases self-love, but truly to be a victim demands a purity, a detachment from creatures, and a heroic abandonment to all kinds of suffering, to humiliation, to ineffable obscurity, that I would consider it either foolish or miraculous if one who is at the beginning of the spiritual life should attempt to do that which the divine Master did not do except by degrees." [\(14\)](#)

The theological basis of offering oneself as a victim of expiation for the salvation of souls or for any other supernatural motive such as reparation for the glory of God, liberating the souls in purgatory, attracting the divine mercy to the Church, the priesthood, one's country, or a particular soul, is the supernatural solidarity established by God among the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, whether actual or potential. Presupposing the solidarity in Christ that is common to all Christians, God selects certain holy souls, and particularly those who have offered themselves knowingly for this work, so that by their merits and sacrifices they may contribute to the application of the merits of the redemption by Christ. A typical example of this can be found in St. Catherine of Siena, whose most ardent desire was to give her life for the Church. "The only cause of my death," said the saint, "is my zeal for the Church of God, which devours and consumes me. Accept, O Lord, the sacrifices of my life for the Mystical Body of thy holy Church." She was also a victim soul for particular individuals. Other examples of victim souls are St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Gemma Galgani, and Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity.

In practice, the offering of oneself as a victim for souls should never be permitted except to souls of whom the Holy Spirit asks it with a persistent and irresistible motion of grace. It should be

noted that, rather than contributing to the sanctification of the individual (although it does add something), this particular act is ordained to the spiritual benefit of others. The soul that would give itself in this way for the salvation of others must itself be intimately united with God and must have traveled a long way toward its own perfection in charity. It must be a soul well schooled in suffering and even have a thirst for suffering. Under these conditions the spiritual director could prudently permit a soul to make this oblation of self as a victim soul. Then, if God accepts the offering, the soul can become a faithful reproduction of the divine Martyr of Calvary.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Cf. Gordon W. Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961).

The psychologist Erik Erikson maintains that even in the first critical transition during infancy the religious attitude of the mother exerts a lasting influence on the infant, and especially her practice of prayer. For an excellent application of Erikson's psychology of personality development to the spiritual life, see B. McLaughlin, *Nature, Grace and Religious Development* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965).

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 63, a. 1; I-II, q. 21, a. 1; q. 72, a. 5; q. 74, a. 1; q. 75, aa. 2-3; q. 77, a. 6.

Cf. Eugene Maly, *Sin* (Dayton: Pflaum/Standard, 1973), pp. 27-31, *passim*.

Cf. D. Hoffman, *Beginnings in Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 36-38. Father Hoffman has written two other works that complete his series: *Maturing the Spirit* (Boston: St. Paul, 1973) and *The Life Within* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

St. Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), First Mansions, Chap. 2.

*The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 41.

St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1949), Part III, Chap. 9.

*The Spiritual Doctrine of Father Lallemant* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1955), Prin. 4, c. 3, a. 3.

St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book I, Chap. 11.

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 114, a. 2.

*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2.

Cf. St. John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chap. 13.

Words of Mother Marie Thérèse, foundress of the Congregation of Mary Reparatrix, quoted

by R. Plus in *Christ in His Brethren*, trans. Irene Hernaman (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1925).

## 8

### **Progressive Purgation**

In order to arrive at the intimate union with God in which sanctity consists, it is not sufficient to win a victory against sin and its principal allies, the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is also necessary to achieve an intense and a profound purification of all the faculties and powers of soul and body. The reason is obvious. When a soul begins the journey to holiness, it is already in possession of sanctifying grace, without which it could not even begin. The soul has been endowed, together with grace, with the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity dwells in the soul as in a living temple, and the grace of adoption makes the soul an heir of heaven for all eternity.

But, in spite of these graces, the soul is laden with imperfections and defects. Grace does not of itself exclude anything more than mortal sin; it leaves us with all the natural and acquired imperfections we had at the moment of our justification. The soul remains subject to every kind of temptation, evil inclinations and acquired evil habits; the practice of virtue is therefore difficult and arduous. The infused virtues, received with sanctifying grace, give the soul the power to perform the corresponding acts, but they do not automatically rid the soul of its acquired evil habits or of its natural indispositions to the practice of virtue. These are destroyed only by the practice of the acquired virtues. Then, when the supernatural habit no longer finds any resistance or obstacle to its exercise by reason of a contrary habit, the virtuous act will be produced with facility and delight.

The reason for the resistance and rebellion of our nature against virtue must be sought ultimately in original sin. That first sin caused a weakening of the natural inclination to good that human nature had in the state of original justice. From this follows the necessity of a profound purification of the faculties in which evil habits and vicious inclinations are rooted. In the process of purification God reserves to himself the better part (passive purifications); but, with the help of grace, we must do all in our power to rid ourselves of all the impediments to the divine action (active purifications).

#### **Purification of the External Senses**

The purpose of the active purification of the external senses is to restrain their excesses and to subject them to the rule of reason illumined by faith. A disciplined human body is an excellent instrument for sanctification, but in the present state of fallen nature it has an almost irresistible tendency to anything that can give pleasure to the senses. If it is not subjected, it becomes indomitable, and its demands become more and more excessive until it constitutes an obstacle incompatible with the spiritual perfection of the soul. St. Paul speaks of the necessity of mortifying the body in order to be liberated from its tyranny and to assure one's own salvation: "I treat my body hard and make it obey me, for, having been an announcer myself, I should not want to be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27). In another place he says: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). St. John of the Cross repeats St. Paul's teaching and gives a reason that is intimately connected with the divine union to which the soul travels:



It is necessary to assume one truth, which is that the sense of the lower part of man, which is that whereof we are treating, is not and cannot be capable of knowing or comprehending God as God is. So that the eye cannot see him or anything that is like him; neither can the ear hear his voice or any sound that resembles it; neither can the sense of smell perceive a perfume so sweet as he; neither can the taste detect a savor so sublime and delectable; neither can the touch feel a movement so delicate and full of delight, nor ought like to it; neither can his form or any figure that represents him enter into, the thought or imagination. Even as Isaias says: "Eye hath not seen him, nor hath ear heard him, neither hath it entered into the heart of man" (Isa. 64:4).

It would be, at the least, but vanity to set the rejoicing of the will upon pleasure caused by any of these apprehensions, and it would be hindering the power of the will from occupying itself with God and from setting its rejoicing upon him alone. This the soul cannot perfectly accomplish, except by purging itself and remaining in darkness as to rejoicing of this kind, as also with respect to other things.[\(1\)](#)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand this doctrine correctly in order not to draw erroneous conclusions. It is not necessary to deprive the senses of their proper objects but only to avoid placing one's joy and final repose in the sensate pleasure these objects arouse without rising to God through them. Creatures are, in the words of St. John of the Cross, "mere crumbs or fragments which fall from the table of God,"[\(2\)](#) but if one can see the vestige or trace of God in them, they not only cease to be an obstacle to sanctification, but can be converted into means and instruments for growth in the spiritual life. The evil or the disorder lies in resting in creatures as if they were our ultimate end, prescind from their relation to God; but when we enjoy their beauty, or the pleasure that they give, and are thereby led to God, they become excellent aids for our sanctification. St. John of the Cross explains this doctrine as follows:

I said advisedly that, if the rejoicing of the will were to rest in any of these things, it would be vanity. But when it does not rest in them, but as soon as the will finds pleasure in that which it hears, sees, and does, soars upward to rejoice in God, so that its pleasure acts as a motive and strengthens it to that end, this is very good. In such a case not only need the said motions not be shunned when they cause this devotion and prayer, but the soul may profit by them and indeed should so profit to the end that it may accomplish this holy exercise. For there are souls who are greatly moved by objects of sense to seek God.

I wish, therefore, to propose a test whereby it may be seen when these delights of the senses aforementioned are profitable and when they are not. And it is that whenever a person hears music and other things, and sees pleasant things, and is conscious of sweet perfumes, or tastes things that are delicious, or feels soft touches, if his thought and the affection of his will are at once centered upon God and if that thought of God gives him more pleasure than the movement of sense which causes it, and save for that he finds no pleasure in the said movement, this is a sign that he is receiving benefit therefrom and that this thing of sense is a help to his spirit. In this way such things may be used, for then such things of sense subserve the end for which God created and gave them, which is that he should be the better loved and known because of them.[\(3\)](#)

Mortification or custody of the senses is necessary even in things that are lawful. But here, as in all else, it is necessary to observe prudence and equilibrium, without going to extravagant or ridiculous extremes. Some of the mortifications practiced by the saints are more to be admired

than imitated. The two principal means of mortifying the senses are (1) to deprive them of anything that may produce unlawful pleasure, and eventually to curtail even lawful pleasure, as one's circumstances permit or one's spiritual needs require; (2) to practice positive mortification by means of bodily self-denial.

Mortification is necessary for all, especially for beginners until they succeed in dominating their passions. In addition to serving as reparation for past sins, bodily mortifications have two other beneficial uses: immolation of self in imitation of Christ and a positive contribution to the Mystical Body by means of the apostolate of suffering. These two functions of suffering pertain to the saints as much as or more than to imperfect souls, for no one is excused from practicing bodily mortification in one form or another. St. Vincent de Paul says: "He who has little regard for bodily mortification, under the pretext that interior mortifications are much more perfect, demonstrates very clearly that he is not mortified either interiorly or exteriorly."[\(4\)](#)

However, one should proceed prudently and slowly, increasing the exercises of penance as the powers of the soul increase and as the interior invitations of grace urge one on more and more. Especially at the beginning, one should avoid any kind of severe bodily penance. It must never be harmful to one's health or make one incapable of fulfilling the duties of state, which are more important than the voluntary practice of mortification. And the soul should take care not to make an end or goal of that which is only a means, believing that sanctity consists in punishing the body.

If the Holy Spirit wishes to lead a soul by way of extraordinary penances, he will inspire the soul to that effect and will give the strength necessary to carry it out. Meanwhile, the majority of souls should practice ordinary bodily mortification by accepting the little crosses of daily life with a spirit of faith and perseverance. This last point is very important. It is better to accept and carry faithfully the little crosses of daily life than to give oneself to occasional periods of great penance, alternated with other periods of relaxation.

### **Purification of the Internal Senses**

Of the four internal senses -- imagination, memory, common sense, and the estimative power -- the common sense (*sensus communis*) is controlled and purified by the custody and purification of the external senses. The estimative power is purified and controlled when the imagination is purified and the intellectual judgment exercises its proper function. Therefore, we shall speak only of the purification of the imagination and the memory.

#### *The Imagination*

Every idea acquired by the natural operation of our faculties corresponds to an image impressed upon the imagination. Without images, the intellect cannot know naturally. Our Lord frequently made use of the imagination to place the great mysteries within the grasp of the people by means of his beautiful parables and allegories. The imagination also has a great influence over the sensitive appetite, which is moved with great force toward its proper object when the imagination clothes it with special attractiveness.

Because of its great importance and influence, the imagination needs a profound purification. When used in the service of the good, it can give incalculable assistance; but there is nothing that can cause greater difficulty on the way to sanctification than an imagination that has broken away

from the control of reason enlightened by faith.

There are two principal obstacles caused by an uncontrolled imagination: dissipation and temptation. Without recollection, an interior life and a life of prayer are impossible, and there is nothing that so impedes recollection as the inconstancy and dissipation of the imagination. Freed of any restraint, it paints in vivid colors the pleasure sin provides for the concupiscible appetite, or exaggerates the difficulty the irascible appetite will encounter on the road to virtue, thus leading to discouragement. But the difficulties can be avoided if we use the proper means.

**Custody of the External Senses.** It is necessary to control the external senses, and especially the sense of sight, because they provide the images the imagination retains, reproduces, and reassembles, thus, arousing the passions and encouraging the consent of the will. There is no better way to avoid temptations from this source than to deprive the imagination of such images by custody of the external senses.

**Prudent Selection of Reading Matter.** It is not only a question of reading matter that is evil or obviously dangerous, but also that which fills the imagination with useless images. There are occasions, of course, when it is beneficial to engage in light reading for relaxation. It is, in fact, a good practice to relieve tension or to rest one's mental powers in this way. But it is likewise necessary to provide holy and profitable material so that the imagination will be directed positively to the good. This is where spiritual reading can contribute a great deal to the proper use of the imagination.

**Attention to the Duty of the Moment.** The habit of attending to the duty of the moment has the double advantage of concentrating our intellectual powers and of disciplining the imagination by preventing it from being distracted to other objects. It also helps a person avoid idleness, which is one of the primary sources of dissipation.

**Indifference to Distractions.** There is no sure way of avoiding all distractions, but one can always ignore them. Indeed, this is a much more effective measure than to combat them directly. One should take no account of them but should do what one must do, in spite of the uncontrolled imagination. It is possible to keep one's mind and heart fixed on God even in the midst of involuntary distractions.

### *The Memory*

We make a distinction between the sense memory, which has for its object only the sensible, the particular, and the concrete, and the intellectual memory, which deals with the suprasensible, the abstract, and the universal; but the process of purification is the same. The memory can give inestimable service to the intellect and can be its most powerful ally. Without it, our spirit would be like a sieve that is always empty, however much water is poured into it. For certain types of knowledge, such as languages, history, the physical and natural sciences, an excellent memory is indispensable.

Precisely because the memory stores up all kinds of knowledge, both good and evil, it is necessary to subject it to purification. Throughout life we experience many things that are of no use whatever for the sanctification of the soul. Many of them destroy the soul's peace and tranquillity, which are so necessary for a life of prayer and recollection. We can offer some suggestions for the active purgation of this faculty.

**Forget Past Sins.** This is the first step, and it is absolutely indispensable for all who aspire to eternal salvation. The remembrance of one's own sins or of those of another has a strong power for suggesting to the soul the same things by way of a new temptation, and of disposing it to sin again, especially if a vivid imagination is associated with the recollection. The soul must reject immediately and energetically any remembrance of this kind.

**Cease Thinking of Past Injuries.** This pertains to virtue and is indispensable for any soul that wishes to sanctify itself. In spite of a pardon that has been given, the remembrance of a past offense will disturb the peace of conscience and present the guilty party in an unfavorable light. One should forget the disagreeable episode and realize that our offenses against God are much greater, and that he demands that we pardon others in order to receive his pardon. The soul that nourishes rancor, however justifiable it may seem (and it never is in the eyes of God), can forget about reaching sanctity.

**Remember Benefits From God.** This pertains to the positive purgation of the memory and is an effective means for directing the memory to God. The recollection of the immense benefits we have received from God, of the times he has pardoned our faults, of the dangers from which he has preserved us, of the loving care he has exercised over us, is an excellent means of arousing our gratitude toward him and the desire of corresponding more faithfully with his graces. And if to this we add the recollection of our disobedience and rebellion, of our ingratitude and resistance to grace, our soul will be filled with humility and confusion and will experience the need of redoubling its vigilance and its efforts to be better in the future.

**Consider Motives for Christian Hope.** This is one of the most efficacious means for directing our memory to God and for purifying it of contact with earthly things. St. John of the Cross makes the memory the seat of Christian hope and shows how growth in this virtue effectively purges the memory. The remembrance of an eternity of happiness, which is the central object of Christian hope, is most apt for making us disdain the things of earth and raise our spirits to God.

### **Purification of the Passions**

The sensitive appetite is the organic faculty through which we seek the good so far as it is known through the senses. It is generically distinct from the rational appetite or the will, which seeks the good as apprehended by the intellect. Hence, St. Paul says: "The Flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; the two are directly opposed" (Gal. 5:17).

The sensitive appetite, also called sensuality, is divided into two species: the concupiscible or pleasure appetite and the irascible or utility appetite. The former has as its object the delightful good that is easy to obtain; the latter has as its object the arduous good that is difficult to obtain. These two movements of the sensitive appetite give rise to the passions.

The passions are movements or energies we can use for good or for evil, but in themselves, they are neither good nor evil. When placed at the service of the good, the passions can be of incalculable assistance, even to the point that one could say that it is morally impossible for a soul to arrive at great sanctity without possessing a great energy or passion directed to God. But when placed at the service of evil, the passions are converted into a destructive force that is truly terrifying.

As movements of the sensitive appetite caused by the apprehension of the sensible good or evil,

the passions are accompanied by a certain change, more or less intense, in the organism. Some psychologists use the word passion to designate the more vehement and intense movements of the sensitive appetite, reserving the word emotion for those movements that are gentler and more ordinary. In any case, the passions always presuppose some knowledge of the good that is sought or the evil that is feared, and the judgment made is always in terms of self. The passions are by nature expressions of love of self.

In the concupiscible appetite, the good, which has a power of attraction, engenders three movements of passion. The simple awareness of good arouses *love*; if it is a question of a future good, it gives rise to *desire*; if it is a good already possessed and present, it produces *pleasure*. On the other hand, the apprehension of evil, which is of itself repulsive, produces *hatred*; if it is an impending evil, it causes a movement of flight or *aversion*; but if the evil has overtaken us, it causes *sadness*.

In the irascible appetite the absent good, if it is considered possible of attainment, engenders *hope*; but if it is impossible of attainment, it produces *despair*. In like manner, the difficult evil that is absent, if it can be avoided, produces *courage*; but if the evil is unavoidable, it arouses *fear*. Lastly, the presence of a difficult evil produces *anger* in the irascible appetite and sadness in the concupiscible appetite, while the presence of a difficult good does not arouse any movement in the irascible appetite, but causes joy in the concupiscible appetite. For that reason the irascible appetite has only five passions, while there are six passions in the concupiscible appetite.

The great importance of the passions can be deduced from their decisive influence in our physical, intellectual, and moral life. Without the previous stimulation of the emotions, we would take scarcely one step in our physical life, since the stimulation of the emotions is what enables us to expend an extraordinary amount of effort for good or for evil. Add to this the fact that the passions can have a powerful influence on bodily health, especially the emotions of sadness, anger, and fear. In the moral life the passions can increase or diminish the goodness or malice, the merit or demerit of our actions. They diminish human responsibility when a person seeks a good or evil more because of the impulse of passion than by the free choice of the will; they increase human responsibility when the will confirms the antecedent movement of passion and uses it in order to work with greater intensity.

A prudent organization of all our psychological resources can result in a near-perfect control of our passions, excepting, of course, the first spontaneous movements of passion, but these do not affect morality. People who have lived for years under the domination or disorderly passions have been able to free themselves from this slavery and begin to live a life that is in harmony with the moral law. There is no doubt that there are great difficulties at the beginning, but gradually the individual can achieve self-mastery. The following principles can be helpful in achieving control and proper use of the passions.

1. *Every idea tends to produce its corresponding act.* This is especially true if the idea or sentiment is accompanied by strong emotions and a vivid representation. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate ideas that are in accordance with Christian morality and carefully to avoid the concepts and ideas that relate to actions that should be rejected. In this way one's action will always be in accordance with one's ideas and values.

2. *Every act arouses the sentiment of which it is a normal expression.* The rule of conduct following from this principle is that in order to acquire the desired sentiment or to intensify the emotion already experienced, one should act as if already experiencing it. In this way one's sentiments and emotions are controlled by one's actions.

3. *Passion augments and intensifies the psychological forces of 'the individual and uses them for attaining the goal that one seeks.* Consequently, it is necessary to choose the emotion carefully in order to gain the most from its psychological potential. In this way one's ideas and actions are effectively promoted by the correct use of emotional energy.

Such are the basic principles concerning the control and use of a passions, but we must now make some detailed applications regarding the rule of conduct in relation to Christian living. First of all, one must be firmly convinced of the need to combat disorderly passions, for these disturb our spirit, impede prayer and reflection, prejudice our judgment, stimulate the imagination, weaken the power of the will, and disturb one's conscience. The remedies, of course, will vary with the particular emotion that must be controlled. Against the passions aroused by one's environment, a good remedy is wholesome recreation, distraction, or a journey; against those that proceed from the organism itself, work, custody of the senses and the imagination, and a regular schedule are helpful; against those originating from one's temperament, the best remedy is reflection and will power.

From a psychological point of view the most important requisite for controlling the passions is the firm and resolute will to do so, but wishful thinking will not suffice; there must be a determined resolution translated into effective action, especially if it is a question of a deeply rooted disorder on the emotional level. Hence, it is necessary to avoid those situations that arouse the emotions in relation to sinful objects; to prevent any new manifestation of the emotion; and to realize that although giving in to the passion may quiet the urge temporarily, it also gives the passion greater strength for making future demands.

Lastly, one should make use of the technique of sublimation or transference, whereby one is able to direct the energy of the passion to morally good and beneficial objects. St. Augustine touched on this when he stated that one should choose wisely the objects of love and then love with all one's heart. The same thing applies to all the passions; they are powers for good and should be utilized as such, but they can promote one's spiritual perfection and human fulfillment only if directed to the proper objects.

Spiritual directors should carefully examine the passion or passions that predominate in the souls under their care. Having done this, they can propose as material for self-examination the control and proper use of the passion as we have just indicated. They should concentrate principally on the control of the dominant passion, but without neglecting the others, for frequently more than one passion will be involved.

The persons receiving direction should faithfully and honestly report to the director regarding progress or failure in this struggle, and they should not be content until they have successfully directed their emotional energies to God and to morally good objects. This is no easy task and for many persons it is the work of a lifetime. On the other hand, it is precisely because they have given up the battle against their own passions that many persons abandon the struggle for sanctity. Lastly, we would stress that we are not here advocating the extinction or repression of

the emotions, but their control and proper use, for without great passion for God and the good, sanctity is impossible.

### **Purification of the Intellect**

The active purification of the external and internal senses and of the sensitive appetite constitutes a great step toward Christian perfection. But it is necessary that the purification reach the very depths of one's spirit, there to rectify the deviations of intellect and will. After that, the passive purifications will complete what a person cannot accomplish by his or her own efforts under ordinary grace.

According to traditional psychology, there are two spiritual faculties of the soul: the intellect and the will. Some mystical authors, including St. John of the Cross, considered the intellectual memory as a faculty distinct from the intellect and will, but modern psychology classifies it as a function of the intellect. We shall therefore speak of the active purgation of the two spiritual faculties that are really distinct: the intellect and the will.

The intellect is the spiritual faculty by which we apprehend things in an immaterial way. Its proper effect is the idea or essence it abstracts from external reality by means of the abstractive power of the intellect acting upon the phantasm in the imagination. Intellectual knowledge is completely distinct and far superior to sense knowledge. Knowledge acquired through the senses always refers to singular objects in the existential order, but knowledge through ideas or concepts is always universal, abstract, and undetermined as to individuality. We possess sensitive knowledge in common with animals; we possess intellectual knowledge in common with purely spiritual beings.

When the intellect compares two ideas and affirms or denies the connection between them, it pronounces a judgment, which is the second act or function of the intellect. When it compares two judgments or statements and draws a conclusion, it performs the act of reasoning. The function proper to the intellect is judgment, and it is there that we speak of truth or error, but prior to that it is necessary that one exercise proper attention and concentration so that the concepts received by the intellect will be in conformity with objective truth.

Although the intellect as a spiritual faculty is eminently simple, mystical authors have made distinctions or divisions of that faculty in order to explain certain phenomena of mystical experience otherwise difficult to understand. Thus, some of them have referred to the mens, or high point, of the intellect to designate that part of the soul that always reflects the image of God and can experience the divine even in the midst of trials and darkness. They also speak of the superior reason and the inferior reason. The former reaches its conclusions from the principles of pure understanding, unaffected by the passions or lower powers of the soul, whereas the latter tends toward that which is useful or delightful and is therefore much more closely related to the movements of passion or what is called the "animal man."

What this means in practice is that the intellectual functions of simple apprehension, judgment, and reasoning can be greatly influenced by the appetitive powers of will and emotions. The latter tend to draw the intellect downward to the things of the senses or inward to selfish pursuits. For this reason the mystical writers have consistently extolled the speculative and contemplative aspects of the intellectual activity.

The active purification of the intellect normally requires first of all the removal of obstacles to the virtuous use of this faculty. This means that the individual must at the outset reject all vain, useless, and sinful thoughts. The imagination, as we have seen, is practically uncontrollable directly, and therefore it will frequently present to the intellect phantasms that must be rejected or ignored. Secondly, it is necessary to overcome ignorance by studying the truths of faith and seeking to probe their deeper meaning and their application to Christian living. At the same time, one should avoid the vice of intellectual curiosity that engages in the study of sacred truths as a purely scholastic pursuit instead of seeing them as truths by which one lives. Lastly, it is necessary to avoid excessive attachment to one's own ideas and opinions, especially in matters of faith. The two attitudes that are especially important here are obedience to the Magisterium of the Church and the cultivation of a mentality that is open and receptive to new developments and applications of revealed truths or theological conclusions.

We can offer the following positive principle as a guide in the purification of the intellect: *the soul must let itself be led by the light of faith, which is the proximate and proportionate means for the union of the intellect with God in this life*. No one has expounded this principle so well as St. John of the Cross. He repeats it constantly in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

Among all creatures, the highest or the lowest, there is none that comes near to God or bears any resemblance to his being. For although it is true, as theologians say, that all creatures have a certain relation to God and bear a divine impress (some more and others less, according to the greater or lesser excellence of their nature), yet there is no essential resemblance or connection between them and God; on the contrary, the distance between their being and his divine being is infinite. Hence it is impossible for the intellect to attain to God by means of creatures, whether these be celestial or earthly, because there is no proportion or resemblance between them ...

The reason for this is that the imagination cannot fashion or imagine anything whatever beyond that which it has experienced through the external senses, namely, that which it has seen with the eyes, heard with the ears, etc. At most it can only compose likenesses of those things which it has seen or heard or felt ...

Just so, all that the imagination can imagine and the intellect can receive and understand in this life is not, nor can it be, a proximate means of union with God ....

From what has been said it is to be inferred that, in order that the intellect be prepared for this divine union, it must be pure and void of all that pertains to sense, and detached and freed from all that can be clearly apprehended by the intellect, profoundly hushed and put to silence, and leaning upon faith, which alone is the proximate and proportionate means whereby the soul is united with God .... Therefore, the greater the faith of the soul, the more closely is it united with God.<sup>(5)</sup>

Therefore the soul must travel in pure faith if it wishes to arrive at the perfect purification of the intellect and be intimately united with God. The reason is that since the rational creature has far greater dignity and excellence than all temporal and earthly creatures, it is made impure by attaching itself to these things through love, but purified by tending to those things above itself, and especially to God. But the first movement toward God is through faith, and therefore the first principle of purification is faith, vivified by charity.



It does not matter that faith is essentially about things that are not seen clearly and is therefore necessarily obscure. In fact, it is precisely because of this that faith can provide the only knowledge possible concerning the intimate life of God, who cannot be adequately represented by any created intelligible species. The clear vision and knowledge of God are reserved for us in the beatific vision in glory, but even in this life faith enables us to attain in some measure to the unfathomable mystery of God, though the knowledge be dark and obscure. By reason of its object, the knowledge of faith is superior to all sensible and intellectual evidence that we could have of God in this life.

It is necessary that the soul inform all its life and actions with the light of faith, and cling ever more firmly to the truths proposed for faith on the authority of God. Gradually one can reach the point of judging all things through the light of faith and, indeed, to see all things as God sees them.

### **Purification of the Will**

The will, also called the rational appetite, is the faculty by which we seek the good as known by the intellect. It is distinguished from the sensitive appetite, which instinctively seeks the good as known by the senses. Even the animals possess a sensitive appetite, but the rational appetite is proper to intellectual beings.

The proper object of the will is the good proposed to it by the intellect, but in the appreciation or evaluation of the good, error may creep in. The intellect can judge as a true good something that is only an apparent good, and the will, which is a blind faculty and always follows the apprehension of the intellect, will be impelled toward that object that is taken as if it were a true good.

The proper act of the will is love, or the effective union of the will with a known good. All the movements or partial aspects of the human acts that take place in the will, such as simple volition, efficacious tendencies, consent, active use of the faculties, and fruition, proceed from love, directly or indirectly.

Love can be divided in many ways. The principal division for our purposes is the following: by reason of the object, love can be sensual or spiritual; by reason of the modality, love can be natural or supernatural; by reason of the formal object or motive, love can be a love of concupiscence or of benevolence. It is called a *love of concupiscence* when one desires the good so far as it is good for oneself (egotistic motive); it is a *love of benevolence* if one loves another precisely so far as the other is good and lovable; it is a *love of friendship* if the love is directed to a person and is a mutual benevolent love. Thus the sensual person loves with a love of concupiscence the object that gives pleasure; the blessed in heaven habitually love God with a love of benevolence, taking complacency in his infinite perfection and rejoicing that God is infinitely happy in himself; and the blessed in heaven and the people sanctified by grace here on earth love God with the love of friendship under the impulse of the virtue of charity.

Acts of the will may be elicited or imperated. They are called *elicited* if they proceed directly from the will (e.g., to consent, to choose, to love). They are called *imperated* (commanded) acts when they are performed by some other faculty under the command of the will (e.g., to study, to paint, to mortify oneself voluntarily).

As we have already seen, human nature and all its faculties were profoundly affected by original sin. Once the orientation to God had been weakened, the dominion of reason over the sensible faculties was also weakened, and the will itself was readily inclined to selfishness.

Hence the necessity of a double effort involved in the rectification of the will: one required to subject the will to God by means of a total submission and conformity to his divine will; the other to increase the power of the will with regard to the inferior faculties until it can subject them completely to itself. In other words, one must attempt to regain, at the cost of great effort and with the help of grace, that initial rectitude that the will enjoyed when it came forth from the creative hand of God.

It should be evident that we cannot achieve total submission of our will to God unless we first detach ourselves from excessive love of created things and from the self-centered love that runs counter to the demands of charity.

St. John of the Cross reduces his whole spiritual doctrine to this detachment from creatures, as the negative element, and to union with God through love as the positive element. It is a fact that the soul is filled with God in the measure and to the degree that it empties itself of creatures.

The reasons for the necessity of detachment from creatures for perfect union with God, as stated by St. John of the Cross, can be summarized in the following synthesis.

1. God is all, the necessary and absolute being, most pure act without the shadow of potency, who exists of himself and possesses the absolute plenitude of being. Compared with him, creatures are nothing; they are contingent beings that have more of potency than of act.
2. Two contraries cannot exist in the same subject because they mutually exclude each other. Therefore, light is incompatible with darkness and the All is incompatible with nothing.
3. If, then, creatures are nothing and darkness, and God is the All and light, it follows that the soul that wishes to be united with God must detach itself from creatures. Without this, union with God is impossible.
4. Hence it is necessary that the way and ascent to God should consist in mortifying the desires. Until these desires cease, the soul will not arrive at perfect union, although it may exercise many virtues, because it still does not perform those virtues with perfection, which requires that the soul be purged of every inordinate desire.
5. Some persons burden themselves with extraordinary penances and many other exercises and think that this or that will suffice for them to arrive at union with divine wisdom. If they would exert half the effort in mortifying their desires, they would advance more in one month through this practice than they would in many years by means of the other exercises. Just as it is necessary that one labor over the earth if it is to bear fruit, and without labor it will bear nothing but weeds, so also mortification of the appetites is necessary if there is to be any fruit or profit in the soul.[\(6\)](#)

St. John of the Cross develops these thoughts throughout all his writings, which teach both the negative element of detachment and the positive element of the love of God. Actually, the system of St. John of the Cross can be reduced to one important statement: God is all. His

negations rest on affirmation, because they have as their object the detachment of the soul from the false appearances of creatures, in order to enable the soul, purified and ennobled, to lose itself in the profundity of the All. He does not disdain creatures; he wishes only to help the soul see in creatures the traces and vestiges of the divine being.

But no one can arrive at the All except by the narrow path of the absolute negation of the nothing:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything, desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing.

In order to arrive at that in which you have no pleasure, you must go by a way in which you have no pleasure.

In order to arrive at that which you do not know, you must go by a way which you do not know.

In order to arrive at that which you do not possess, you must go by a way that you do not possess.

In order to arrive at that which you are not, you must go through that which you are not.

When your mind dwells on anything, you are no longer casting yourself upon the All.

In order to pass from the all to the All, you must deny yourself wholly in all.

And when you come to possess it wholly, you must possess it without desiring anything.

And if you will have anything in having all, you do not have your treasure purely in God.<sup>(7)</sup>

St. John of the Cross does not intend to annihilate the natural tendencies of human nature by removing them from their object and leaving them suspended in a vacuum. He wishes to orientate them to God, to make God the only object of the soul. It is true that this can never be attained perfectly until the soul has been introduced into the passive purgations, but God does not usually complete the purification of the soul until the soul has done all that it can by using the ordinary means within its grasp. For that reason St. John of the Cross repeats with insistence that one must mortify the desires that divide the forces of the soul. When the soul has become detached from creatures, it will be filled with God.

Detachment from created things is absolutely indispensable for arriving at Christian perfection, but it would be of little avail to detach oneself from external things if one is not likewise detached from one's own ego, which constitutes the greatest of all the obstacles to one's free flight to God. St. Thomas states that egoism or disordered self-love is the origin and root of all sin.<sup>(8)</sup> St. Augustine says: "Two loves have erected two cities: self-love, carried to the extreme of disdain of God, has built the city of the world; the love of God, carried to the point of disdain for one's self, has constructed the city of God. The one glories in itself; the other glories in the Lord."<sup>(9)</sup>

Precisely because it is the root of all sins, the manifestations of self-love are varied and almost infinite. So far as it affects spiritual things, self-love becomes the center around which everything else must rotate. Some persons seek themselves in everything, even in holy things: in prayer, which they prolong when they find sweetness and consolation in it, but which they abandon when they experience aridity; in the reception of the sacraments, which they seek only for

sensible consolation; in spiritual direction, which they consider a note of distinction and in which, therefore, they always seek the director who is most popular, or who will let them live in peace with their egoistic values and selfish aims; in the very desire for sanctification, which they do not subordinate to the greater glory of God and the good of souls, but which they direct to themselves as the best ornament of their souls here on earth and as the source of increased happiness and glory in heaven. We would never finish if we were to attempt to list the manifestations of excessive self-love.

The soul that aspires to perfect union with God must strive energetically against its own self-love, which subtly penetrates even holy things. It must examine the true motive for its actions, continually rectify its intentions, and not place as its goal or the goal of all its activities and efforts anything other than the glory of God and the perfect fulfillment of his divine will. It must keep constantly in mind the decisive words of Christ himself, who makes perfect self-abnegation the indispensable condition for following him: "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps" (Luke 9:23).

### **Passive Purgations**

Up to this point we have been examining the active purifications the soul can effect by its own efforts with the help of grace in order to purge itself of its defects. Now we shall consider the part that God reserves for himself in the purification of the soul: the passive purifications, which are divided into the night of the senses and the night of the spirit.

The teaching of St. John of the Cross on the necessity of the passive purgations is very clear. In Book I of *The Dark Night*, he treats of the imperfections of beginners. After describing these imperfections in the chapters that follow, he terminates with these words:

However assiduously the beginner in mortification exercises himself in all these actions and passions, he can never completely succeed -- far from it -- until God shall effect it in him passively by means of the purgation of said night. [\(10\)](#)

To speak of perfection and sanctity without the soul's having endured any of the passive purifications is to depart radically from the doctrine of St. John of the Cross. It cannot be said, as they who are defenders of the double way have said, that the passive purifications pertain only to those souls who are to attain perfection by the mystical way and not to those who are to reach perfection by the ascetical way. St. John of the Cross teaches that, however much the soul may exert itself, it cannot correct its imperfections unless God does this for the soul in a passive manner. Therefore, one or the other conclusion must be accepted: either we must say that there is a perfection that is filled with imperfections (which is manifestly a contradiction), or there is no other perfection than that which results in the passive purification and is manifestly a mystical perfection.

Theological reason fully confirms the teaching of St. John of the Cross. As a result of original sin, human nature is strongly inclined to evil. Egoism, which is imbedded in the very depths of our being, disturbs the clarity of our intellect and impedes our objective view of things, especially when self-love makes us see things through the perspective of its own evaluations.

The passive purifications are, therefore, necessary from the very nature of things. Naturally, not

all souls will suffer them with the same rigor, because there are many degrees of impurity that have been contracted, and there are many grades of perfection to which various souls are destined. But in every case, in order to conquer egoism, sensuality, self-love, the immoderate desire for sensible consolations, intellectual pride, and whatever opposes the spirit of faith, it is absolutely indispensable that there be a complete and total renewal of the soul through the passive purifications.

This doctrine has the advantage of opening wide horizons to souls and of saving them from many dangers and illusions into which they could easily fall if they were obliged to remain in that which has been called the "ordinary" way of sanctity. Some authors do not look with sympathy on the mystical way because they believe it to be filled with dangers and pitfalls, but in reality the contrary is true. In the mystical state souls are governed in a special manner by the Holy Spirit himself, operating through his precious gifts and divine motion. Illumined by the light of contemplation, they discover much better their nothingness and their misery, at the same time that they see the snares of their enemies and their own sensuality. They are much more cautious, prudent, and docile to their spiritual masters precisely because of the passive purifications to which they have been subjected.

There is, therefore, no doubt that the passive purifications, which according to the unanimous teaching of all the schools of spirituality are of a mystical order, are necessary and indispensable in one form or another for the full purification of the soul, and for arriving at complete Christian perfection.

Let us now see in particular the two principal manifestations of these passive purifications, which St. John of the Cross calls the night of the senses and the night of the spirit.

### *Night of the Senses*

The night of the senses consists of a prolonged series of profound and persistent aridities that submerge the soul in a very painful state and severely test its perseverance in the desire for sanctification. It is so difficult to support this crisis of the senses that the many souls draw back in fear and abandon the life of prayer.

No one has explained with such precision and clarity as has St. John of the Cross the nature, necessity, causes, and effects of the passive purifications. Above all, it is necessary to note that St. John of the Cross includes under the word senses not only the external and internal senses, but also the sensitive appetite and the discursive intellect so far as it uses the imagination to construct its discursus. He begins by describing the sweetness that beginners usually experience in the service of God. They may become strongly attached to the sensible consolations and, without realizing it, make the delight and sweetness they find in the practices of devotion the principal motive for which they practice them. On feeling themselves so favored by God, they think they are already saints, or not far from being saints. As a result, there they manifest many imperfections that flow from the seven capital sins.[\(11\)](#)

A profound purification is needed, but these souls could never achieve it by their own efforts, even if they could recognize all their faults. Therefore God intervenes and leads them into the night of the senses.

They have now had practice for some time in the way of virtue and have persevered in

meditation and prayer, and because of the sweetness and pleasure they have therein found, they have lost their love of the things of the world and have gained some degree of spiritual strength in God .... When they are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of divine favor is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness and shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whenever and for as long as they desired .... And thus he leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and meditation, for they cannot advance a step in meditation, as they were accustomed to do before, their inward senses being submerged in this night and left with such dryness that not only do they experience no pleasure and consolation in spiritual things and good exercises in which they were wont to find their delights and pleasures, but instead they find insipidity and bitterness in the things mentioned.[\(12\)](#)

St. John of the Cross expressly states that the cause of this emptiness and insipidity of the senses is infused contemplation.

The soul can no longer meditate or reflect in the imaginative sphere of sense as it used to do, however much it may attempt to do so. For God now begins to communicate himself to it, no longer through sense, as he did before, ... but by an act of simple contemplation, to which neither the exterior nor the interior senses of the lower part of the soul can attain.[\(13\)](#)

How can one discern the presence of the night of the senses and distinguish it from the dryness or aridity that may be caused by other reasons, such as dissipation, bodily indisposition, or influence of the devil? St. John of the Cross gives three signs:[\(14\)](#)

1. The first sign is that the soul finds delight or consolation neither in the things of God nor in any created thing. If the soul were to find consolation in the latter, it is evident that its distaste for the things of God would be due to a dissipation of the soul. But since this universal dryness or distaste could come from some indisposition of the body that causes one to lose one's taste for everything, it is necessary to add the second sign.

2. The second sign is that ordinarily the memory is fixed on God with great care, but the soul thinks that, rather than serving God, it is falling back, because of its lack of taste for the things of God. One can see that the distaste does not proceed from lukewarmness, because it is the nature of lukewarmness not to have any interior solicitude for the things of God. And if it comes from some bodily infirmity, everything becomes distasteful, and there is not even any desire to serve God. Nor would the devil arouse any desire to serve God. For that reason this second sign is one of the most unmistakable.

3. The third sign is the inability to meditate or use reasoning by means` of the imagination as one formerly did. The reason for this impotency is due to the initial infused contemplation.

When these three signs are all verified in a clear manner, the soul and the spiritual director can conclude that they are in the presence of the night of the senses and can act accordingly. But for greater certitude, we shall investigate the matter further in order to verify with certainty whether the aridity that the soul experiences in this state is due to the night of the senses or to one of the other causes.

If it is an effect of lukewarmness, it can be known very easily because this distaste for the things

of God will be accompanied by a strong inclination for recreation and worldly diversion, together with a dissipation of soul that sometimes runs the risk of mortal sin and commits venial sin without any resistance. The remedy for this is to repent sincerely and to return again with new fervor to the road of the spiritual life.

If it is a question of mental infirmity or nervous imbalance, it is not difficult to distinguish it from the aridity of the night of the senses.

To distinguish neurasthenia from the passive purification, we should note that the most frequent symptoms in neurasthenics are the following: almost continual fatigue, even when they have not worked, accompanied by a feeling of prostration, of discouragement; habitual headaches... ; insomnia, to the extent that the neurasthenic wakes up more tired than when he went to bed; difficulty in exercising the intellectual faculties and in maintaining attention; impressionability (intense emotions for very slight causes), which leads the sufferer to believe that he has illnesses that he does not really have; excessive self-analysis even to minute details. and continual preoccupation not to become ill.

Neurasthenics are, however, not imaginary invalids; the powerlessness they experience is real, and it would be very imprudent to urge them to disregard their fatigue and work to the limit of their strength. What they lack is not will but power.

We should also note that psychoneuroses may be associated with a developed intellectual life and a lofty moral life .... But we see also that the passive night is distinguished from this state of nervous fatigue by the second sign (the soul ordinarily keeps the memory of God with solicitude and painful anxiety for fear it may be falling back), and by the third sign (the quasi-impossibility to meditate, but the ability to keep a simple and loving gaze on God, the beginning of infused contemplation). The ardent desire for God and for perfection, which is manifested by these signs, distinguishes notably this passive purification from neurasthenia, which may sometimes coexist with it.[\(15\)](#)

If it is a question of diabolical temptation or disturbance, which God permits sometimes as a means of purifying a soul, it will be known from the fact that the aridity is accompanied by strong, sinful suggestions of an unusual tenacity, together with an instinctive horror of the soul toward such suggestions. The devil tries to disturb the peace and tranquillity of the soul and to withdraw it from the practice of prayer. The soul will conquer the devil by insisting, in spite of its repugnance, on its exercises of piety, and by using the other methods for conquering the devil that we indicated when discussing diabolical temptation (see Chapter 7).

Sometimes one or another of these states may coincide with the night of the senses, and especially the second or third. In this case, a careful and penetrating analysis is required in order to discern what pertains to one or another cause and to correct it with the proper remedies. Sometimes also there will be concomitant trials of various kinds. On the part of the devil there are terrible temptations against faith, hope, and charity; strong suggestions against purity accompanied by phantasms in the imagination; a spirit of blasphemy so violent and strong that at times one is almost forced to pronounce the words, and this is grave torment to the soul, as St. John of the Cross states; obscurities that fill the soul with a thousand scruples and perplexities, and other similar afflictions.

Again there may be persecutions and ridicule, sometimes from the good people, which is one of the greatest tribulations one is forced to suffer; or one's own superior or friends or spiritual director may torment the soul by judging its state to be one of lukewarmness or by not being able to discover the proper remedies to alleviate its condition. Lastly, there may be infirmities, misfortunes, the loss of one's good name or friends or possessions. It would seem at times that heaven and earth have conspired against the soul, but God is permitting all these things in -- order to detach it completely from the things of earth, to remind it that it can do nothing without him, and how much it needs his divine mercy and assistance.

Not all souls suffer the night of the senses to the same degree. It depends on the grade of perfection to which God intends to elevate the soul, the greater or fewer number of imperfections from which the soul must be purified, the forces and energies of the soul itself, and its docility and patience in supporting this painful trial. There are always degrees of more or less in these purifications, but God always gives his grace and strength in the measure needed by the soul.

During the dark night of the senses, the soul should observe the following forms of conduct:

1. Complete and loving submission to the will of God, accepting with patience and resignation the painful trial for as long a time as God decrees. The soul should not consider this purgative state as something evil but see in it a means of fortifying itself and of making progress in the spiritual life. This is the advice given by St. John of the Cross in Chapter 10, Book I of *The Dark Night*.

2. Perseverance in prayer in spite of all difficulty, in imitation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, who even in his agony prayed with greater intensity (Luke 22:43). Prayer in the midst of these terrible aridities is a veritable torment for the soul, and only by means of force exerted upon oneself can the soul persevere in it; but it is necessary that the soul should do so, asking God for strength, if it does not wish to fall back and lose everything. This is the point at which many souls turn back. Tormented by those agonies of the dark night, they abandon the life of prayer when they were on the point of receiving the grace to make giant strides along the road to sanctity. But it is necessary that the soul know that it is being led into a new type of prayer, and it would be a great imprudence to try to use the former method of prayer.

3. The soul should remain in peace and quiet, content simply with a loving gaze on God, without any particular consideration and without any desire for delight or sensation. The reason is that the soul is receiving infused contemplation, which has nothing to do with the methods of ascetical prayer.

St. John of the Cross explains:

And although further scruples may come to them -- that they are wasting their time and that it would be well for them to do something else, because they can neither do nor think anything in prayer -- let them suffer these scruples and remain in peace .... If such a soul should desire to make any effort of its own with its interior faculties, it will hinder and lose the blessings which ... God is instilling into it and impressing upon it....

For these reasons such a soul should pay no heed if the operations of its faculties become lost to it; it should rather desire that this happen quickly. For by not hindering the operation of infused contemplation which God is bestowing upon it, it can receive this with more peaceful abundance



and cause its spirit to be enkindled and burn with the love which this dark and secret contemplation brings with it and sets firmly in the soul. For contemplation is naught else than a secret, peaceful, and loving infusion from God which, if it be permitted, enkindles the soul with the spirit of love.[\(16\)](#)

The soul would actually be going back if it were at this time. to return to the discursive use of its faculties. And yet the soul should remember that in the beginning it will not perceive any special attraction of the Holy Spirit to remain quiet and tranquil. In this case, as St. John of the Cross advises, it ought to practice meditation in the `usual manner in order tot to remain without the one or the other. But as soon as the soul encounters difficulty in the operations of the faculties and perceives a strong desire to remain in loving attention to God by means of a simple gaze and without any particular consideration, it should then let itself be led by this impulse of grace.

4. Docility to a prudent and experienced director. At no other time is the advice of a prudent spiritual director so necessary as in this crisis.

However, the soul should therefore understand that, if it wants to make progress in perfection, it must be careful into whose hands it places itself, because as the master is, so also shall be the disciple. And if it does not have a spiritual director or does not have as excellent a one as would be desirable, God will supply in other ways so long as the soul remains humble and seeks only the will of God in all I things.

St. John of the Cross enumerates the great benefits produced in the soul by the night of the senses. The following is a summary of his teaching, taken from *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chapters 12 and 13.

Knowledge of one's self and one's misery on finding oneself so full of obscurity and weakness.

Greater respect and courtesy toward God than one had when one enjoyed sensible consolation.

More vivid light concerning the grandeur and excellence of God.

Profound humility upon seeing oneself so wretched.

Love of neighbor.

Submission and obedience.

Purification of avarice, lust, and spiritual gluttony, and purification of anger, envy, and sloth.

Recollection in God with a fear of falling back.

Exercise of the virtues.

Liberty of spirit in which one enjoys the fruits of the Holy Ghost.

Victory against the three enemies of the soul; the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The duration of these painful trials of the night of the senses will vary in different cases. St. John

of the Cross remarks that it depends upon the degree of love to which God wishes to raise the soul and the greater or lesser dross of imperfections from which the soul must be purified. God does not purify weak souls with such intensity and profundity as he does the stronger; there are alternate periods of light and obscurity so that weak souls will not become discouraged and fall back.

Some souls pass through the night of the senses without being able to know definitely and clearly when the night began and when it ended. The director must take into account this possibility so that he will not be deceived concerning the true state of the soul. But when God wishes to raise a soul to a very high degree of perfection, he is wont to subject it for a long time and with great intensity to these painful purifications of the senses.

Spiritual directors and theologians of the spiritual life may reasonably ask when one can expect the night of the senses to occur in the soul's progress to perfection. There is no agreement on the precise point at which the soul enters the dark night of the senses. However, St. John of the Cross seems to teach that one should expect the passive purgation of the senses to start while the soul is still practicing acquired mental prayer, and to serve as a transition to the full illuminative stage. This means that mystical activity has its beginnings in the illuminative stage. When the soul begins to experience infused contemplative prayer, it will, if it follows faithfully the movements of the Holy Spirit, soon enter fully into the night of the senses. St. John of the Cross expresses it as follows:

Into this dark night souls begin to enter when God draws them forth from the state of beginners, which is the state of those that meditate on the spiritual road, and begins to set them in the state of progressives, which is that of those who are already contemplatives, to the end that, after passing through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect, which is that of the divine union of the soul with God.[\(17\)](#)

When this house of sensuality was now at rest, that is, was mortified, its passion being quenched and its desire put to rest and lulled to sleep by means of this blessed night of purgation of sense, the soul went forth, to set out upon the road and way of the spirit, which is that of progressives and proficientes, and which, by another name, is called the way of illumination or of infused contemplation, wherein God himself feeds and refreshes the soul, without meditation or the soul's active help.[\(18\)](#)

Therefore, according to St. John of the Cross, the passive night of the senses marks the transition from the purgative way to the illuminative way, from the ascetical phase to the mystical phase, from those who meditate in the spiritual life to those who begin to be enlightened by the splendors of infused contemplation.

### *Night of the Spirit*

The night of the spirit is constituted by a series of passive purgations that are extremely painful and have for their object the completion of the purification that was begun but not completed by the night of the senses. By means of the terrifying trials of this second night, the defects of the soul are uprooted at their very source, something that could not be accomplished by the purification of the senses. St. John of the Cross says:

The night which we have called that of sense may and should be called a kind of correction and

restraint of desire rather than purgation. The reason is that all the imperfections and disorders of the sensual parts have their strength and root in the spirit, where all habits, both good and bad, are brought into subjection, and thus, until these are purged, the rebellions and depravities of sense cannot be purged thoroughly.[\(19\)](#)

The causes of the night of the spirit are the same as those of the night of the senses, namely, infused contemplation and the imperfection of the soul, although in a higher degree of intensity as regards the contemplative light. The excess of this light torments and blinds the soul at the same time that it manifests to the soul its smallest and most insignificant imperfection. The contrast between the ineffable grandeur of God as seen through the splendor of contemplation and the dross of imperfections and miseries that the soul discovers in itself makes the soul feel that an intimate union between such great light and such great darkness is impossible and that the soul is condemned to live eternally separated from God. This situation, which seems most evident and beyond remedy, submerges the soul into a state of anguish and torture so terrifying that it surpasses the torments of purgatory, in which the souls have the assurance of eternal salvation.

The principal source of suffering in this night is an apparent abandonment by God. The soul is deprived of all delight and satisfaction in relations with God. It is closed in upon itself, faced with its own misery and lowliness; God appears as a ruthless and avenging judge. The soul desires more than ever to serve God but feels that it can in no way be acceptable to God. Although actually in a high state of perfection, it feels desolate rather than favored by God. It would welcome death as a release from its torture.

But the soul that passes through this night comes forth from this trial resplendent and beautiful, completely transformed in God, and free forever from its weaknesses, imperfections, and miseries. Having been completely purified of them by the terrible mystical purgatory it has suffered, it scales the heights of sanctity, is confirmed in grace, and awaits only death to break the bonds that still hold it in this world in order to penetrate the eternal splendors of the beatific vision:

Is the night of the spirit necessary in order to reach Christian perfection? In order to attain the relative perfection that corresponds to the souls that have passed through the fifth and are entering upon the sixth mansions described by St. Teresa (contemplative prayer of quiet and of union), the dark night of the spirit is not necessary. God can supply and has, in fact, supplied for the purifications of the night of the spirit by means of other intermittent trials, alternating light with darkness, until he raises the soul to the degree of purity and perfection to which he has predestined it.

But in order for anyone to reach the seventh mansions of transforming union and to scale the very heights of sanctity, the night of the spirit is indispensable. St. John of the Cross states this many times, and it must be so by the very nature of things. The soul cannot be united with God in the transforming union until it has been totally purified of all its weakness and misery. And this is the proper effect of the night of the spirit.

It should be evident that there cannot be any fixed rule concerning the night of the spirit because circumstances are too variable. But these painful purifications usually last for a long period of time, sometimes for years, before the soul is admitted to the transforming union or mystical

marriage. From time to time, God is wont to lift his hand and let the soul breathe, but if it is a question of the true night of the spirit, these periods of relaxation are very brief. The soul immediately returns to the terrible pains and torture until the trial is finished by its entrance into the last classified degree of perfection, which is the transforming union.

The passive purgations of the spirit, when they are intermittent, extend throughout the illuminative and the unitive way, but when it is a question of the true night of the spirit, they occur between the sixth and seventh mansions described by St. Teresa, that is to say, when the soul is already far advanced in the unitive way and prior to its entrance into the transforming union for which the night is a preparation.

Anyone who reads St. John of the Cross can see that, when he says that God places the soul in this terrible night to lead it to divine union, he is not referring to the unitive way taken in its entirety, but to the transforming union, which is the final union to which the soul attains. Otherwise, it would be necessary to exclude from the unitive way the marvelous phenomena of the ecstatic union, which do not appear in the transforming union, and which, nevertheless, pertain to the unitive way according to the traditional teaching.

The attempt to fit the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of the spiritual life into the fourfold active and passive nights of the senses and the spirit may appear rather tedious and strained to contemporary theologians. It is better, perhaps, to stress the continuous development, differentiated only by a greater or lesser intensity.

Father John Arinterro has described the dark night of the spirit in great detail, and he places it at the height of the unitive way, prior to the transforming union. We quote a small part of his description as a fitting conclusion to our study of the active and passive purgations.

That this union may be changed from the conforming union to the transforming union, God himself must work in the soul in a manner that is hidden, mysterious, and painful. He rids the soul of all sensible delights which it experienced in the former union wherein the delight of the spirit redounded to the senses. God seems to hide himself now, but actually he is much more intimately united to the soul. The soul is amazed at the change it now experiences. It believes itself to be abandoned, yet it finds that it is improved in every way. The change is most profitable, but the soul is unable to understand how this can be so ....

In the formidable spiritual darkness wherein the soul is buried in its mystical cocoon and is incapacitated for working by itself or for possessing any initiative at all, it believes itself to be imprisoned or buried in hell itself. Nevertheless it is gradually undergoing the mysterious change from the conforming to the transforming union although the soul itself is scarcely aware of it ....

Thus is verified the obscure and prolonged interior activity which renews souls and disposes them for the mystical espousal. Later it leads them gradually to the total transformation which is required for the mystical marriage.[\(20\)](#)

## CHAPTER NOTES

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957),

- Book III, Chap. 24.
- Ibid.*, Book I, Chap. 6.
- Ibid.*, Book III, Chap. 24.
- Abbé Maynard, *Vertus et doctrine spirituelle de S. Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Tequi, 1924), Chap. 23.
- The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chaps. 8-9.
- Ibid.*, Book I, Chaps. 4-8.
- The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 13.
- Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 77, a. 4.
- St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Demetrius Zema (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), Book XIV, Chap. 28.
- The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 7.
- Ibid.*, Chaps. 2-7.
- Ibid.*, Chap. 8.
- Ibid.*, Chap. 9.
- Ibid.*, loc. cit.
- Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Vol. II, pp. 52-3, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947-48).
- The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 10.
- Ibid.*, Chap. 1.
- Ibid.*, Chap. 14.
- Ibid.*, Book II, Chap. 3.
- John G. Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949) Vol. 2, pp. 175-79.

## 9

### Means of Spiritual Growth

The spiritual life, which consists fundamentally in sanctifying grace made operative by the virtue of charity and the other virtues imperated by charity, is a positive, dynamic reality; But the life of grace and charity is received into a human nature wounded by original sin and strongly inclined to self-centered love and the works of the flesh. Therefore, St. Thomas states that "at first it is incumbent on man to occupy himself chiefly with avoiding sin and resisting his concupiscences,

which move him in opposition to charity."[\(1\)](#)

But purgation and mortification are not ends in themselves; they are simply the means of removing the obstacles to the growth of grace and charity. They comprise what St. Paul describes as putting off the old man of Adam and sin, and putting on the new man, Jesus Christ, who is the perfect man. But to put on Christ and to grow in his likeness require the use of positive means by which grace and charity can reach their full expansion and intensity. These positive means can be divided into the three principal ones that are necessary for all Christians -- the sacraments, meritorious good works, and the prayer of petition -- and certain secondary aids to growth in holiness.

It should be noted at the outset that there is a marked difference in the efficacy of the three principal means by which grace and charity are increased. The sacraments are the most efficacious, for they produce their effects *ex opere operato*, that is, they infallibly produce grace in those who receive the sacraments with the proper dispositions. The other two means -- meritorious good works and the prayer of petition -- produce their effects *ex opere operantis*, that is, their efficacy depends on the dispositions of the human agent, working under the impetus of grace and relying on God's benevolent love.

If we were to arrange these three means in the order of their efficacy, we would list first the sacraments, then meritorious good works, and finally the prayer of petition. Without in any way disdaining good works and the prayer of petition, we recall the words of the Fathers of Vatican Council II: "It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the sacramental signs, and should eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life."[\(2\)](#)

## **The Sacraments**

Traditionally the sacraments have been described as sensible signs instituted by Christ to bestow grace on those who receive them. As the Word made flesh, and therefore a visible sign of the Father's love for us, and as the Mediator and the Source of the life of grace, Jesus Christ is the first and greatest sacrament. Christian spirituality is a sharing in the mystery of Christ, indeed, in the life that is Christ; the sacraments are instruments of the divine power of Christ, effecting grace in the recipient through the merits of his passion and death.

The sacraments are signs or symbols that actually effect what they signify, and what they signify constitutes the reality of the life of grace. The sign alone, such as the pouring of water, anointing with oil, or sharing in bread and wine, could mean many things, but when these signs are true sacraments, they have a meaning, a relationship to a reality that was specified by Christ himself.

The sign or action passes, but the reality of the effect, the grace received through the merits of Christ, remains. The sacraments, like the deeds of Christ, retain their sanctifying power for all time. Thus, the Council of Trent solemnly affirmed that the sacraments of the New Law confer, grace *ex opere operato*, that is, by their own intrinsic power, so long as the recipient places no obstacle to the reception of grace.[\(3\)](#)

In view of the foregoing, we can also describe the sacraments as actions of Christ in and through the Church for the bestowal of grace on those who accept him in faith. We emphasize the phrase "in and through the Church" because Vatican Council II did not hesitate to say that "the Church,

in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament -- a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men."(4) It is in the Church, the mystical body of Christ, that "the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his passion and glorification."(5)

This statement has several important pastoral implications: (1) In her sacramental actions the Church does and wills what Christ does and wills, because the Church as holy is united with Christ, and because he gave the Church authority over the administration of the sacraments. (2) All apostolate and ministry, even the lofty mission of preaching the Gospel, should lead people to the sacraments, which are, within the framework of the liturgy, "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper."(6) (3) The Church as sacrament, and as commissioned by Christ to bring all peoples to him through the sacraments, serves as a basis for determining the essence and goal of priestly ministry.

On the part of the recipient, an understanding of the sacraments as points of contact with Christ can do much to dispel the notion that the sacramental signs and gestures are some kind of magic formula that works automatically. It may likewise help Christians to avoid a routine and monotonous reception of the sacraments, especially regrettable in the reception of the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance.

In theological terms we would say that the sacramental effect *ex opere operato* must be conjoined to the effect *ex opere operantis*. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the degree of grace received in the worthy reception of a sacrament will depend ultimately on the intensity and perfection of one's disposition,(7) and since the moment for receiving grace is the . moment of sacramental contact with Christ through the Church, one should strive to approach the sacraments with the greatest possible faith, devotion, and love.

Since the sacraments are specific ways of participating in the mystery of Christ, the grace given through the sacraments should correspond to specific needs in the Christian life, and this should be signified by the matter and form of the sacrament. St. Thomas demonstrates that the grace flowing from each sacrament is a special grace proper to the sacrament in question, and that each sacrament corresponds to a particular need of the Christian as an individual or as a member of the Christian community.

The life of the spirit has a certain similarity to the life of the body, just as other corporeal things have a certain likeness to spiritual things. Now man is perfected in his bodily life in two ways: first, with respect to his own person; secondly, with respect to the whole social community in which he lives. With regard to his private self, man is perfected both directly, by acquiring some vital perfection, and indirectly, by removing sicknesses and the like, which are hindrances to his bodily life.

There are three ways by which the life of the body is directly perfected:

First, by generation, by which a man begins to exist and to live. Corresponding to this in the life of the spirit is *baptism*, which, according to the Epistle to Titus (3:5), is a spiritual

regeneration.

Secondly, by growth, by which one is brought to full size and strength. Corresponding to this in the life of the spirit is *confirmation*, the sacrament in which the Holy Spirit is given to strengthen men. Because of this the disciples already baptized were told: "Wait here in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

Thirdly, by nourishment, which conserves a man's life and strength. The *Eucharist* corresponds to this in the life of the spirit. Thus Christ said: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you" (John 6:54).

If man's life, both bodily and spiritual, were inaccessible to harm, this would suffice. But since man at times suffers infirmity, both bodily infirmity and the spiritual infirmity which is sin, he needs a cure for his malady, and this is twofold:

One is the healing which restores health. And corresponding to this in the life of the spirit is *penance*, as Psalm 40:5 points out: "Heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee."

The other cure is the restoration of former vigor by suitable exercise and diet. In the spiritual life the *anointing* corresponds to this, for it removes the remains of sin and prepares a man for his final glory. Hence in the Epistle of St. James (5:15) it is said: "If he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him."

With respect to the whole community, man is perfected in two ways:

First, by receiving the power to govern the community and to exercise public office. In the life of the spirit the sacrament of *holy orders* corresponds to this. As the Epistle to the Hebrews (7:27) points out, priests offer sacrifice not for themselves alone but for the people.

Secondly, by natural propagation. Both in the corporeal and in the spiritual order this is accomplished by *matrimony*, which is not only a sacrament but also a function of nature.[\(8\)](#)

Since our concern is primarily with the sacraments as positive means of personal growth in holiness, it is under this aspect that we shall now discuss each sacrament in particular.

### *Baptism*

Baptism, the first sacrament instituted by Christ, constitutes a new birth into the life of grace, as Jesus declared in his statement to Nicodemus: "I solemnly assure you, no one can enter into God's kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit. Flesh begets flesh, Spirit begets spirit" (John 3:5-6). Baptism is *par excellence* the sacrament of faith, as is evident from the fact that Jesus commissioned the apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations and to "baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

According to St. Paul, baptism is a dying in Christ and a resurrection in Christ to a new life (Rom. 6:3-11), signifying first of all the intimate union of the baptized with Christ's paschal mystery and secondly that, as a result of baptism, the Christian must be "dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11). Finally, baptism signifies the incorporation of the Christian



into Christ and his admission into the community of the people of God as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ (cf. Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Several points are worth noting in regard to the significance of baptism for one's growth in holiness. First, baptism is a commitment to a way of life and, as is evident in the baptism of adult converts, it means a conversion from the past to one's future as a member of Christ and of the people of God. Secondly, given our proneness to self-love and creature attachments, baptismal promises should be renewed, as is done in the liturgy for the Easter Vigil Mass. Baptism can be received only once, and it imprints a lasting spiritual character on the soul, but to remain faithful to the Christian way of life in the face of temptations requires a constant renewal of commitment.

Lastly, baptism bestows on the recipient the life of sanctifying grace, the infused theological and moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus, from the beginning the baptized Christian has all the supernatural powers that are needed to grow to the fullness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity. Rightly, then, did the Fathers of Vatican Council II state:

The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God.[\(9\)](#)

### *Confirmation*

Traditionally, the sacraments of baptism and confirmation have been considered the sacraments of initiation, although confirmation is also the development and further ratification of the effects of baptism. As in domestic life, so also in the Church and in the spiritual life, there is an extended period of infancy and childhood, during which the baptized Christian is protected, provided for, and educated in the faith; but on reaching sufficient maturity, the Christian must step forth as a responsible person in the Christian community and give witness to his or her faith by a virtuous life. It is at this phase of development that the young adult receives the Holy Spirit, is marked with the seal or character of the sacrament, and is "more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith both by word and by deed as a true witness of Christ."[\(10\)](#)

It is an article of faith that confirmation is a sacrament of the New Law, that it confers an indelible character on the soul, but it is not strictly necessary for salvation.[\(11\)](#) The sacrament of confirmation stems from the promise of Christ to send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16) who will bear witness to Christ and will enable those who receive the Spirit to bear witness also (John 15:26). In Acts 8:15 ff., there is clear testimony that St. Peter and St. John imposed hands on some Samaritans who had been baptized previously, but in the primitive Church the sacrament of confirmation was considered a part of the rite of baptism, a practice still prevalent in the Eastern Church.

The soul receives at baptism the entire supernatural organism of the spiritual life, including the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but at confirmation the mission of the Holy Spirit is like a personal Pentecost wherein the soul receives the grace of fortitude to witness to the faith, to stand firm in the faith, and to defend the faith. Thus, Christ told the apostles just before his ascension to heaven: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth"

(Acts 1:8). Consequently, the sacrament of confirmation is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit, in the sense that it involves a special mission of the Holy Spirit to the soul in grace, bestowing the particular grace or power proper to the sacrament as well as the permanent character.

In recent years great emphasis has been placed on the sacrament of confirmation as the sacrament of Catholic Action and the basis of the priesthood of the laity. Pope Pius XII was a great promoter of Catholic Action, for he was convinced that the Church needs witnesses even more than apologists. In a letter to the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon (1933) he stated:

In reality, it is the sacraments of baptism and confirmation themselves which impose, among other obligations, that of the apostolate; that is to say, the obligation of giving spiritual help to one's neighbor. It is true that by confirmation one becomes a soldier of Christ, and everybody recognizes that a soldier must bear fatigue and battle for others rather than himself. But, in a way that is much more hidden from the eyes of the uninstructed, baptism too imposes the duty of the apostolate, since by it we become members of the Church, that is to say, of the Mystical Body .... One member should aid the other; none can remain inactive; each should contribute in his own turn.

The apostolate, therefore, whether considered as the spiritual and corporal works of mercy or as evangelization, is the obligation of every baptized Christian, according to one's state of life, capabilities, and opportunities for apostolic action. This is evident once we grasp the notion that *apostolate* comprises any work or deed by which we bring God to souls and souls to God. Since all moral activity is specified by its end or goal, authentically apostolic works must always be orientated, directly or indirectly, to the spiritual order, that is, the extension of God's kingdom, the salvation of souls, and the attainment of the perfection of the Christian life. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have made some clear and challenging statements on apostolic activity:

The Church was founded to spread the kingdom of Christ over all the earth for the glory of God the Father, to make all men partakers in redemption and salvation, and through them to establish the right relationship of the entire world to Christ. Every activity of the Mystical Body with this in view goes by the name of "apostolate"; the Church exercises it through all its members, though in various ways. In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation "to the apostolate as well."[\(12\)](#)

The work of Christ's redemption concerns essentially the salvation of men; it takes in also, however, the renewal of the whole temporal order. The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal ....

The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ. The principal means of bringing this about is the ministry of the word and of the sacraments. Committed in a special way to the clergy, it leaves room however for a highly important part for the laity, the part namely of "helping the cause of truth" (3 John 8). It is in this sphere most of all that the lay apostolate and the pastoral ministry complete each other.

Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life and the good works done in a supernatural spirit are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God .... The witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them to the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life ....

That men, working in harmony, should renew the temporal order and make it increasingly more perfect: such is God's design for the world ....

Pastors have the duty to set forth clearly the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use to be made of the world, and to provide moral and spiritual helps for the renewal of the temporal order in Christ. Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, prompted by Christian love, they should act in this domain in a direct way and in their own specific manner.[\(13\)](#)

The priesthood of the laity is also rooted in baptism and reaffirmed in confirmation, and the Fathers of Vatican II insisted that since all Christians are members of the Mystical Body of Christ, "all the faithful are made a holy and kingly priesthood."[\(14\)](#) Nevertheless, the lay priesthood and the ministerial priesthood "differ essentially and not only in degree," though they complement each other and "each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ."[\(15\)](#)

Although there are various opinions concerning the nature of the priesthood of the laity, it would seem that the cultic or sacrificial aspect of the lay priesthood consists in the offering of themselves and their actions -- spiritual sacrifices -- to God through Jesus Christ. This is indicated in the statement of St. Paul: "And now, brothers, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). But the "ministry" of the lay priesthood, wherein it cooperates closely with the ministerial priesthood, is in the area of apostolic action and doctrinal evangelization. This would seem to be the teaching of the Fathers of Vatican Council II, who connect the priesthood of the laity with the apostolate:

The laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ; they have, therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole people of God. In the concrete, their apostolate is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of men; it is exercised too when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order, going about it in a way that bears clear witness to Christ and helps forward the salvation of men. The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, laymen are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world.[\(16\)](#)

### *The Eucharist*

The Eucharist may be considered under two aspects: as sacrament and as sacrifice. The Eucharist as *sacrifice* is the Mass, and the Mass is substantially the same sacrifice as that of Calvary: the

same victim, the same oblation, the same priest. Such is the teaching of the Council of Trent:

In the divine sacrifice that is offered in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross is present and is offered in an unbloody manner .... For it is one and the same victim: he who now makes the offering through the ministry of priests and he who then offered himself on the Cross; the only difference is in the manner of offering. The benefits of this oblation are received in abundance through this unbloody oblation.[\(17\)](#)

The event that reveals the true meaning of the Last Supper and the Eucharist that was instituted there is the Sacrifice of the Cross, which changed the Passover from a memorial meal to a true sacrifice. Thus, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

In 1967 the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued an instruction concerning the Eucharist,[\(18\)](#) and it contains numerous statements that are of help in understanding the nature and purpose of the Eucharist. It begins by stating that "the mystery of the Eucharist is the true center for the sacred liturgy and indeed of the whole Christian life." Then, touching upon the doctrinal principles that have been further developed in recent years, the instruction emphasizes the following conclusions: (1) the Mass is a sacrifice in which the sacrifice of the Cross, is perpetuated; it is a memorial of the death and Resurrection of the Lord; it is a sacred banquet in which the people of God share the benefits of the Paschal Sacrifice; (2) in the Mass, therefore, sacrifice and sacred meal are linked together by the closest bond, so much so that the Mass may be described as a "sacrificial meal"; the Lord entrusted this sacrifice to the Church so that the faithful might share in it spiritually (through faith and charity) and sacramentally, through the reception of Communion; (3) the eucharistic sacrifice is the source and the summit of the Church's worship and of the Christian life; (4) the faithful participate more fully in this sacrament of thanksgiving, propitiation, petition, and praise not only when they offer the victim and themselves to the Father, but when they receive this victim in Communion; (5) the mystery of the Eucharist consists in its fullness not only in the celebration of Mass but in devotion to the sacred species reserved on the altar. From these basic statements the instruction then proceeds to lay down specific regulations concerning the Eucharist, but since they pertain to the pastoral and liturgical aspects, of Mass and Eucharist, it is not necessary for us to discuss them. Rather, we shall make some observations on the four purposes and effects of the Mass.

Since the Mass is substantially the same sacrifice as that of Christ on the Cross, it has the same purposes and produces the same effects. The first is *adoration*, and this effect is always produced *ex opere operato* because of the infinite dignity of the principal priest, who is Christ, and because of the infinite worth of the victim of sacrifice, who is also Christ. There is no greater way of giving honor and glory to God than by offering to him his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. This fact alone should call forth the greatest possible reverence and devotion of the priest who celebrates the Mass and the faithful who participate in it.

After adoration, there is no obligation more pressing than that of *reparation* for sin. In this sense the value of the Mass is unsurpassed in making atonement for our own sins and the sins of others, since in this eucharistic sacrifice we offer to the heavenly Father the redemptive action of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But the reparatory effects of the Mass are applied to us only in accordance with our dispositions. Hence, we can receive from the Mass, unless we place an obstacle to it, the actual grace to repent of our sins; indeed there is no more efficacious means for obtaining the conversion of sinners. Secondly, the Mass will remit, if there is no obstacle, at least part of the temporal punishment due to sin. From this stems the great value of the Mass as a suffrage for the souls in purgatory, who can do nothing to help themselves since they are beyond the stage of meriting. Confessors should also consider imposing on their penitents the sacramental penance of having a Mass offered in reparation for their sins.

As children of the heavenly Father, we should go to him with our petitions. But in the Mass, Jesus is always making intercession for us (Heb. 7:25), supporting our *petitions* by his infinite merits. Without disdaining other spiritual exercises and devotions, which produce their effects *ex opere operantis*, pastors and preachers should educate the faithful concerning the incomparable impetratory power of the Mass. Of all the forms of liturgical prayer, that of petition is the most frequent, and when our petitions are joined to the prayers of the Church and the worshipping community at Mass, blending with the intercessory prayer of Christ our Priest and Redeemer, how can the heavenly Father fail to grant our lawful requests?

The fourth value or function of the Mass is *thanksgiving*. We owe a debt of thanks to God that can never be adequately repaid, but just as we needed the Son of God to atone for our sins and intercede for us, so we can call upon this same Mediator to return thanks to the Father. If, in offering a Mass for a particular intention, we have called upon Christ to plead for us with the Father, we should feel obliged by a sense of gratitude to offer another Mass in thanksgiving through the same Christ our Lord. Together with adoration, thanksgiving constitutes a foretaste of glory, where all the blessed for all eternity are occupied with praise and thanksgiving to the Trinity.

In speaking of the Eucharist as *sacrament*, Vatican Council II states:

Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister,... but especially in the eucharistic species .... The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper.[\(19\)](#)

The faithful achieve a more perfect participation in the Mass when, with proper dispositions, they receive the body of the Lord sacramentally in the Mass itself, in obedience to his words, "take and eat."[\(20\)](#)

For the faithful and the celebrant, therefore, the culmination of the Mass is reception of Holy Communion. It is in every sense of the word an incorporation into Christ, who comes to us in this sacrament.. Through the gift of sanctifying grace, the individual Christian share's in the very nature and life of God and is thereby a dwelling-place of the three Persons of the Trinity. Worthy

Communion increases sanctifying grace in the soul of the recipient and thus produces a new mission of the Holy Spirit and greater receptivity to the, indwelling Trinity.

Some manuals of sacramental theology emphasize the distinction between sacrament and sacrifice in the Eucharist; but, various statements of the Church during and since Vatican Council II urge us to reunite these two aspects and to see the Mass, and Communion as a sacrificial meal. The words of consecration are words, that bespeak a sacrifice -- a body that is broken and blood that, is shed -- and the consuming of the victim as food for the spiritual nourishment of Christians is also a sacrificial act. In the reception of Communion the priesthood of the laity is admitted to its highest cultic or liturgical act. It should be evident from the foregoing that the Christian life is eminently eucharistic: incorporation in Christ who comes to us under the sacramental species.

For the worthy reception of Communion, it is necessary, as remote dispositions, that one be in the state of grace and have the right intention. The first is necessary because the Eucharist is a sacrament of the living; the second is required because the worthy reception of any sacrament demands sufficient knowledge and proper intention .[\(21\)](#)

But since the grace received from Communion depends ultimately on the dispositions of the recipient, it is also necessary to make a *proximate* preparation for receiving the Eucharist. The first requisite is *faith*, and for this reason, after the consecration of the sacred species, the celebrant of the Mass invites the congregation in the words: "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." St. Thomas points out that on the Cross the divinity of Christ was hidden, but on the altar and in the Eucharist even his sacred humanity is veiled from our eyes. It is truly a sacrament of faith.

Secondly, one should approach the Eucharist with *profound reverence and deep humility*. Therefore, just before receiving Communion, we say: "Lord, I am not worthy." If the Virgin Mary proclaimed her lowliness as handmaid of the Lord before receiving into her womb the Word made flesh, and if she again confessed her humble state in the Magnificat, how much more should we sinners approach the immaculate Lamb with reverence and humility.

Thirdly, one should receive the eucharistic Lord with *loving confidence*, trusting in the infinite love and mercy of the eucharistic Heart of Jesus who came among us precisely to redeem and save us. As our Good Shepherd he will welcome us with joy and take us in his arms to shield us from danger and comfort us with his tender love.

We cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of cultivating the proper dispositions for the fruitful reception of Communion. Indeed, since the moment of grace is the moment of contact with the sacramental matter and form, preparation for Communion is much more necessary and more important than thanksgiving after Communion. However, since Christ is present as long as the sacramental species remain, it would be irreverent not to spend at least that time in prayerful thanksgiving and recollection. What better opportunity is offered us for presenting our numerous petitions to the good Jesus as when he is tabernacled within us? Since the Church has legislated that we should normally receive Communion within the Mass and has also stipulated that there be a period of silent prayer after Communion, priests should be considerate in allowing this time of thanksgiving to the congregation before ending the Mass.

Although in modern times the ease and frequency for receiving sacramental Communion have resulted in less emphasis on the practice of spiritual Communion, it is nevertheless a praiseworthy devotion. The Council of Trent had stated that there are three ways of receiving the Eucharist: sacramentally only, spiritually only, and both sacramentally and spiritually.<sup>(22)</sup> The first case would apply to sinners who receive Communion, lacking grace and charity; the second case applies to those who with a living faith that works through charity express a fervent desire to receive the Eucharist; lastly, they receive the Eucharist both sacramentally and spiritually who receive Communion with the proper dispositions of faith, charity, and devotion. All worthy Communions are spiritual, and even when the Communion is spiritual but not sacramental, it receives its value from its orientation to sacramental Communion. The effects of spiritual Communion depend on the intensity of one's faith and the fervor of one's love for the Blessed Sacrament (*ex opere operantis*), and it is an excellent way of uniting oneself with the eucharistic Lord and with the Masses being offered throughout the world to the glory and praise of the Father.

### *Penance*

The sacrament of penance has been called a "second baptism," but a difficult and sometimes painful one because of the need to acknowledge one's sin, do penance, and amend one's life. Christ gave his apostles, and through them their successors, the power to forgive sins. Thus, the Council of Trent affirmed that Christ instituted the sacrament of penance particularly at the time when, after rising from the dead, he breathed upon his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit; for those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

In instituting the sacrament of penance, Christ did not specify in particular the integral parts of the sacrament or the formula of absolution. This is determined by the Church, although the Council of Trent specified that contrition, confession, and satisfaction are, by divine institution (*ex Dei institutione*), necessary for the full and perfect remission of sins.<sup>(23)</sup> Moreover, the same Council declared that the priest must make a judgment concerning the sins committed, which he cannot do unless he knows the sins; therefore the integral confession of one's sins was also instituted by Christ, and the Council refers to James 5:16; 1 John 1:9; and Luke 5:14; 17:14.

The sacrament of penance has both a personal and a communal aspect. So far as it relates to the individual penitent, it calls for conversion from sin (*metanoia*) and the resolve to amend one's life; as regards the Christian community, it signifies that the sinner, now forgiven, has been reconciled with the people of God. But conversion from sin and forgiveness are not granted without repentance. Consequently, the actuation of the virtue of penitence provides the necessary dispositions for worthy reception of the sacrament of penance.

The virtue of penitence or repentance includes sorrow for one's past sins as offenses against God and the resolve not to sin again. It comprises the second act required for the sacrament, namely contrition, and it also connotes conversion of life or *metanoia*. As St. Thomas says: "Penitence is not considered a special virtue only because it grieves over evil committed -- charity would suffice for this -- but because the penitent grieves over sin committed as it is an offense against God and because he has the purpose of amendment."<sup>(24)</sup>

Since the acts of contrition, confession, and satisfaction constitute the proximate matter of the

sacrament of penance, the virtue of penitence is not only a necessary disposition for worthy reception of the sacrament; it is also an essential or integral part of the sacrament itself. It will admit of varying degrees of intensity, however, and the more perfect it is, the better disposed is the recipient to receive more graces through the sacrament.

An intense and universal sorrow for sin can obtain for the soul not only forgiveness of all sins and remission of the temporal punishment due to them, but also a considerable increase in sanctifying grace, thus raising the soul to a higher degree of holiness. It is important to realize that on regaining the state of grace in the sacrament of penance, one does not receive grace in the same degree as possessed prior to mortal sin, but according to one's actual disposition in receiving the sacrament.[\(25\)](#)

As regards conversion of life, if the purpose of amendment is lacking, the confession is invalid; and theologians generally list three qualities as essential: it must be a *firm* determination here and now not to sin again; it must be *efficacious*, that is, a willingness to use the usual safeguards against sin and avoid the occasions of sin; and it must be *universal*, that is, a resolve to avoid all mortal sins: Persons who normally confess only venial sins or absolved mortal sins of the past should be especially careful to avoid routine and mechanical confession of sins without a purpose of amendment. As we have said, the lack of a firm purpose of amendment invalidates the sacrament.

In addition to having sorrow for sin and the firm purpose of amendment, the penitent should prepare for confession by an adequate examination of conscience. By Church law, "penitents must disclose in confession all the mortal sins of which they are conscious after a diligent examination of conscience, even if these sins be most hidden and committed against the last two commandments only. Moreover, even those circumstances that change the species of the sin must be mentioned in confession."[\(26\)](#)

Mortal sins already forgiven and actual venial sins are considered "free matter" for confession; that is, the penitent may renew sorrow for forgiven mortal sins and may confess only predominant or noteworthy venial sins. The reason for this is that such penitents are already in the state of grace and hence their confessions are called "confessions of devotion." Two things should be noted about the repetition of absolved mortal sins: (1) for persons who are weak in virtue the recollection may be the occasion of a temptation to sin again, particularly if it is a sin of sensuality; (2) persons who tend to be scrupulous or are easily put in a state of doubt and anxiety should not normally confess mortal sins that have been confessed and forgiven. God forgives and forgets, as Jeremiah says: "I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34).

The examination of conscience should be made with the greatest sincerity and humility, with a serene and impartial spirit, without excusing our defects and without straining scrupulously to see faults where there are none. The time given to this examination will vary with the frequency of one's confessions, the need of the soul, and the degree of perfection of the soul at any given time. An excellent means of simplifying this task is to make a daily examination of conscience and to note especially those things that must be subjected to the confessor in the tribunal of penance. If one does this daily, it will take but a few moments to make a mental review before approaching confession. Moreover, this procedure has the advantage of keeping one's faults in mind during the week and of avoiding the anxiety that would be caused by forgetting to mention



some sin at the time of confession.

But it is especially important that one should not lose oneself in a multitude of unnecessary details. It is of much more importance to be able to discover the cause of distractions in prayer than to be able to recall the exact number of times that one was distracted. Some would endeavor to do the impossible in seeking mathematical precision regarding the number of venial sins or imperfections, when it would be much more profitable for them to attack the causes of these sins directly rather than to spend so much time counting the external manifestations. This is to be understood, naturally, in regard to venial sins, because if it is a question of grave sins, it is necessary to confess the number exactly, or with the greatest possible precision.

There is no doubt that confession made with the foregoing conditions is of a great efficacy in the sanctification of the soul. The following are the effects of such a worthy confession:

1. The Blood of Christ has fallen upon the soul to purify and sanctify it. Therefore, the saints who received the most vivid light concerning the infinite value of the redeeming Blood of Jesus had a veritable hunger and thirst for receiving sacramental absolution.
2. Grace is increased in us, but in different degrees, according to the disposition of the penitent. Of one hundred persons who have received absolution from the same faults, there may not be two who have received grace in the same degree. It will depend on the intensity of their repentance and the degree of humility with which they have approached the sacrament.
3. The soul is filled with peace and consolation, a great help for making progress on the road to perfection.
4. Greater lights are received concerning the ways of God. Thus, after a worthy confession we understand more clearly the necessity of forgiving injuries, seeing how mercifully the Lord has pardoned us; or we understand with greater clarity the malice of venial sin, which is a stain that deprives the soul of some of its brilliance and beauty.
5. It increases considerably the powers of the soul by imparting the energy and the strength to conquer temptations and the fortitude to fulfill one's duties perfectly.

### *Anointing*

The Catholic Church professes and teaches that the sacred anointing of the sick is one of the seven sacraments of the New Testament, that it was instituted by Christ and that it is alluded to in Mark 6:13 and recommended and promulgated to the faithful by James the Apostle and brother of the Lord. "If any one of you is ill," he says, "he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15.) [\(27\)](#)

Since the promulgation of Pope Paul VI's *Apostolic Constitution* and the revision of the *Roman Ritual*, the sacrament may be now administered as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from illness or old age. Accordingly, Vatican Council II has stated: "Extreme unction, which may also and more fittingly be called 'anointing of the sick,' is not a sacrament for

those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the appropriate time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived."[\(28\)](#)

The reform of the sacrament of anointing reflects at once a return to the original Christian practice (there is no mention of danger of death in the Epistle of St. James) and also a more maternal concern of the Church for those who are seriously ill or incapacitated by old age.

Moreover, the sick give witness to other Christians of that which is inevitable -- death -- and of the *unum necessarium*: salvation through the merits of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. They can also sanctify their suffering and pain by uniting themselves with the crucified Christ and the Sorrowful Mother, a very helpful way to share in the mystery of Christ. Or they can offer their sufferings as atonement for their own sins and the sins of others, something all the sick would do eagerly if they could fully realize the suffering of the souls in purgatory. It is in the last sense that some authors have spoken of the sacrament of anointing as the completion of the sacrament of penance, since it has as one of its purposes to rid the soul of the remnants of sin and thus liberate the soul completely.

For the Christian, pain and suffering are sanctified and transformed by the virtue of hope which rests on faith in Christ Jesus, who said: "I tell you truly: you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve for a time, but your grief will be turned into joy" (John 16:20).

The aging have a special problem, for they may be perfectly healthy; they are not, like the sick, hoping to return to their former condition; they have reached a point of no return. Not only that, but the aged feel isolated, left out of community life and sharing. At the same time, the aged have a grace-filled opportunity to grow in wisdom and in humility based on truth and self-acceptance. Their very isolation enables them to accept the two ultimate realities of life: God and self. From this comes a self-affirmation that gives peace and a deep trust in God's loving providence. Then death is seen as the transit to the fulfillment of all that they have worked for and loved in this life. "I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us. Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:18-19).

### *Matrimony*

In discussing the last two sacraments -- matrimony and holy orders -- we are dealing with sacraments that are especially communal or social in their orientation.

The first chapters of Genesis reveal to us God's plan in the creation of man and woman and likewise the purposes of their conjugal union. It follows from this divine instruction that matrimony is the natural and normal vocation for every man and woman. There are always those who for one reason or another will choose a celibate life, but the first presumption should always be for marriage. Thus, anyone who takes a vow or makes a promise to lead a celibate life should have positive reasons for so doing; conversely, a person who enters the married state should have the qualities and dispositions necessary for conjugal life and possible parenthood.

In the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* the Fathers of Vatican Council II devoted an entire chapter to marriage and the family.

God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and with various ends in view: all of these have a very important bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of every member of the family, on the dignity, stability, peace, and prosperity of the family, and of the whole human race. By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring, and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory. Thus the man and woman, who "are no longer two but one" (Matt. 19:6), help and serve each other by their marriage partnership; they become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day. The intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable unity between them.

Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed this love, which is rich in its various features, coming as it does from the spring of divine love and modeled on Christ's own union with the Church. Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Savior, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage. He abides with them in order that by their mutual self-giving spouses will love each other with enduring fidelity, as he loved the Church and delivered himself for it. Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church, with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God and are helped and strengthened in their lofty role as fathers and mothers. Spouses, therefore, are fortified and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and dignity of their state by a special sacrament; fulfilling their conjugal and family role by virtue of this sacrament, spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope, and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God ....

Married love is an eminently human love because it is an affection between two persons rooted in the will and it embraces the good of the whole person; it can enrich the sentiments of the spirit and their physical expression with a unique dignity, and ennoble them as the special elements and signs of the friendship proper to marriage. The Lord, wishing to bestow special gifts of grace and divine love on it, has restored, perfected, and elevated it. A love like that, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual giving of self, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeates their whole lives; besides, this love is actually developed and increased by the exercise of it ....

Married love is uniquely expressed and perfected by the exercise of the acts proper to marriage. Hence the acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the selfgiving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude. Endorsed by mutual fidelity and, above all, consecrated by Christ's sacrament, this love abides faithfully in mind and body in prosperity and adversity and hence excludes both adultery and divorce. The unity of marriage, distinctly recognized by our Lord, is made clear in the equal personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection. Outstanding courage is required for the constant fulfillment of the

duties of this Christian calling; spouses, therefore, will need grace for leading a holy life: they will eagerly practice a love that is firm, generous, and prompt to sacrifice and will ask for it in their prayers.

Authentic married love will be held in high esteem, and healthy public opinion will be quick to recognize it, if Christian spouses give outstanding witness to faithfulness and harmony in their love, if they are conspicuous in their concern for the education of their children, and if they play their part in a much needed cultural, psychological, and social renewal in matters of marriage and family. It is imperative to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, above all in the heart of their own families, about the dignity of married love, its role, and its exercise; in this way they will be able to engage in honorable courtship and enter upon marriage of their own.[\(29\)](#)

### *Holy Orders*

The sacrament of holy orders confers the priesthood of Jesus Christ, either fully or in a limited degree, on those who receive it. Bishops alone, as successors of the apostles, have the fullness of Christian priesthood, and to them belongs the office of pastor and teacher over the local church committed to their care. The ministerial priesthood has evolved, historically and theologically, from the episcopacy, and priests are dependent upon the bishops for the exercise of their priestly ministry. The diaconate is the lowest and most limited grade of holy orders, and it may be conferred on those who will ultimately be advanced to the priesthood or on those -- lay deacons -- who intend to remain permanently in the diaconate ministry to assist the priests in preaching, administering the sacraments, and celebrating the liturgy.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was sent into the world for the redemption of mankind. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he preached the good news of reconciliation between God and men. Exercising a supreme and unique priesthood by offering himself on Calvary as the victim for sin and thus paying the price of our redemption, he was constituted the "one mediator between God and mankind" (1 Tim. 2:5). Consequently, Jesus Christ is also the unique Priest of the New Covenant, and his priesthood will never pass away; it is forever (cf. Heb. chaps. 3-11).

The Church that Christ founded on Peter as its rock was from the beginning a hierarchical Church because of the ministry of word and sacrament committed to the apostles. In the words of Tertullian: "The Church from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God." But the Church is likewise established as a sacrament of salvation that comes to us from God in Christ. Intimately united with Christ as Head, the Church is an organic body that shares in the various functions of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King. Hence, all the people of God constitute a priestly people.

However, to the apostles was given a ministry that differed specifically from the ministry of the priesthood of the laity, and particularly as regards the prophetic ministry of the word, the priestly ministry of the sacraments, and the kingly or pastoral ministry of government of the churches. To provide for the continuation of these various ministries, the apostles designated certain men to be pastors of the flock.

The ministerial priest is therefore configured to Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the character received at ordination, which is given through the Church and administered by the

bishop. The priesthood received is the priesthood of Christ, as is the power that is meant to be used for the service of the people. The priest is therefore a man for others and is ordained for ministry. But the ministry is exercised in dependence on the bishop, although it is always orientated to the whole Church, to build up the body of Christ and extend his kingdom. It is eminently a spiritual ministry and even when it touches the temporal or secular order, it is always in view of man's sanctification and salvation, as was the ministry of Christ and the apostles.

Like all Christians, bishops and priests are obliged by their baptismal commitment to strive for the perfection of charity and configuration to Christ, but theirs is a special obligation by reason of their priestly ordination and their pastoral ministry. The priest is identified with mission and, as we have seen, he should sanctify himself by the very works of his ministry; but prior to that, in his very person, he has been sealed by the Holy Spirit and configured to Christ as *alter Christus*. Therefore, in speaking of the priest's call to perfection, Vatican Council II states that there is a relationship between the holiness of the priest and the fruitfulness of his ministry and "God ordinarily prefers to show his wonders through those men who are more submissive to the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit and who, because of their intimate union with Christ and their holiness of life, are able to say with St. Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' " (Gal. 2:20). [\(30\)](#)

### **Meritorious Good Works**

The second positive means for growth in grace and holiness is meritorious good works that, as the term indicates, comprise all the virtuous acts entitling the individual to an increase of grace and virtue. One normally thinks first of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy or of apostolate and ministry as good works, and it is on this basis that many Christians distinguish the active from the contemplative life or love of neighbor from love of God.

However, if these distinctions are pushed too far, one would have to conclude that the only meritorious. good works are those that constitute a service to neighbor in the performance of corporal or spiritual works of the apostolate. But this is tantamount to saying that the first precept of charity is love of neighbor and that the contemplative life as such is not meritorious -- conclusions obviously at variance with the teaching of Christ and the principles of spiritual theology.

St. Thomas offers a clear explanation of merit in relation to action and contemplation:

The root of merit is charity. Although charity embraces the love of God and neighbor,... to love God in himself is more meritorious than to love one's neighbor .... Therefore that which belongs more directly to the love of God is more meritorious on the basis of object than that which belongs to the love of neighbor because of God.

Now the contemplative life has direct and immediate reference to the love of God .... But the active life is more directly ordained to the love of neighbor .... Therefore in its nature the contemplative life is of greater merit than the active life ....

Nevertheless it may happen that a person will merit more in the works of the active life than does another in the activities of the contemplative life; for example, if, out of an abundance of divine love, a person consents to be separated from the sweetness of divine contemplation for a time to fulfill God's will and for his glory.[\(31\)](#)

The terms *active life* and *contemplative life* are ambiguous because they may refer to a state of life (such as active religious and contemplative religious); they may mean the type of activity that predominates at a given moment in the life of an individual (e.g., the contemplative exercises of an apostle or the good works of a contemplative); or they may signify in general the works of mercy as compared with one's interior life of prayer and recollection. In the spiritual life of the individual Christian, however, both the activity of the interior life (contemplative) and the activity of external works are necessary; they should complement each other and both should be directed to the glory of God under the impetus of charity. Indeed, if properly balanced, the works of the active life are conducive to the contemplative activity of prayer and recollection; conversely, the interior life should be the source of apostolic activity, at the risk of reducing the apostolate to humanistic philanthropy or social work.

### *Good Works*

When we speak of meritorious good works as a means of growth in grace and holiness, we are referring primarily and essentially not to the external acts of apostolate and ministry, but to the virtues from which those external works proceed.

The reason for this is that the external works are *good* in the measure that they are directed to a morally good object or end; external works are *meritorious* in the measure that they proceed from charity, which constitutes the supernatural motivation for the work. Now, it is evident that a person can perform the external work without possessing the supernatural virtue corresponding to that work (as in the case of a person in the state of mortal sin), or a person may perform the action without the necessary interior dispositions (cf. Matt. 6:1). In neither case is the external good work productive of an increase in grace. Therefore it is necessary to insist that external good works should proceed from the proper interior dispositions and that growth in holiness through meritorious good works applies first and foremost to the operation of the infused virtues.

As morally good operative habits, the virtues are ordained to action, but the formal and distinctive element of virtue is that it is a habit, an interior quality or disposition by which the human faculties are perfected in their operations. Every human faculty has a purpose or goal that is the reason for its existence and when an individual by deliberate control acts in view of that purpose, he or she contributes to completeness and perfection as a person.

Therefore Aristotle described virtue as a habit that makes its possessor good, and what he does good. When it is a question of the infused supernatural virtues, it is necessary to recall the definition given by St. Augustine, who described virtue as "a good quality of mind by which one lives righteously, of which no one can make bad use, *which God works in us without us.*"

The pagan philosophers understood and taught that the integration and fulfillment of the human person are impossible without the virtues, without subordinating man's lower powers and faculties to the control of reason. But because we know through revelation by God that we are made in the image of God and called to intimate union with the Trinity in glory, we, as people of faith, realize that our true vocation is to become mature persons in Christ, for which we need God's grace and the infused virtues.

These virtues, working as they do through our natural faculties, are meant to become ever more deeply radicated in the human person until they reach that perfection at which the Holy Spirit

becomes the primary agent of activity through his gifts. After the sacraments, there is no more efficacious means for growth in grace and holiness than the acts of virtue imperated by charity, whether they be the works of mercy, of apostolate and ministry, or the less visible but equally sanctifying acts of humility, meekness, patience, obedience, and penance.

### *Merit*

The concept of merit has its source in the teaching of Christ (cf. Matt. 6:1-4; 20:1-16; 25:14-23), and St. Paul speaks of merit in terms of wages received for one's toil (1 Cor. 3:8) and as a recompense (1 Cor. 3:14). It is necessary, of course, to avoid any juridical or mathematical interpretation of merit, as if the spiritual goods merited from God were due in strict justice. Scripture also states that of ourselves we can do nothing; God alone gives the increase. Nevertheless, we use the term *merit*, but always with the understanding that since grace and charity are the basis of merit, in rewarding us for our works of grace God is rewarding his own gifts to us. We need grace to merit grace, but grace comes only from God.

Our actions, therefore, are meritorious in the measure that they proceed from grace and are motivated by charity. It does not matter so much for merit what kind of good act is performed as the love with which we perform the act. A very insignificant action done out of intense love will be much more meritorious than a great deed performed with less charity or less perfect motivation. As St. Teresa says: "The Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it."[\(32\)](#)

Since merit is determined by the actuation of the virtue of charity, an actual increase of grace requires a more intense act of charity than the habit of charity possessed here and now. Thus, St. Thomas states: "Charity does not actually increase by any act of charity whatever. But any act of charity disposes for an increase of charity, so far as by an act of charity a man becomes more prompt to continue working through charity, and as this disposition increases, the man breaks forth in a more fervent act of charity through which he strives to grow in charity, and then charity is actually increased."[\(33\)](#) Of course, any act of charity presupposes an actual grace reducing the habit from potentiality to action, and this applies also to the more intense act of charity. Hence the importance of striving to dispose oneself for ever more intense acts of charity, without which there is always the danger of falling into spiritual lukewarmness and purely routine works of virtue that make the soul susceptible to all kinds of temptation. We should note, however, that the sacraments, which work *ex opere operato*, always produce grace so long as the soul receives them with the proper dispositions.

According to the theological axiom that the principle of merit does not fall under merit -- or stated positively, we need grace to merit grace -- no person can merit the first grace for himself, and therefore a person in mortal sin can do nothing for himself by way of merit. However, since grace does serve as the basis for merit, those souls who are in the state of grace may, by their prayers and good works, and by reason of a certain fittingness because they are friends of God, merit the first grace for a person in sin. Indeed, prayer for the conversion of sinners is one of the most powerful means of obtaining whatever is necessary for the salvation of souls.

### **Prayer of Petition**

St. Thomas assigns four distinct values to prayer: satisfactory, meritorious, a certain spiritual

delight, and impetratory.

The *satisfactory* value of prayer is evident. It is clear not only from the fact that it always presupposes an act of humility and subjection to God, whom we have offended by our sins, but also because prayer springs from charity, the source of all satisfaction for sin. Finally, a prayer well made is a difficult task for imperfect souls, by reason of the attention and firmness of will that it requires; hence it is also satisfactory as regards the difficulty involved.

Like any other act of supernatural virtue, prayer receives its *meritorious* value from charity, from which it springs by means of the virtue of religion, of which it is a proper act. As a meritorious act, prayer is subjected to the conditions for any other virtuous act and is ruled by the same laws. In this sense prayer can merit *de condigno* whatever can be merited in this way so long as the proper conditions are fulfilled.

The third effect of prayer is a certain *spiritual delight* of the soul. But in order that prayer actually produce spiritual delight, attention is absolutely necessary; spiritual delight is incompatible with distractions, voluntary or involuntary. For that reason, contemplative prayer, in which the attention of the soul is the greatest possible by reason of the concentration of all one's psychological energies on the object contemplated, carries with it the greatest delight. Prayer nourishes our intellect, arouses our sensibility in a holy manner, and stimulates and strengthens our will. It is truly a *refectio mentis*, which by its very nature is meant to fill the soul with sweetness.

But it is the *impetratory* value of prayer that interests us most as an element of increase and development of the Christian life independent of merit. Let us first see the principal differences between the meritorious and impetratory aspects of prayer. As a meritorious act, prayer implies a relation to justice in regard to a reward; its impetratory value implies a relation simply to the mercy of God. As meritorious, it has an intrinsic efficacy for obtaining a reward; as impetratory, its efficacy rests solely on the promise of God. The meritorious efficacy is based above all on charity; the impetratory value is based primarily on faith. The object of merit and of impetration is not always the same, although sometimes these two aspects may coincide. Most important for our purposes, however, is the fact that prayer of petition, when it fills the requirements, infallibly obtains what is asked in virtue of the promises of God. The truth is definitely *de fide*, based as it is on several scriptural texts:

Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. The one who knocks enters (Matt. 7:7-8). You will receive all that you pray for, provided you have faith (Matt. 21:22).

And whatever you ask in my name I will do, so as to glorify the Father in the Son. Anything you ask in my name, I will do (John 14:13-14).

If you live in me, and my words stay part of you, you may ask what you will -- it will be done for you (John 15:7).

I give you my assurance, whatever you ask the Father, he will give you in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:23-24).



We have this confidence in God: that he hears us whenever we ask for anything according to his will. And since we know that he hears us whenever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours (1 John 5:14-15).

It is impossible to speak more clearly or with more insistence. The divine promise regarding an answer to prayer stands out in full certainty in the sources of revelation. But what conditions are required that prayer infallibly obtain and fulfill the divine promises? St. Thomas assigns four of them, to which all the others that are listed by other authors can be reduced: that one should pray for oneself; that one should pray for that which is necessary for salvation; that one should pray piously; and that one should pray with perseverance.[\(34\)](#)

The reason that one must pray *for oneself* is that the granting of a divine grace always demands a subject who is properly disposed, and it may be that one's neighbor is not disposed to receive that which is asked in prayer. On the other hand, those who pray for themselves, if they do it fittingly, are by that very fact disposed to, be heard. If -it were otherwise, their prayers would not be true prayers at all.

This is not to say, however, that prayer for others is always inefficacious. On the contrary, it often obtains what is asked; but we cannot have infallible certainty of an answer because we cannot be certain of the dispositions of the person for whom we pray. We may ask God that he dispose our neighbor for a certain effect through his infinite mercy, but God has not promised this to anyone, and therefore we cannot obtain it infallibly.

One must pray *for those things necessary for salvation*. This means anything at all that in any way is necessary or useful for salvation. As such it falls under the infallible impetration of prayer. Hence we can impetrate by prayer the growth or increase of the infused virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and even those things that cannot in any way be merited. It is evident from this that the area of impetration is much wider than that of merit. Thus by impetration one can petition actual efficacious grace in order not to fall into a grave sin or to perform some salutary act or even the gift of final perseverance that is infallibly connected with eternal salvation. The Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, frequently begs in the liturgy for these graces no one can merit in the strict sense of the word.

One must pray *piously*, and by this word St. Thomas refers to all the conditions required on the part of the individual who prays -- humility, confidence, attention, and petition in the name of Christ. Some authors include all these subjective conditions under the heading of the state of grace, without which, they say, no one can pray piously. St. Thomas raises this very objection, and this is his solution:

The sinner cannot pray piously in the sense that his prayer is informed by the supernatural habit of the virtue of piety, which he lacks, but he can pray piously in the sense that he can ask for something that pertains to piety, just as he who does not have the habit of justice may nevertheless desire something that is just. And although the prayer of the sinner is not meritorious, it can nevertheless have an impetratory value, because merit is based on justice, while impetration is based on pure gratuity or liberality.[\(35\)](#)

Consequently, although the state of grace is undoubtedly most fitting for the efficacy of prayer, it

is not absolutely necessary. It is one thing to demand a wage that is due in justice, but it is something quite distinct to beg for alms. In the second case, no other titles are necessary but one's need. What is always necessary, however, is the previous impulse of an actual grace, which can be given and actually is given to sinners.

The prayer must be made *with perseverance*. The Lord repeated time and again the necessity of perseverance in prayer until we obtain what we ask. Recall the parable of the friend who came to beg for bread (Luke 11:5-13), of the evil judge and the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-5), the moving episode of the woman of Cana who insisted in spite of an apparent rebuff (Matt. 15:21-28), and the sublime example of Christ himself, who frequently spent the whole night in prayer and in Gethsemane prayed in great anguish to his heavenly Father (Luke 6:12; 22:44).

Such are the conditions for the infallible efficacy of prayer. In practice, however, we obtain many things from God without fulfilling all these conditions because of the superabundance of the divine mercy. But if we do fulfill all the conditions, we shall infallibly obtain, by reason of the divine promise, even those graces we could not merit in an absolute sense.

#### *Utility and Necessity of Prayer*

Following the teaching of St. Thomas, the first question to be asked concerning prayer of petition concerns its fittingness and utility. God knows our needs better than we do; therefore, it seems unnecessary to give voice to our petitions. Moreover, God knows from the beginning what he will grant us and what he will not grant us; therefore, since we cannot change the immutable will of God, it is useless to pray.

In answer to these difficulties, St. Thomas replies, first, that we need to pray to God, not to make known to him our needs, but that we may be reminded of the necessity of having recourse to God; secondly, that our motive in praying is not to change the divine will in our regard but, by our prayers, to obtain what God has decreed.<sup>(36)</sup> Scripture explicitly commands us to pray always (Luke 18:1); the theological reason is that divine providence decrees what effects are to take place, by what causes, and in what order. Human actions, and among them prayer, are causes of certain effects under God's dispensation, and hence when we achieve something by our prayers, we are receiving what God has decreed we shall receive through our prayers.

The prayer of petition is not, therefore, an extrinsic cause that moves or determines the will of God, for this is impossible. It is a cause only in the sense that God has related some things to others in such a way that, if certain causes are placed, certain effects will, follow. Moreover, prayer is a conditional cause, as if God were to decree: "If you ask for such and such a benefit, it will be granted you; but if you do not ask, you will not receive it." It follows from this that it is an error to believe that if we persevere in prayer, come what may, we shall always obtain that which we seek. Some things will be granted to us whether we pray for them or not, because God has decreed that they shall be granted to us absolutely; some things will never be granted to us, no matter how earnestly and how long we pray for them; still others will be granted to us only if we pray, because God has decreed that they will be given only on the condition that we ask for them.

The next question concerns the things for which we should pray. Although the very notion of petition signifies that we desire something for ourselves, our petitions to God should always be

made with the condition that what we ask is according to his will. And there are certain things that by their very nature are in accordance with, or contrary to, the divine will. Thus we can, in an absolute sense, petition God for any of those things that pertain to God's glory, eternal salvation, and growth in grace and virtue, for then we conform our wills to God's will. But it would never be lawful to ask God for anything that would work to our spiritual detriment, for this would be asking God to go against his own divine will.

But what of temporal goods? Is it commendable and lawful to ask God for such things as the necessities of life, good health, a long life? The principle used by St. Augustine was that it is lawful to pray for anything that it is lawful to desire.

Our need for temporal goods is based on the natural law of selfpreservation, our rights and duties as members of society, and the requirements of our particular profession, occupation, or vocation. All things being equal, it matters not whether we possess many worldly goods or only the minimum; what matters is the manner in which we use them and the degree of our attachment to them.

Therefore, so long as we use temporal goods virtuously and subordinate them to our true ultimate end, it is lawful to possess them and to petition for them from God. But since some persons are excessively attached to temporal goods or are led into occasions of sin through the possession of them, one can readily surmise why prayers for such things often go unanswered. We do not know what things are for our good, and for that reason we should always pray for temporal goods under the condition that such things be in accordance with God's will and for our own spiritual benefit.

If used in the proper way, the prayer of petition is of great spiritual benefit. It is in itself an excellent act of the virtue of religion, it exercises us in the virtue of humility, and it increases our confidence in God. When we pray, we enter into the workings of divine providence by placing the secondary conditional cause from which certain effects will follow, according to the divine decrees. Lastly, when we are on our knees before God, we are thereby raised to a greater dignity, for the proper use of prayer will conform our will to God's.

But prayer is not only fitting and useful; it is also absolutely necessary in the economy of divine providence, both by necessity of precept and by necessity of means *ex institutione divina*. As to the first, Scripture repeatedly commands that we pray: "Watch and pray" (Matt. 26:41); "They ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1); "Ask, and it will be given you" (Matt. 7:7); "Pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17); "Continue steadfastly in prayer" (Col. 4:2). Even natural precept obliges us to pray because we are so weak and lack many things only God can supply. The ecclesiastical law prescribes certain prayers on certain occasions, such as during the administration of the sacraments, during times of great peril, the canonical recitation of the Office. If we fulfill our religious obligations by attendance at Mass on days of obligation and say some prayers daily, we can be at ease in our conscience as regards the obligation to pray.

As regards the necessity of means, it is common and certain theological doctrine that prayer is necessary by necessity of means for the salvation of adults. There are many testimonies from the Fathers to substantiate this doctrine, but perhaps the most conclusive is that of St. Augustine, which was quoted by the Council of Trent: "For God does not command impossibilities, but by commanding admonishes you both to do what you can do and to pray for what you cannot do,

and ,assists you that you may be able."[\(37\)](#) God will not refuse grace to him who prays for it with the proper dispositions, for it is the divine will that all men be saved. For this reason spiritual writers have listed the faithful practice of prayer as a sign of predestination and the lack of prayer as a sign of reprobation.

Since prayer is an act of the virtue of religion, which has the worship of God as its proper object, it would seem unnecessary to ask whether it is lawful to pray to anyone but God. But the practice of the Church and the objections of certain religious groups make it necessary to clarify the practice of praying to the saints. St. Thomas gives the answer as clearly and succinctly as one could wish:

Prayer is offered to a person in two ways: first, to be fulfilled by him, and secondly, to be obtained through him. In the first way we offer prayer to God alone, since all our prayers ought to be directed to the acquisition of grace and glory, which God alone gives, according to Psalm 83:12: Grace and glory he [the Lord] bestows." But in the second way we pray to the saints, whether angels or men, not that God may know our petitions through them, but that our prayers may be effective through their prayers and merits.[\(38\)](#)

The Council of Trent solemnly defended the practice of praying to the saints to intercede for us, and of venerating their relics and images.[\(39\)](#) The principal theological reasons for the practice are the goodness of God, who deigns to associate the saints in the obtaining and distribution of graces; the doctrine of the communion of saints; and the perfect charity and abundant merits of the blessed, who know our needs and desire to assist us to attain glory.

What is to be said of the practice of praying to the souls in purgatory and the possibility of their interceding for us? The Church has made no definite statement on this matter, and therefore it is an open question among theologians. Many theologians, however, defend the practice of praying to the souls in purgatory. Their primary argument is based on the doctrine of the communion of saints, for it is unlikely that those who are in purgatory and assured of ultimate glory would be entirely ignorant of the needs of souls on earth, especially of those they have loved in this life. Also, although we cannot know for certain the amount of suffrage and relief that is granted the souls in purgatory by our prayers and good works, it is probable that the souls realize that their relief is due to someone here on earth, and they would logically be moved to gratitude toward their benefactors.

#### *Difficulties in Prayer*

There are two main sources of difficulty in the practice, of prayer: *distractions* and *dryness*. These difficulties are not restricted to the prayer of petition nor to any particular type of prayer. Consequently, what is said here should be applied to all of the grades of prayer we shall discuss later.

Since prayer is an operation of the practical intellect under the impetus of the will, by its very nature it requires attention, as does any other intellectual operation. But there are various degrees of attention, and not every type of prayer requires the same degree of attention. Indeed, in the higher grades of prayer it would seem

that the individual pays no attention at all to the act of prayer as such. With beginners in the practice of prayer, on the other hand, there may be a great deal of attention, but the prayer is as yet very imperfect.

In order to understand this apparent paradox it is necessary to consider the kinds of attention that can be used in prayer and the psychology of habit formation. Since prayer is conversation with God, it involves the use of words, whether one reads or speaks or merely thinks them. In the act of praying, one may focus attention on any one of three elements: the words themselves (e.g., to pronounce them correctly or use them rightly), the meaning of the words and content of the prayer as a whole, or the one to whom the prayer is addressed and the purpose of the prayer. In vocal prayer it is essential that one be attentive to the words spoken; in meditation one must give attention to the meaning of the words; but in any kind of prayer the most important element is to fix the mind on God by the third kind of attention.

Like any other human activity, the practice of prayer can become habitual, and therefore it falls under the laws of habit formation. Habits are acquired by the repetition of acts, and as a habit becomes more deeply rooted and perfected, the acts that flow from it are more facile, more pleasant, and require less actual attention. For that reason habits are said to be "second nature."

In the practice of prayer beginners will have to give attention to all the details and mechanics of prayer so that they will learn to do things correctly from the start. Thus the beginners in meditation will follow some method. But as they become more facile in the practice of prayer, the focal point of attention changes from words and methods and other mechanical details to the content of the prayer and the purpose of the prayer. Attention is still present -- as indeed it must be for all prayer -- but it is a different and more excellent type of attention. At this stage one recites the rosary with practically no awareness of the words or their meaning but with attention to a given mystery, or one's attention in mental prayer has shifted from methods and devices to the content and purpose of the meditation. At this point the soul is liberated, so to speak, so that it can soar to the higher grades of prayer in which the mind is fixed on God so strongly that it forgets all other things.

But however much we endeavor to keep our attention fixed on one thing, we cannot do so for an extended period of time. Even in the act of concentration the human mind wavers, if only for a second. Fixed attention becomes all the more difficult as the object of concentration is loftier, or the time spent in concentration is longer. There is, of course, a great discrepancy in the powers of concentration and attention of various individuals, due to temperament and training, but the human mind is also limited by the inherent weaknesses of man's psychosomatic structure.

Our concern with *distractions* in prayer is not from the viewpoint of their effect on the merit of prayer, but their effect on the practice of prayer as such. Whether voluntary or involuntary, a distraction consists in any alien thought or imagination

that prevents the mind from attending to that which it is doing. If the distraction affects the external senses or internal senses only, the mind can still give attention to what it is doing, but with difficulty. If the distraction consists in an alien thought in the mind itself, attention is completely destroyed or, rather, it is shifted to another object. Divided attention or the complete lack of attention in the performance of actions that involve manual operations or bodily movements (e.g., walking, dancing, eating) does not necessarily affect the perfection of the operation, but when it is a question of the operation of the higher faculties, some degree of attention is absolutely necessary. Distractions in prayer, therefore, will always render it less perfect or will nullify it completely.

We have stated that distractions in prayer may be voluntary or involuntary. In either case they are obstacles to prayer, and they must be reduced and ultimately eliminated if one is to make progress in this spiritual exercise. To achieve this it is necessary to examine the causes from which distractions spring:

1. *Constitutional factors*: nervous or sanguine temperament; vivid and unstable imagination; weak powers of concentration; vehement and uncontrolled passions; sensate nature.
2. *Physical or mental illness*: brain disorders; glandular malfunction; physical exhaustion; mental fatigue; neurotic traits; psychotic predispositions.
3. *Character defects*: any acquired habits inimical to the practice of prayer (lack of recollection; dissipation; lukewarmness; vain curiosity; slothfulness; lust; gluttony; pride).
4. *Improper spiritual direction*: if the spiritual director imposes his own preconceived ideas upon the individual without understanding the needs of the soul, the capacity of the soul, and the movements of grace in the soul (e.g., to force a soul to practice meditation when God moves the soul to a higher degree of prayer).
5. *The devil*: with God's permission the devil sometimes acts directly on the external and internal senses, or indirectly distracts from prayer by working through any of the other causes enumerated.
6. *Unsuitable circumstances*: uncomfortable posture; improper time; external noises; lack of proximate preparation; excessive heat or cold.

There is no infallible method for ridding oneself of all distractions in prayer because, as we have seen, it is the nature of the human mind to waver in its attention. Nevertheless, this does not excuse us from doing the best we can to pray with full attention and to forestall possible distractions to the best of our ability. To this end, one should approach prayer with a recollected spirit, putting aside all concerns and interests and entering into prayer with the simple and pure motive of addressing God.

In particular, one should prevent external distractions by selecting the proper time and place and a reasonably comfortable posture for prayer. When this is not possible, one should make every effort to withdraw oneself mentally from one's surroundings and to enter into the cell of the heart to speak with God. Even more important, one should rid oneself of internal sources of distraction by putting aside all thoughts of one's duties, anxieties, interests, except so far as they may be the subject matter of one's prayer. It is necessary to give full attention to the duty of the moment, which in this instance is the practice of prayer. As a remote preparation for prayer the following points are of special importance: a spirit of silence and recollection, avoidance of vain curiosity, custody of the senses, spiritual reading practiced faithfully, and the practice of mortification.

*Aridity or dryness* in the practice of prayer consists in a certain inability to produce the necessary intellectual and affective acts, or in an actual distaste for prayer. It is usually encountered in the practice of mental prayer, and it reaches its most painful state in the higher stages of mystical prayer when it seems that God has abandoned the soul completely.

Dryness in prayer may be caused by the individual, by God, or by the devil, but those who actually experience dryness should first suspect that they themselves are the cause. Among the internal and involuntary causes of dryness are bad health, bodily fatigue, excessive activity or absorbing duties, vehement and prolonged temptations that exhaust one's powers, improper training in the practice of prayer, methods of prayer unsuited to the individual. Sometimes, however, dryness is the natural result of one's own imperfections: lukewarmness in the service of God, infidelity to grace, habitual venial sin, habits of sensuality, vain curiosity, instability and superficiality, excessive activism.

At other times dryness may be sent by God as a purification or a test. After a soul has become somewhat adept in the practice of prayer, God usually deliberately withdraws all sensible consolation so that the soul will be purified of any excessive attachment to such consolation, will be humbled at seeing how little it can do without God's help, and will thus be disposed for the next grade of prayer. Throughout one's advancement in the life of prayer, this alternation between dryness and consolation is usually perceptible at regular intervals, and especially when God is preparing the soul for some new advance or some greater grace. If the dryness is prolonged over a long period, in spite of the soul's fidelity to grace and earnest efforts, one may suspect that the soul is entering upon the night of the senses or some other passive purification.

If, however, there is every indication that the dryness is caused by the devil, the soul should strive to be faithful in the practice of prayer, even if this means that it must return from a higher grade of prayer to the simple recitation of vocal prayers. The important thing is for the soul to do the best it can and under no pretext give up the practice of prayer, for that is precisely the goal the devil seeks to achieve.

But since one should always suspect that dryness in prayer is due to one's own

weakness and imperfection, the best remedy is to correct any defects in the practice of prayer, especially lukewarmness and negligence in the service of God. If the causes of the dryness are beyond one's control, the best thing to do is to resign oneself to the trial for as long a time as God wills, to realize that sensible devotion and consolation are not essential to the true love of God, to humble oneself with a sense of one's unworthiness, and to persevere in prayer at any cost. The periods of involuntary dryness can be periods of great merit and purification, especially if one unites oneself with the suffering Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Other pitfalls to be avoided in the practice are the following:

1. Purely mechanical recitation of vocal prayers and lifeless routine in the practice of mental prayer.
2. Excessive personal effort, as if one were able to do all by sheer force; or undue passivity and inertia, as if one should leave all to God alone.
3. Discouragement at not perceiving the consolations one expected; or rash optimism that one is further advanced in prayer than one really is.
4. Attachment to sensible consolation, which causes in the soul a certain spiritual gluttony that impels one to seek the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations.
5. Persistence in the use of a particular method, as if that were the only possible method, or the premature abandonment of a method.

## CHAPTER NOTES

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9.

*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 59.

Cf. Denz.-Schön., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), n. 1608.

*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 1.

*Ibid.*, n. 6.

*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 9.

Cf. *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 69, a. 8.

*Ibid.*, q. 65, a. 1.

*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 39.

*Apostolic Constitution Divinae Consortium Naturae*, AAS, LXIII (1971), pp.



657-64.

Denz.-Schön. 1609, 1628.

*Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People*, n. 2.

*Ibid.*, nn. 6-7.

*Cf. Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 2.

*Cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 10.

*Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, n. 2.

Denz.-Schön. 1739-1743, and Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*.

*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, AAS LIX (1967), pp. 539-73.

*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, nn. 1-11, *passim*.

*Eucharisticum Mysterium* (Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery), section H. In the Instruction *Immensae Caritatis*, issued on January 25, 1973, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship stated that the occasions on which the faithful are permitted to receive Communion more than once in the same day are restricted and clearly stated. The basic norm that Communion may be received only once a day remains in force, and it is not permitted to set it aside merely from motives of devotion.

In the baptism of infants the sponsors supply the intention by speaking for the infant; in Viaticum or the anointing of an unconscious person a habitual intention suffices.

*Cf. Denz.-Schön.* 1648-50.

Council of Trent, Session 14, Chap. 3. The Council described contrition as sorrow for sin, accompanied by the resolve to sin no more (Chap. 4). *Cf. Denz.-Schön.* 1703.

*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 85, a. 3.

St. Thomas says: "It may happen that the strength of the penitent's act at times corresponds to a greater degree of, grace than that from which he fell by sin; at times to an equal degree; at times to a lower degree. Consequently the penitent sometimes rises in a higher degree than he previously possessed; sometimes in equal degree; sometimes in lesser degree. The same reasoning applies to the [infused] virtues, since they follow upon grace" (*Summa*, III, q. 89, a. 2).

*Cf. Denz.-Schön.* 1679-83.

*Anointing of the Sick*, November 30, 1972. The passage from Mark,

mentioned in the quotation from the Council of Trent reads: "They expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil, and worked many cures" (Denz.-Schön. 1695).

*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 73.

*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, nn. 47-49.

*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 12.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 182, a. 2.

*The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946),  
Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 6.

*Ibid.*, q. 83, a. 15, ad 2.

*Ibid.*, a. 16, ad 2.

*Ibid.*, a. 2.

Cf. St. Augustine, *De natura et gratia*, Chap. 43, n. 50; Denz.-Schön. 1536.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 83, a. 4.

Denz.-Schön. 1744, 1755, 1821.

## 10

### The Theological Virtues

We have already discussed the theology of the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Chapter 4. Now it is necessary to treat of them in particular, as meritorious good works by which one grows in holiness. The detailed study of each of the virtues and gifts belongs to systematic moral theology, and therefore we shall not repeat what is treated in that section of theology. Rather, we shall focus our attention on the principal virtues that are necessary for the perfection of the Christian life.

The virtues contribute to Christian perfection and holiness in a variety of ways. First of all, when performed under the impetus of grace and motivated by charity, the acts of the virtues are meritorious of an increase of grace. Secondly, they pertain to the essence of Christian perfection, because charity is the principal virtue of Christian holiness while the other virtues relate to Christian perfection as imperated by charity. Thirdly, the virtues constitute a kind of goal in the sense that through the perfection of the virtues the individual is configured to Christ and thus gives glory to God.

Our treatment of the virtues and the gifts will concentrate especially on the virtues as constitutive elements of Christian holiness. It should be noted, however, that while all the virtues contribute to Christian perfection, the pattern of particular virtues that are operative in the life of the individual will be determined by one's vocation or state of life, as well as by one's particular gifts

or charisms. Thus, in the saints we find that each one practiced the virtues to a heroic degree and was actuated by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but one saint differs from another in the virtues that formed the pattern of holiness.

The theological virtues are so called because they enable the individual to relate directly to God, whereas the moral virtues have as their objects the proper use and control of our faculties in relation to those things that can serve as a means to personal holiness and eternal life. Thus, by faith we believe in God and accept all that he has revealed; by hope we trust God to be faithful to his promises if we correspond to his grace; by charity we love God as our perfect good and ultimate end.

The three theological virtues are the Christian virtues *par excellence*, and yet they are not understood or appreciated by those who live according to purely human standards, though these same persons may admire the moral virtues of justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance. The reason is that the theological virtues draw us away from the natural order to the divine and the supernatural. Faith looks beyond the horizons of human knowledge and clings to the truths and mysteries revealed by God in Jesus Christ; hope causes us to regard the things of this world of little worth when compared to the life of glory to which we are called; charity impels us to love God above all else and to love all else in God, rejecting anything that is an obstacle to that love.

However, true Christians do not overreact against the world and brand all creation as evil, nor do they disdain anything that does not bear the label of Christian. At the same time, they have the courage to stand against the purely secular when it infringes on the rights of God and of true religion. The theological virtues, therefore, enable Christians to orientate their whole life and all their actions to God, as St. Paul points out:

We constantly are mindful before our God and Father of the way you are proving your faith, and laboring in love, and showing constancy of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ .... We who live by day must be alert, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet (1 Thess. 1:3-5; 5:8).

## **Faith**

If, as we have seen in the discussion on grace, the Christian life can be understood only in relation to the supernatural end to which it is directed and in view of which it must be evaluated, the first place "in the order of generation" must be given to the virtue of faith. The Church has defined the virtue of faith as follows:

It is a supernatural virtue by which, thanks to the movement and help of God's grace, we believe what God reveals to be true, not because its intrinsic truth is obvious under scrutiny according to the natural light of reason, but on the authority of God himself revealing.

In virtue of the divine and Catholic faith, all those things are to be believed which are contained in the word of God-either the written or the traditional word-and are proposed for belief by the Church.[\(1\)](#)

The virtue of faith is an infused gift of God, but man "cannot give his adherence to God when he reveals himself unless, drawn by the Father, he submits to God with a faith that is reasonable and free."<sup>(2)</sup> The act of faith is an act of belief in truths revealed by God, and therefore it requires *assent of the intellect*. But the act of belief does not follow upon any discursus of the intellect or any evidence that necessitates belief; it rests on the authority of God revealing, and therefore it requires the *command of the will* preceding the faith-act. But proceeding as they do from a supernatural virtue, both the command of the will and the assent of the intellect in faith are supernatural acts, and hence the third element in the act of faith is the *movement of divine grace*, for actual grace is the intrinsic principle of all supernatural acts. As St. Paul says: "I repeat, it is owing to his favor that salvation is yours through faith. This is not your own doing, it is God's gift" (Eph. 2:8).

The perfect operation of the virtue of faith requires the state of sanctifying grace and the actuation of charity. Thus, the Council of Trent stated that a faith not united to hope and charity does not unite us perfectly to Christ nor make us living members of his Mystical Body.<sup>(3)</sup> However, the same Council declared that persons in mortal sin can still possess an *unformed faith* (not animated by charity). They still believe the truths of faith on the authority of God revealing, but lacking sanctifying grace, their acts are not meritorious.<sup>(4)</sup> Only a serious sin directed against faith will destroy the virtue of faith.

The Council of Trent states that faith is the beginning, the foundation, and the root of justification, and without faith it is impossible to please God and to be numbered among his children.<sup>(5)</sup> It is the *beginning* because it establishes the first contact between ourselves and God, the Author of the supernatural order. The first thing is to believe in God. It is the *foundation*, inasmuch as all the other virtues, including charity, presuppose faith, and are established upon it as an edifice on its foundation. Without faith it is impossible to hope or to love. It is the *root*, because in it, when vivified by charity, all the other virtues live. When animated by charity, faith produces, among other things, two great effects in the soul: the filial fear of God that helps the soul keep itself from sin, and the purification of the heart that raises it to the heights and cleanses it of its affection for earthly things.

Both objectively and subjectively faith can grow and develop in our souls until it reaches an extraordinary degree, but it is necessary to understand this doctrine correctly. No one has explained it better than St. Thomas, and we shall summarize his teaching.

A habit or virtue can be considered in two ways: by reason of the object and by reason of its participation in the subject (objective faith and subjective faith). Now the object of faith (objective faith) can be considered in two ways: according to its formal motive (the authority of God revealing) or according to the things proposed for belief (the truths of faith). The formal motive of faith (the authority of God) is one and, from this point of view, faith is not diversified in believers, but it is the same in all (one either accepts the authority of God, or one does not). But the truths proposed for our belief are many, and they can be known more or less explicitly (the theologian knows many more and knows them more clearly than the simple believer). Accordingly, one person can believe explicitly more truths than another person, and thus have a greater faith according to the greater explication of that faith.

But if faith is considered according to its participation in the subject (subjective faith), it can also have two modes, because active faith proceeds from the intellect (the intellect assents to revealed

truths) and from the will (which, moved by God and our free choice, imposes this assent on the intellect). In this sense also faith can be greater in one than in another, by reason of the greater promptness with which the will commands the intellect to its assent.[\(6\)](#)

There is nothing to add substantially to the foregoing doctrine. We shall now investigate the ways in which souls can intensify their faith in the various stages of the Christian life.

The principal concern of *beginners* is to nourish and foment their faith so that it will not be lost or corrupted. In order to do this, certain things are required:

1. Realizing that faith is a gift from God, as St. Paul teaches (Eph. 2:8), they will ask God for the grace to strengthen their faith.
2. They will reject energetically, with the help of divine grace, anything that could be a danger to their faith: doubts and temptations against the faith; dangerous literature that promotes worldly or anti-Christian values; intellectual pride, which is the primary obstacle to a docile assent to divine revelation. "God 'is stern with the arrogant, but to the humble he shows kindness'" (1 Pet. 5:5).
3. They will attempt to increase their knowledge of the truths of faith by studying Catholic doctrine to the best of their ability, thus extending their assent to a greater number of specific truths.
4. They will endeavor to augment subjective faith by making devout acts of faith and by obedience to the Magisterium of the Church.

*Advanced souls* will cultivate a spirit of faith that will place them on a strictly supernatural plane from which they can see and judge all things. For this, the following things are necessary:

1. They should see God through the light of faith, without taking any account of self-love or selfish views. God is always the same, infinitely good and merciful, regardless of the consolations or dryness we may experience in prayer, and regardless of adversity or prosperity.
2. They should evaluate everything in accordance with the teachings of faith, in spite of anything that the world may say or think. For example, they must be convinced that poverty, meekness, repentance, mercy, cleanness of heart, and peace (Matt. 5:3-10) are of more value toward eternal life than anything the world can offer. They should renounce all worldly criteria and any points of view that are purely human. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (1 John 5:4).
3. The spirit of faith intensely lived will be a source of consolation in the suffering of this life in bodily infirmity, in bitterness and trials of soul, in the ingratitude or hatred of men, in the loss of one's relatives and friends. Suffering passes, but the reward for having suffered well will never pass. Moreover, a holy life is much more important than a long life. The apostles, and after them all the martyrs, illumined by the light of faith, walked steadfastly and tranquilly to their death, joyful that they could suffer for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41).

In *perfect* souls, illumined by the gifts of understanding and knowledge, faith reaches its greatest intensity. It shines forth resplendently as a prelude to the beatific vision and the light of glory.

## **The Gift of Understanding**

The gift of understanding is a supernatural habit, infused in the soul with sanctifying grace, by which the human intellect, under the illuminating action of the Holy Spirit, is made apt for a penetrating intuition of revealed truths, and even for natural truths, so far as they are related to the supernatural end. The gift of understanding resides in the speculative intellect, which it perfects (the intellect having been informed previously by the virtue of faith), in order to receive in a connatural way the motion of the Holy Spirit.

The essence of the gift of understanding is a penetrating intuition, and this constitutes the specific difference between the gift and the virtue of faith. Faith provides a knowledge of supernatural truths in an imperfect manner (*modo humano*), which is proper to, and characteristic of, the infused virtues; the gift of understanding makes the intellect apt for the profound and intuitive penetration (*modo divino*) of those same revealed truths. Simply speaking, this is a type of infused contemplation, a simple and profound intuition of truth.

The gift of understanding is distinguished from the other intellectual gifts (wisdom, knowledge, and counsel) inasmuch as its proper function is the profound penetration of the truths of faith by way of simple apprehension, without making any judgment concerning them. Judgment, so far as it relates to divine things, pertains to the gift of wisdom; so far as it relates to created things, to the gift of knowledge; and so far as it pertains to the application of these truths to particular actions, to the gift of counsel.

The object of the gift of understanding comprises speculative and practical revealed truths, and even natural truths so far as they are related to the supernatural end. It embraces everything that pertains to God, Christ, human beings, and all creatures, but primarily to the truths of faith and secondarily to all other things as related to the supernatural end.

The gift of understanding produces admirable effects in the soul, and all of them perfect the virtue of faith. St. Thomas Aquinas points out different ways in which the gift of understanding enables us to penetrate into the truths of faith.[\(7\)](#)

1. *It discloses the hidden meaning of Sacred Scripture.* This is what the Lord effected in regard to the disciples at Emmaus when he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). In the profound understanding of some scriptural passage, many of the saints found the theme of their whole spiritual life: "The favors of the Lord I will sing forever" of St. Teresa (Ps. 89:2); "Let whoever is simple turn in here" of St. Thérèse of Lisieux (Prov. 9:4); "The praise of glory" of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity (Eph. 1:6). For that reason these mystics find great satisfaction in the inspired words of Scripture, and especially in the words of Christ himself.

2. *It reveals the mysterious significance of symbols and figures.* Thus St. Paul saw Christ in the rock that gushed forth with living water to appease the thirst of the Israelites in the

desert: "And the rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). St. John of the Cross explains many of the symbols and figures of the Old Testament that reached their full realization in the New Testament or in the life of grace.

3. *It reveals spiritual realities under sensible appearances.* The liturgy of the Church is filled with sublime symbolism that for the most part escapes the notice of superficial souls. But the saints experienced a great veneration and respect for the slightest ceremony of the Church. The gift of understanding enabled them to see the sublime realities hidden beneath those symbols and sensible signs.

4. *It enables one to contemplate the effects that are contained in causes.* This is particularly noticeable in contemplatives and in prayerful theologians. After the long hours of meditation and study, everything is suddenly illuminated under an impulse of the Spirit. A word or a statement is then seen in all its depth and meaning.

5. *It makes us see causes through their effects.* In an inverse sense, the gift of understanding reveals God and his all-powerful causality in his effects without resorting to a lengthy discursive process. In a simple gaze and by a divine intuition the soul discovers the invisible hidden beneath the visible.

Such are the principal effects produced in the soul by the actuation of the gift of understanding. Perfected by this gift, the virtue of faith reaches an astounding intensity. St. Thomas stated: "In this very life, when the eye of the spirit is purified by the gift of understanding, one can in a certain way see God."<sup>(8)</sup> On reaching these heights, the influence of faith is extended to all the movements of the soul, all its acts are illuminated, and it sees all things through the prism of faith. These souls seem to be guided entirely by the divine instinct as to their manner of being, thinking, speaking, or reacting to the events of their own lives or to the lives of others.

The actuation of the gifts depends entirely on the Holy Spirit, but the soul can do much to dispose itself, with the help of grace, for that divine movement. These are the principal means of disposing oneself:

1. *The practice of a vital faith with the help of ordinary grace.* The infused virtues are perfected by the ever more intense practice of their proper acts. And although it is true that unless they go beyond the human mode of operation they can never reach their perfection, the Holy Spirit will perfect the virtues with his gifts if the soul does all that it can by the exercise of the infused virtues. God gives his graces to those that are best disposed.

2. *Perfect purity of soul and body.* The sixth beatitude, which pertains to the clean of heart, corresponds to the gift of understanding. Only through perfect cleanness of soul and body is one made capable of seeing God: in this life, by the profound illumination of the gift of understanding in the obscurity of faith; in the next life, through the clear vision of glory.

3. *Interior recollection.* The Holy Spirit is the friend of recollection and solitude. Only there does he speak in silence to souls. The soul that is a friend of dissipation and worldliness will never perceive the word of God in its interior. It is necessary to empty oneself of created things, to retire to the cell of one's own heart in order to live there with

the divine guest. When the soul has done all that it can to be recollected and detached from the world, the Holy Spirit will do the rest. .

4. *Fidelity to grace.* The soul must be always attentive and careful not to deny the Holy Spirit any sacrifice that he may ask. Not only must the soul avoid every voluntary thought, however small, that would sadden the Holy Spirit-according to the mysterious expression of St. Paul: "Do nothing to sadden the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 4:30) - but it must positively second all his divine movements until it can say with Christ: "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29).

5. *To invoke the Holy Spirit.* We cannot practice any of these methods without the help and prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit. For that reason we should invoke him frequently and with the greatest possible fervor, remembering the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to us (John 14:16-17). In imitation of the apostles when they retired to the Cenacle to await the coming of the Paraclete, we should associate our supplications with those of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Acts 1:14), the most faithful Virgin and the heavenly Spouse of the Holy Spirit. The divine Spirit will be communicated to us in the measure of our fidelity to grace, and this fidelity must be obtained through Mary, the universal Mediatrix of all graces.

## **The Gift of Knowledge**

Some authors assign to the gift of knowledge the function of perfecting the virtue of hope, but St. Thomas assigns it to the virtue of faith, while to hope he assigns the virtue of fear of the Lord.<sup>(9)</sup> We follow the teaching of the Angelic Doctor on this matter but also admit that this gift can be related to prudence, justice, and temperance.

The gift of knowledge is a supernatural habit through which the human intellect, under the action of the Holy Spirit, judges rightly concerning created things as related to eternal life and Christian perfection.

It is not a question of human or philosophical knowledge, which gives certain and evident knowledge of things deduced by natural reason from their principles or proximate causes. Nor is it a question of theological knowledge, which deduces from revealed truths the virtualities contained therein by making use of natural reasoning. It is a question of a supernatural knowledge or "divine instinct" which proceeds from a special illumination by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to judge rightly the connection between created things and the supernatural ultimate end. As a habit it resides in the intellect, as does the virtue of faith, which it perfects. It is primarily speculative and secondarily practical.

Under the action of this gift the individual does not proceed by reasoning but judges rightly concerning all created things by a superior impulse and by a higher light than that of simple reason illumined by faith. This distinguishes the gift of knowledge from the gift of understanding. The latter, as we have seen, penetrates revealed truths by a supernatural intuition, but without forming any judgments. The gift of knowledge, on the other hand, *judges* rightly concerning created things in relation to the supernatural end, and is thus distinguished from the gift of wisdom, whose function it is to judge divine things and not created things. This right



judging of creatures is the "science of the saints," and it is based on charity, which relates not only to God but also to creatures, forming a judgment of them according to their properties, and then directing all of them to God.

The effects of this gift are admirable, and all of them have a great sanctifying value. The following are the principal effects:

1. *It teaches us how to judge rightly concerning created things in relation to God.* This is proper to the gift of knowledge. Under its impulse, a double awareness is produced in the soul: it realizes the emptiness of created things and sees through them the God who made them.

2. *It guides us with certitude concerning that which we must believe or not believe.* The soul instinctively possesses the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*). Without having studied theology or without having had any education, such souls are aware whether or not a devotion, a doctrine, a counsel, or any kind of maxim is in accord with faith or is opposed to faith.

3. *It enables us to see promptly and with certitude the state of our soul.* Everything is clear to the penetrating introspection of the gift of knowledge. Our interior acts and the secret movements of our heart are seen in their goodness or malice. In this way we discover the evil or the good that previously escaped our notice. Rightly did St. Teresa say that "in a place where the sun enters, there is no hidden dust."

4. *It inspires us concerning the best method of conduct with our neighbor as regards eternal life.* In this respect the gift of knowledge influences the virtue of prudence, whose perfection is directly under the gift of counsel. By this gift preachers know what they ought to say to their hearers and what they ought to urge upon them. Directors perceive the state of the souls under their guidance, their spiritual needs, and the remedies for their faults. Superiors know in what way they ought to govern those under them, and parents, how to form their children. Here the gift of knowledge relates also to justice.

5. *It detaches us from the things of earth.* This is a consequence of that right judgment of things that constitutes the proper characteristic of the gift of knowledge. Compared to God, all creatures are as if they were not. For that reason it is necessary to rise above created things in order to rest in God alone. The gift of knowledge instructs the saints concerning the necessity of the detachment we admire, for example, in St. John of the Cross. A soul illuminated by the gift of knowledge passes beyond creatures in order not to be detained in its journey to God. The whole of creation is not worth a glance from one who has experienced God.

6. *It teaches us how to use created things in a holy way.* It is certain that created things are nothing when compared with God, and yet they are vestiges of God, and they can lead us to him if we use them rightly. There are countless examples of this in the lives of the saints. The contemplation of created things raised their souls to God because they could see the trace of God in creation. Sometimes the most insignificant detail, which would pass unnoticed by an ordinary person, made a strong impression on them and led them to God. Here the gift relates to the virtue of temperance.

7. *It fills us with repentance and sorrow for our past errors.* This is an inevitable consequence of a right judgment concerning created things. In the light of the gift of knowledge, souls discover the emptiness of created things, their short duration, their inability to make us truly happy, the harm that attachment to them can cause to the soul. Then, recalling the times they were attached to created things, they feel a most profound repentance manifested by intense acts of contrition. The pathetic accents of the *Miserere* spontaneously spring to their lips as a psychological necessity to alleviate their sorrow.

Such are the principal effects of the gift of knowledge. Through it, far from seeing creatures as obstacles to union with God, the soul uses them as instruments to be united to God. Perfected by the gifts of understanding and knowledge, the virtue of faith reaches its greatest intensity.

In addition to recollection, fidelity to grace and invocation to the Holy Spirit, which are the common means for fomenting the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general, we can point out some special means for disposing oneself for the actuations of the gift of knowledge.

1. *Consider the vanity of created things.* We can never attain by our own efforts the penetrating intuition of the gift of knowledge concerning the vanity of created things. And yet we can achieve something by meditating seriously on this point. God does not ask of us more than we can do at a given time, and those who do what they can, will not be refused the divine assistance for further progress.

2. *Accustom oneself to refer all created things to God.* We should never rest in creatures but should pass through them to God. Are not created beauties a pallid reflection of the divine beauty? We should endeavor to discover in all things the vestige or trace of God and thus prepare the way for the action of the Holy Spirit in us.

3. *Oppose energetically the spirit of the world.* The world is not concerned with anything but enjoying created things, putting all its happiness in them. There is no attitude more contrary to the spirit of the gift of knowledge. We should avoid the false maxims that are completely opposed to the spirit of God. We should always be alert lest we are taken by surprise by the artful enemy, who is constantly striving to turn our gaze away from the supernatural world.

4. *See the hand of God in the government of the world and in all the events of our life, whether prosperous or adverse.* It costs a great deal to acquire this point of view, and it will never be acquired completely until the gift of wisdom operates in us as well as the gift of knowledge. Nevertheless, we must endeavor to do as much as we can in this respect. God cares for us with a loving providence. He is our Father, and he knows much better than we what things are good for us. He leads us with an infinite love, although many times we cannot discover the secret design in that which he disposes or permits to happen to us.

5. *Cultivate simplicity of heart.* This will attract the blessing of God, and he will not neglect to give us the gifts we need to attain perfect purity of heart, if we are faithful to his grace. There is a close relationship between custody of the heart and the exact fulfillment of all our obligations. "I have more discernment than the elders, because I observe your precepts" (Ps. 119:100).

## Hope

Hope is the theological virtue infused by God into the will, by which we trust with complete certitude in the attainment of eternal life and the means necessary for reaching it, assisted by the omnipotent help of God. The primary object of hope is eternal beatitude; the secondary object consists in all the means leading to it. The formal motive of hope is the assisting omnipotence of God, connoting divine mercy and God's fidelity to his promises.

Hope resides in the will, because its proper object is the good, which is the object of the will, but charity and faith are more perfect than hope. Absolutely speaking, both faith and hope can exist without charity (unformed faith and hope), but no infused virtue can exist in the soul without faith.

Hope tends to its object with absolute certitude, a truth that requires some explaining. The Church teaches that without a special revelation we cannot be certain we shall attain our eternal salvation,<sup>(10)</sup> although we can and ought to have absolute certitude that with the assistance of the omnipotent help of God, no obstacle to our salvation is insuperable.

The goods of this world fall under the secondary object of hope, but only to the extent that they can be useful to us for salvation. For that reason, St. Thomas says that, apart from the salvation of our soul, we ought not to ask God for any good unless it is in some way related to our salvation.<sup>(11)</sup>

The act of hope, even of unformed hope, is of itself good and virtuous. This is expressly stated in Sacred Scripture (cf. Ps. 119:112; Matt. 6:33; Col. 3:1; Heb. 11:26) and can be demonstrated theologically because eternal life is the supernatural ultimate end of man. Therefore, to work with one's gaze fixed on this end is not only good and virtuous but also necessary.

By the same token, in this life there is no state of perfection that habitually excludes the motives of hope. The error of the Jansenists and the Quietists consisted in the affirmation that to work out of hope is immoral and imperfect and gives evidence that individuals desire God as a good for themselves, thus subordinating God to our own personal happiness. But such is not the case. We desire God for ourselves, not because of ourselves but because of himself. God continues to be the end or goal of the act of hope, not ourselves.

Like any other virtue, hope can increase more and more. Let us consider the principal phases of its development in the various stages in the spiritual life.

Above all, *beginners* should avoid falling into one of the two extremes contrary to hope: presumption and despair. To avoid the first, they should consider that without the grace of God we can do absolutely nothing in the supernatural order. "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Without God's help one could not have a single good thought or even pronounce worthily the name of Jesus (1 Cor. 12:3). They should remember that God is infinitely good and merciful, but that he is also infinitely just (Gal. 6:7). He is disposed to save us, but on the condition that we cooperate with his grace (1 Cor. 15:10) and that we work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).

To avoid despair and discouragement, beginners should realize that the mercy of God is untiring in pardoning the repentant sinner; and if it is certain that of ourselves we can do nothing, it is likewise certain that with God's grace we can do all things (Phil. 4:13). It is necessary, then, to rise courageously from one's falls and renew the journey with greater effort and zeal, taking occasion from the fault itself to redouble one's vigilance and effort. "All things work together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his decree" (Rom. 8:28); and St. Augustine adds, "even sins," so far as they are an occasion of making the soul more vigilant and cautious.

Beginners should also endeavor to raise their thoughts to heaven, and this for several reasons:

1. *In order to disdain the things of earth.* No created thing can fill completely the heart of man, in whom God has placed an infinite capacity. And even in the event that such things could satisfy man completely, this would be a transitory and fleeting happiness, as is life itself on this earth. Pleasures, wealth, honors, the applause of others -- all these things pass and vanish like smoke. When all is said and done, "What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process?" (Matt. 16:26).

2. *To be consoled in the midst of their labors and sufferings.* Suffering accompanies us inevitably from the cradle to the grave, and no one escapes it. But Christian hope reminds us that all the sufferings of this life are as nothing in comparison with the glory to be manifested in us (Rom. 8:13). If we bear them in a holy manner, these momentary tribulations prepare us for the eternal weight of a sublime and incomparable glory (2 Cor. 4:17). What a consolation for the soul that suffers tribulation if it is able to contemplate heaven through its tears!

3. *To be encouraged to be good.* The practice of virtue is arduous indeed. It is necessary to be detached from everything, to renounce one's own tastes and caprices, and to turn back the continuous attacks from the world, the devil, and the flesh. Especially at the beginning of the spiritual life this constant battle is most difficult. But what great encouragement the soul can experience in raising its eyes to heaven! It is well worthwhile to struggle for a short time during the brief years of this life in order to enjoy eternal blessings in heaven. Later, when the soul begins to advance along the path of union with God, the motives of disinterested love will prevail over those of the soul's own happiness, but these desires for perfect happiness will never be completely abandoned. Even the greatest saints experienced a nostalgia for heaven, and this is one of the most powerful stimuli for advancing without discouragement along the way of heroism and sanctity.

The *advanced soul* will strive to cultivate the virtue of hope by intensifying as much as possible its confidence in God and in his divine assistance. To this end, the following practices are helpful:

1. *Never to be preoccupied with anxious solicitude for tomorrow.* We are submerged in the divine and loving providence of God. Nothing necessary will be lacking to us if we trust in him and if we hope for all things from him. We have the promise of Christ himself: "Look at the birds in the sky .... Think of the flowers growing in the fields .... Will he not much more look after you?" (Matt. 6:26-30). Christ also tells us: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

2. *To simplify their prayer as much as possible.* "In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do .... Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:7-9). The formula of the Our Father, which came from the lips of the divine Master, will be their favorite prayer, together with the other prayers from the Gospel that are so brief and filled with confidence in the goodness and mercy of God. What simplicity and sublimity in the Gospel, but how much complication and confusion in us when we pray!

3. *To advance in detachment from all earthly things.* Of what value are all created goods when compared with the graces of God. Before the thought of the sovereign beauty of God, the soul will readily renounce all earthly things, and reach the point of conquering the threefold concupiscence to which so many souls are subject on earth and which prevents them from flying to heaven (1 John 2:16).

4. *To advance with great confidence along the path of union with God.* Nothing can detain the soul if it wishes to proceed at any cost, God, who calls the soul to a life of intimate union with himself, extends his divine hand with the absolute guarantee of his omnipotence, mercy, and fidelity to his promises. The world, the devil, and the flesh will declare war against the soul, "but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). With good reason did St. John of the Cross say that hope is that which especially makes the soul pleasing to the beloved, and that by it the soul will attain all that it desires.

The following are the principal characteristics of the virtue of hope in *perfect* souls:

1. *Universal confidence in God.* Nothing is able to discourage a servant of God when he or she enters upon an enterprise pertaining to the divine glory. One would say that contradictions and obstacles, far from diminishing the virtue of hope, intensify and augment it. Such a soul's confidence in God will sometimes reach the point of holy audacity. As St. Paul said of Abraham, these holy souls hope "against hope" (Rom. 4:18). They are disposed at any moment to repeat the heroic phrase of Job: "Slay me though he might, I will wait for him" (Job 13:15). This heroic confidence glorifies God greatly and is of the greatest merit for the soul.

2. *Indestructible peace and serenity.* This is a natural consequence of their universal confidence in God. Nothing can disturb the tranquillity of their spirit. Ridicule, persecution, calumny, injury, sickness, misfortune -- everything falls upon their souls like water on a stone, without leaving the slightest trace or alteration in the serenity of their spirit. One would say that their souls had lost contact with the things of this world and were as tranquil as if they were already in eternity.

3. *The desire to die in order to reach heaven.* This is one of the clearest signs of the perfection of hope. Nature experiences an instinctive horror of death. Only when grace has taken complete possession of the soul can one desire death in order to live the true life hereafter. Then the soul gives expression to the "I die because I do not die" of St. Augustine, which was repeated later by St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross. "Pressing on the Christian, to be sure, are the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death. But, linked with the paschal mystery and patterned

on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope."[\(12\)](#)

4. *Heaven begins on earth.* The saints desire to die to go to heaven, but in reality their life in heaven has already begun on earth. What do the things of this world matter to them? The servants of God live on earth only in their bodies, but their souls and their yearning are fixed on heaven. It is simply another way of stating the phrase: "We have our citizenship in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

## **The Gift of Fear**

According to St. Thomas, the gift that pertains to the perfection of the virtue of hope is fear of the Lord. This gift also relates to temperance under certain aspects.

The gift of fear is a supernatural habit by which the just soul, under the instinct of the Holy Spirit, acquires a special docility for subjecting itself completely to the divine will out of reverence for the excellency and majesty of God. God in himself, as supreme and infinite goodness, cannot be an object of fear; he is an object of love. But so far as he is able to punish us for our sins, he can and ought to be feared. St. Thomas harmonizes fear and hope by saying that in God there are justice and mercy, the first of which arouses fear in us, the second, hope. And thus, for different reasons, God is the object of fear and of hope.[\(13\)](#)

It is necessary to examine the nature of this fear, however, because there are many types of fear and not all of them are gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some of them are not even virtues. Fear can be divided into mundane fear, servile fear, filial fear and initial fear.

*Mundane fear* is that which would not hesitate to offend God in order to avoid some temporal evil. This fear is always evil because it places its end and goal in this world and turns its back upon God.

*Servile fear* is that which serves God and fulfills his divine will because of the punishment that would fall upon us if we did not do so (temporal punishment or the eternal punishment of hell). This fear, although imperfect, is substantially good; it enables us to avoid sin, and it is directed to God as to its end.

*Filial fear* (also called reverential fear) is that which serves God and fulfills his divine will, fleeing from sin because it is an offense against God and for fear of being separated from him. This fear, as is evident, is good and perfect. It flees from sin without taking any account of punishment.

*Initial fear* is that which occupies an intermediate place between the last two types of fear. It flees from sin principally as an offense against God, but there is mixed with this flight a certain fear of punishment. This fear is better than servile fear, but it is not as perfect as filial fear.

The question now arises: which of these types of fear is the gift of the Holy Spirit? Evidently the gift of fear is not a mundane or servile fear. Mundane fear is sinful, and servile fear, although not evil of itself, could be found even in a sinner by means of an actual grace that would move him

to sorrow because of the fear of punishment. According to St. Thomas, only filial or chaste fear is the gift of fear, for it is based on charity or reverence of God as Father, and it fears to be separated from him.

Three principal virtues are perfected by the operation of the gift of fear: hope, temperance, and humility. The gift of fear gives us supernatural awareness of our dependence on God and inclines us to rely only on the infinite power of God, the formal motive of hope. Therefore St. Thomas states that the gift of fear looks principally at God, and in this sense it pertains to the virtue of hope; but secondarily it helps to correct the disorderly tendency by which we experience a strong attraction to carnal delight, thus aiding and strengthening the virtue of temperance. The gift of fear also perfects humility by making the soul realize its nothingness before God and acknowledge the punishment it deserves for its offenses against God's infinite majesty.

In addition to these three fundamental virtues, the gift of fear also exercises its influence in regard to other moral virtues. It acts on the virtues of modesty and chastity by imparting a repugnance to anything shameful; on the virtue of meekness, by controlling disordered anger. Moreover, it serves as a brake on the passions when they would otherwise exceed the limits of reason.

The effects of the gift of fear are of great value in the sanctification of souls. The following are the principal effects of this gift:

1. *A lively sentiment of the grandeur and majesty of God, which arouses in the soul a profound adoration filled with reverence and humility.* This is the most characteristic effect of the gift of fear, and it follows from its definition. Before the infinite majesty of God the soul feels as if it is nothing or less than nothing. It is filled with such reverence, submission, and subjection that it feels great desires to suffer for God (St. John of the Cross). This reverence for the majesty of God is also manifested in all the things that have any relationship to God. A church or oratory, the priest, sacred vessels, the images of the saints all are regarded with respect and veneration. The gift of piety produces similar effects, but from another point of view, as we shall see later.
2. *A great horror of sin and a lively sorrow for ever having committed sin.* Once its faith is illumined by the splendor of the gifts of understanding and knowledge, and once its hope has been subjected to the action of the gift of fear, the soul understands as never before the malice of any offense against God, however insignificant. It understands the rigor with which divine justice must punish sin in the next life if penance is not done in this life. The repentance of such souls for the slightest fault is most profound. From it proceeds the anxious desire to make reparation for sin and an irresistible tendency to crucify oneself in a thousand ways.
3. *An extreme vigilance to avoid the occasion of offending God.* This is a logical consequence of the previous effect. These souls fear nothing so much as the slightest offense against God. They have seen clearly that in reality the only evil in the world is sin and that the others do not deserve to be called evil.
4. *Perfect detachment from all created things.* We have already seen that the gift of knowledge produces this effect in the soul, but from another point of view. The gifts are

interrelated among themselves and with charity, and for that reason they mutually influence each other. This is perfectly understandable. The soul that has become aware of the grandeur and majesty of God must necessarily consider all created things as empty and useless. Honors, wealth, power, and dignity -- all are considered as less than straw and unworthy of a moment of attention.

In addition to the general means for disposing oneself for the impetus of the Holy Spirit -- recollection, purity of heart, fidelity to grace, frequent invocation of the Holy Spirit -- there are other methods more closely connected with the gift of fear.

1. *To meditate frequently on the infinite grandeur and majesty of God.* We can never by our own discursive methods acquire the contemplative knowledge that is given to the soul by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But we can do something by reflecting on the power and majesty of God.

2. *To accustom oneself to converse with God with filial confidence, filled with reverence.* We should never forget that God is our Father, but that he is also a God of terrible grandeur and majesty. Sometimes pious souls forget the latter and allow themselves to be excessively familiar with God and even to give expression to irreverent audacity. It is certainly incredible to see the extent to which the Lord gives expression of his familiarity with souls that are pleasing to him, but it is necessary that he take the initiative and not the soul. Meanwhile the soul should remain in an attitude of reverence and submission, which is not incompatible with the sweet and intimate confidence of adopted children.

3. *To meditate frequently on the infinite malice of sin and to arouse a great horror for sin.* In itself, love is much more powerful and efficacious than fear as a motive for avoiding sin. Nevertheless, the consideration of fear is a great help in keeping souls from sin. The recollection of the terrible punishment God has prepared for those who definitively reject his law would be sufficient to make us flee from sin if we would meditate on it. It is a fearful thing, as St. Paul says (Heb. 10:31), to fall into the hands of an offended God. To this end, it will be of great help if we avoid all dangerous occasions that may lead us to sin, practice the daily examination of conscience with fidelity, and consider Jesus crucified as the victim of propitiation for our crimes and sins.

4. *To be meek and humble in dealing with our neighbor.* He who has a clear concept of what God is in his infinite majesty and realizes that God has mercifully pardoned him thousands of times, how can he dare to exact with haughtiness and disdain that which is owed to him by his neighbor (Matt. 18:23-35)? We must pardon injuries, and we must treat all our neighbors with exquisite humility and meekness. We should consider them to be better than we are, at least in the sense that perhaps they have not resisted grace as much as we have, or they would not have sinned if they had received the gifts God has given us.

5. *To beg frequently of the Holy Spirit a reverential fear of God.* When all is said and done, every perfect disposition is a gift of God, and it can be attained only by humility and persevering prayer. Scripture is filled with sublime formulas by which we can petition holy fear and make us understand that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Sir. 1:16). We must work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), as



the Holy Spirit warns us through the psalmist: "Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way" (Ps. 2:11).

## **Charity**

St. Thomas begins his treatise on charity by stating that it is friendship between God and man. Like every friendship, it implies a mutual love based on the communication of some good. For that reason charity necessarily presupposes sanctifying grace, which makes us children of God and heirs of glory. By nature we are nothing more than servants of the Creator, but through grace and charity we become the children and friends of God. And if our servitude ennobles us so greatly, since to serve God is to reign, how much more are we elevated by the charity of God, which is "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Such is the lofty dignity of the Christian.

Charity is a supernatural habit infused by God into the will, by which we love God for himself above all things, and ourselves, and our neighbor for God. The object of charity is primarily God, secondarily ourselves and our fellow human beings. The object of charity is God as supreme goodness in himself and as our ultimate end.

As an infused habit, charity resides in the will because it involves a movement of love toward the supreme good, and love and the good constitute the act and the proper object of the will. It is a supernatural habit God infuses in the degree that pleases him, without taking into account the natural qualities or dispositions of the one who receives charity.

Charity as a virtue is specifically one, for although it embraces various objects (God, ourselves, and all human beings), the motive of charity in all cases is the divine goodness. Hence, when we love ourselves -or our neighbor for any motive other than the goodness of God, we do not make an act of charity, but an act of natural human love, whether selfish love or benevolent love. Purely human love as such is of no value in the supernatural order.

Charity is the most excellent of all virtues, not only because it is the virtue that intimately unites us with God, but also because it is the form of all the infused virtues. Its intrinsic excellence derives from the fact that it is the virtue that unites us most intimately with God. It far surpasses the theological virtues of faith and hope, as St. Paul teaches: "There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

By the act of charity, the will goes forth from itself to rest in God as he is in himself. This profound doctrine gives us the key to the solution of the much-debated question concerning the superiority of the intellect or the will. The will in itself is inferior to the intellect, for it is a blind faculty and cannot produce its acts if the intellect does not place the desirable object before the will. The intellect precedes and guides the will, which could not love anything without the intellect. It is impossible to love what one does not know. But the operation of the intellect is distinct from that of the will. The intellect draws things to itself or absorbs them, so to speak, into its own intellectual mold. Consequently, when it knows inferior beings such as material things, it ennobles them and dignifies them by raising them to the intellectual order; but when it knows superior beings such as God or supernatural truths, it limits them by obliging them to assume an inferior intellectual mold.

The exact opposite is true of the will. By reason of its proper act, which is to love, the will goes forth from itself to rest in the beloved object as it is in itself. Consequently, if the will loves objects that are inferior to itself, such as the things of earth, it is degraded to an inferior level; but if it loves superior beings, such as God, it is ennobled and elevated to the level of those superior beings in which it rests through love. For that reason St. Augustine could say: "If you love the earth, you are earthly; but if you love God, what must be said except that you are God?"

It follows, therefore, that although the intellect is in itself more perfect than the will, nevertheless, in this life, by the very nature of the operation, it is more perfect to love God than to know him. A theologian may know a great deal about God, but in a manner that is cold and purely intellectual, while a humble and simple soul who knows almost nothing about theology may love God intensely, and this is much better.

Another practical consequence of great importance follows from this sublime doctrine. The only way to avoid debasing ourselves by the love of inferior created things is to love them in God, through God, and for God; in other words, for the formal motive of charity. Charity can transform whatever it touches, even the things inferior to us but directed through charity to the glory of God.

Charity can increase in this life because it is a movement toward God, our ultimate end, and so long as we are wayfarers in this life it is possible to approach more and more closely to the goal. This greater proximity is effected precisely through the increase of charity. Moreover, charity does not admit of any term or limit in this life; it can grow indefinitely. This does not mean, however, that charity cannot reach a relative perfection, as we have already explained (see Chapter 5).

Like all the other habits, charity increases, not by the addition of one form to another form, but by a greater radication of the virtue in the subject. It cannot increase by addition because such an increase is not possible in qualitative things but only in quantitative things, and habits are classified as qualities. Thus the will participates more and more in charity so far as it is more penetrated by charity.

Like the other virtues, charity is not increased by any act whatever, but only by an act that is more intense than the habit as actually possessed here and now. If charity were increased by addition, then any act of charity, however weak and remiss, would increase charity. Thus, simply by the multiplication of many remiss acts, the thermometer of habitual charity would rise to a surprising degree and even surpass the charity of many of the saints. Such an explanation of the increase of charity leads only to absurdity.

The true nature of the increase of charity is far different. As a qualitative form, it can increase only by a more profound radication in the subject, and this is impossible without a more intense act. This is in conformity with the increase of habits even on the natural level. They need a more intense act to increase as habits.

We now have an important practical conclusion. Persons who live in slothfulness and tepidity can paralyze their Christian life completely, even if they live habitually in the grace of God and perform a large number of good but remiss works. This is amply verified in daily experience. A large number of good souls live habitually in the grace of God, without committing any serious

faults but performing many good works and acts of sacrifice, but they are far from being saints. If they encounter any contradiction or difficulty, they become angry; if they are lacking anything, their laments are raised to heaven; if their superiors command something that does not please them, they murmur and complain; if anyone criticizes or humiliates them, they become enemies of those persons. All this shows clearly that such individuals are still very far from Christian perfection.

But how can one explain this phenomenon after these persons have performed so many good works for so many years in the Christian life? The theological explanation is simple: they have performed a great many good works, it is true; but they have performed them in a lukewarm manner and not in such a way that each new act is more fervent. Rather, each succeeding act is more remiss and more imperfect. They are as lukewarm and imperfect as if they were at the very beginning of the path to holiness.

But one may ask: "Then are all those good works that were remiss and imperfect of no avail whatever? Are remiss acts completely useless and sterile?"

To this we reply that the remiss acts are not completely useless and sterile. They serve a twofold purpose, one in this life and the other in glory. In this life they prevent the dispositions of soul from becoming completely cold, which would put these people in the proximate occasion of committing a grave sin and thus destroying their Christian life completely. A person who does not perform an act that is more intense than the virtuous habit he or she possesses will not increase the virtuous habit, but neither will the habit be lost completely. The degree of charity attained will never diminish of itself, even if a person lives for many years in tepidity and performs acts that are remiss or less intense. Therefore, something is achieved by these remiss acts because they at least help to preserve the soul in the state of grace. They likewise preserve the essential degree of merit already gained.

Remiss acts do not remain without their proper reward in the life to come, although they do not increase the degree of essential glory that corresponds to the *habitual* degree of one's grace and charity at the time of death. In addition to the essential reward in heaven, however, there are many different accidental rewards. Each remiss act, since it was good and meritorious for having been performed in a state of grace and under the influence of charity, will receive its corresponding accidental reward in heaven.

Charity does not refer to God alone, but also to one's neighbors. The love of God causes us to love whatever pertains to God or whatever reflects his goodness, and it is evident that one's neighbor is a good of God and shares, or can share, in eternal happiness. For that reason the love of charity with which we love our neighbor is exactly the same charity with which we love God. There are not two charities but only one, since the formal motive of loving one's neighbor is the goodness of God reflected in him. Hence, when we love our neighbors for any other motive distinct from God, we do not love them with the love of charity.

We should also love ourselves with the love of charity, although strictly speaking, one cannot love oneself as a friend, for that requires another person. However, our love for ourselves is the model and root of friendship because friendship for others consists precisely in the fact that our attitude to them is the same as to ourselves. Moreover, love is divided into "friendship-love" and "desire-love." The former is directed to a person; the latter to a thing desired for a person.

Therefore, not only does love of self come under the virtue of charity, but it has priority over love of neighbor.<sup>(14)</sup> In loving ourselves in charity we love ourselves as persons sharing in the nature and life of God through grace, and at the same time we love God as our ultimate end and source of our perfect happiness.

The love that is charity is "friendship-love." It is a generous love or gift love, and it consists more in loving than in being loved. When this type of love predominates, it should produce the following effects:

1. *Union with the beloved*, which in the spiritual life means living constantly in the presence of God and fostering this recollection by the practice of mental prayer, which is the language of love.
2. *Detachment from created things*, which means that one uproots all attachments to created things in order to advance toward ever greater union with God.
3. *Spiritual joy*, which is the fruit of gift love, accompanied by the interior peace that flows from living in God's grace.
4. *Zeal for the beloved*, which is manifested by total submission to God's will and the works of the apostolate that are stimulated by love of neighbor.
5. *Spirit of sacrifice*, which enables one to bear the cross of trials and sufferings out of love and, eventually, to seek to be conformed to Jesus crucified.

## **The Gift of Wisdom**

The gift of wisdom is a supernatural habit, inseparable from charity, by which we judge rightly concerning God and divine things through their ultimate and highest causes under a special instinct and movement of the Holy Spirit, who makes us taste these things by a certain connaturality. The gift of wisdom perfects charity by giving it the divine modality it lacks so long as charity is subject to the rule of human reason, even illumined by faith. So far as it presupposes a judgment, the gift of wisdom resides in the intellect as in its proper subject, but as a judgment by a kind of connaturality with divine things, it presupposes charity, for this is not a purely speculative wisdom but a practical wisdom. It is true it belongs to the gift of wisdom, in the first place, to contemplate the divine, but in the second place, it pertains to wisdom to direct human acts according to divine things.

The philosophers defined wisdom as certain and evident knowledge of things through their ultimate causes. Those who contemplate a thing and know its proximate or immediate causes have scientific knowledge. Those who can reduce their knowledge to the ultimate principles of the natural order possess *philosophical* wisdom, which is called metaphysics. Those who, guided by the light of faith, investigate the revealed data of revelation deduce conclusions from them and possess *theological* wisdom. But those who, presupposing faith and sanctifying grace, judge divine things and human things through their ultimate causes by a kind of divine instinct possess supernatural wisdom, and this is the *gift of wisdom*. Beyond this, there is no higher type of wisdom in this life. It is surpassed only by the beatific vision and the uncreated wisdom of God.

It is evident, therefore, that the knowledge given by the gift of wisdom is incomparably superior to all human sciences, even theology. For that reason a simple and uneducated soul lacking the theological knowledge acquired by study may sometimes possess, through the gift of wisdom, a more profound knowledge of divine things than an eminent theologian.

A certain connaturality is another note that characterizes the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it reaches its highest perfection in the gift of wisdom. Souls that experience this will understand very well the meaning of the words: "Taste and see how good the Lord is" (Ps. 34:9). They experience a divine delight that sometimes enables them to know something of the ineffable joy of eternal beatitude.

From this sublime doctrine follow two inevitable conclusions of great importance in the theology of Christian perfection. The first is that the mystical state is not something extraordinary in the full development of the Christian life; it is the normal atmosphere that grace demands, so that it can develop in all its virtualities.

The second conclusion is that an actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the human mode, besides being impossible, would be utterly useless for the perfecting of the infused virtues, and especially of the theological virtues. Since the latter are superior to the gifts of the Holy Spirit by reason of their nature, the only perfection they could receive from the gifts is that of the divine mode, which is exclusive and proper to the gifts.

By reason of its elevation and grandeur and by reason of the sublimity of the virtue it perfects, the effects produced by the gift of wisdom are truly remarkable. The following are the principal effects of this gift:

1. *It gives to the saints a divine sense by which they judge all things.* This is the most impressive of all the effects of the gift of wisdom so far as they are manifested externally. One would say that the saints have completely lost the human manner of judgment and that it has been replaced by a divine instinct by which they judge all things. They see everything from God's point of view, whether the commonplace episodes of daily life or the great events of life. They never fix their attention on secondary causes but pass them by, to arrive immediately at the Supreme Cause, who governs and rules them from above.

2. *It makes saints live the mysteries of faith in an entirely divine manner.* Introduced by charity into the intimacy of the divine Persons, the divinized soul, under the impulse of the Spirit of love, contemplates all things from this center. God is present to the soul in all his divine attributes and in all his great mysteries. In the measure in which it is possible for a simple creature, the gaze of the soul resembles the vision God has of himself and of the entire universe. It is a godlike type of contemplation experienced in the light of the Deity, and in it the soul experiences ineffable sweetness.

3. *It makes them live in union with the three divine Persons through an ineffable participation in their trinitarian life.* The gift of knowledge acts by an ascending movement, raising the soul from creatures to God; the gift of understanding penetrates God's mysteries from without and within by a simple loving gaze; the gift of wisdom penetrates the very life of the Trinity. Thus the soul sees things only from their highest and most divine cause.

The soul that has reached these heights can give itself to all types of work, even the most absorbing, but in the center of the soul it experiences the divine company of the Three. Martha and Mary have been joined in an ineffable manner, so that the prodigious activity of Martha in no way compromises the peace and tranquillity of Mary, who remains at the feet of the divine Master.

4. *It raises the virtue of charity to heroism.* This is precisely the purpose of the gift of wisdom. Freed from human limitations, charity reaches tremendous proportions. It is incredible what the love of God can do in souls that are under the operations of the gift of wisdom. Such souls love God with a pure love only for his infinite goodness and without the mixture of any human motives or self-interest. True, they do not renounce their hope for heaven; they desire it more than ever, but they desire it primarily because there they shall be able to love God with even greater intensity and without any interruption.

Love of neighbor also reaches a sublime perfection through the gift of wisdom. Accustomed to see God in all things, even in the most minute details of daily life, the saints see him in a special way in their neighbor. They love their neighbor with a tenderness that is completely supernatural. They serve their neighbor with heroic abnegation. Seeing Christ in the poor, in those who suffer, in the heart of all their brothers and sisters, they hasten to serve all with a soul filled with love. They are happy to deprive themselves of even the necessities of life in order to give them to their neighbor, whose interest they place and prefer before their own, as they would put the interests of Christ before their own.

5. *It gives to all the virtues their ultimate perfection and makes them truly divine.* Perfected by the gift of wisdom, charity extends the divine influence to all the other virtues, because charity is the form of all the virtues. The whole supernatural organism experiences the divine influence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All the Christian virtues acquire a godlike modality that admits of countless shades and manifestations. Having died definitively to self, being perfect in every type of virtue, the soul has arrived at the summit of the mount of sanctity, where it reads the inscription written by St. John of the Cross: "Here on this mountain dwell only the honor and glory of God."

Apart from the general means such as recollection, a life of prayer, fidelity to grace, and humility, one can dispose oneself for the actuation of the gift of wisdom by using the following means, which are within the workings of ordinary grace:

1. *By seeing and evaluating all things from God's point of view.* How many souls, even among those who are consecrated to God, fall into the habit of judging things from a purely natural and human point of view! If things do not go their way, they accuse others of all sorts of imperfections and even malice; but when things proceed according to their personal good and pleasure, they attribute everything to God. Actually, they are willing to do God's will whenever it happens to coincide with their own interests. Truly spiritual persons accept all things, whether pleasant or painful, with a spirit of equanimity, and if things are painful or even unjust, they can still see the spiritual value of such experiences, if only as a means of purification and penance. Even the smallest works are seen in the light of supernatural value and merit and, although they are conscious of the defects of others, they are even more aware of their own imperfections.

2. *By combatting the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness in the eyes of God.* St. Paul speaks frequently in this manner, but the greater percentage of us rely on this world's wisdom. Yet Christ constantly warns us in his teaching that we should expect to be a contradiction and a paradox to the world. This does not mean that the world as such is evil, but it does mean that those who live and act for worldly goals and according to worldly standards will inevitably have to jettison the standards of God. The lives of the saints are replete with instances in which the gift of wisdom caused them to perform actions that were foolish in the eyes of the worldly but were divine and prudent from a supernatural point of view.

3. *By detaching oneself from things of this world, however good and useful.* Everything in its proper place. Even the holiest and most beneficial created goods can become a source of temptation and sin if we are too attached to them. As soon as anything outside of God becomes a goal or end in itself rather than a means to God, the soul is diverted from its proper orientation to God. This applies not only to the obvious dangers, such as wealth and pleasure and ambition, but also to things good in themselves, such as the study of theology, the liturgy, private devotions, penitential practices -- even to the use of the means to sanctity itself. All of these, if exaggerated or sought after with a selfish spirit, can become obstacles to union with God and the operation of the gift of wisdom that flows from that union.

4. *By cultivating indifference to spiritual consolations.* It is God's way to lead a soul to him by conferring spiritual consolations, but the time comes when these consolations are removed and the soul is tested, purified, and made strong in love. One must strive diligently to cultivate true devotion, which implies a resolute will to serve God at any cost. We naturally are drawn to those things that give us pleasure, whether spiritual or sensual; hence all the more reason for detachment and self-denial. The common error is to love the gift rather than the giver, and for that reason God withdraws consolations when the soul is ready to pass on to another phase of its spiritual development. To love and serve God in darkness and privation is by far a greater proof of one's fidelity than to love him in periods of delight and consolation.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Vatican Council I, Denz.-Schön. 3008, 3011.

Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Liberty, n. 10.

*Cf.* Denz.-Schön. 1530.

*Ibid.*, 1544; 1578.

*Ibid.*, 1532.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 5, a. 4.

*Ibid.*, q. 8, a. 1.

*Ibid.*, q. 69, a. 2, ad 3.

*Ibid.*, qq. 9 and 19.

Denz.-Schön. 1540.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 17, a. 2, ad 2.

*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 22.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 19, a. 1, ad 2.

*Ibid.*, I-II, q. 26, aa. 1-4.

## 11

### The Moral Virtues

Once the various faculties of the soul are rectified in regard to the supernatural order through the theological virtues, it is necessary to rectify them in regard to the means for attaining that end. This is the role of the moral virtues. As we have already mentioned, it is impossible to enumerate all the moral virtues, since there can be a virtue wherever there can be a morally good habit regarding a given area of human activity, and human activities are multiple. However, theologians generally group the moral virtues around the basic cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

We shall limit ourselves to a discussion of the cardinal virtues and a brief exposition of some of the secondary virtues connected with them. To do more would carry us too far into the domain of moral theology.

#### Prudence

The first of the four cardinal virtues and the most important as a fulcrum for all the other moral virtues is prudence. It is a special virtue infused by God into the practical intellect for the right government of one's actions in view of the supernatural end. By reason of origin, infused prudence is given by God with sanctifying grace. By reason of extension or application, infused prudence governs the supernatural order. By reason of the formal motive, infused prudence operates under reason enlightened by faith and informed with charity.

Prudence is the most necessary of all the moral virtues because its function is precisely to point out and command the just mean or measure in regard to any and all human actions. It enables us to judge accurately what is the morally good thing to do under particular circumstances. In a certain sense, even the theological virtues come under the domain of prudence, for there are occasions and circumstances in which supernatural prudence must dictate the proper operations of faith, hope, and charity. Indeed, it can be said that, without prudence, no other virtue can be practiced with perfection.

The importance of the virtue of prudence is especially evident in certain aspects of human life. First, it helps the individual avoid sin, pointing out through experience the causes and occasions of sin as well as the opportune remedies. Secondly, it contributes to the increase and growth of virtue, judging in each instance what should be done or avoided in view of one's sanctification. It



is sometimes difficult to judge in a given instance which of two virtues is to be practiced; for example, justice or mercy, recollection or apostolic zeal, fortitude or meekness. Thirdly, prudence assists greatly in the works of the apostolate, whether in the pulpit, the confessional, or elsewhere.

There are three acts involved in the functioning of prudence: *deliberation*, *judgment*, and *execution*. First of all, depending on the importance and the complexity of the matter, one must consider the various means for attaining an end or the various ways of performing an action. It is at this point that one needs a knowledge of principles or norms of action and at the same time the ability to relate those principles to the case at hand, with all its existential circumstances. Once the matter has been deliberated, a judgment is made as to the proper method of action in this particular matter. Lastly, the will gives the command to carry out the decision.

Eight integral parts are required for the perfection of the virtue of prudence, five of which pertain to the speculative aspect and three to the practical aspect. Each and every part will not necessarily function in every instance of the exercise of the virtue, but all must be possessed so that they will function when particular circumstances require. The eight parts are:

1. *Memory of the past*, so that one may learn from experience what is to be done or avoided in particular circumstances.
2. *Understanding of the present*, so that one may judge whether a given action is lawful or unlawful, morally good or evil, fitting or unfitting.
3. *Docility*, so that those who lack experience may accept the counsel and advice of those who have experience.
4. *Sagacity*, so that one may act rightly in urgent cases when time or circumstances do not permit delay.
5. *Reasoning power*, so that when time permits, one may act after the required consideration and reflection.
6. *Foresight*, so that one may judge the immediate means in view of the end or goal being sought.
7. *Circumspection*, so that one may take into consideration the special circumstances surrounding a given act, as to persons and places.
8. *Precaution*, so that one will take into consideration the possible obstacles from without, or one's own weakness or incapacity in view of a given action.[\(1\)](#)

The practice of any virtue varies according to the state of perfection of the individual Christian. This is very evident in the case of prudence, which is the virtue of maturity, and hence is usually deficient in the young, due to lack of experience and the tendency to be motivated by emotions or sentiments rather than governed by reason. There are, however, certain basic practices that can be utilized for the cultivation of prudence.

*Beginners* in the spiritual life, whose dominant concern is to remain in the state of grace and grow in virtue, need to foster the particular characteristics just mentioned, concentrating

especially on reasoning power, docility, memory of the past, foresight, circumspection, and caution. They should always reflect before acting, never postponing decisions to the last minute or being influenced unduly by passion or selfishness. They should try to project into the future in order to foresee the possible effects of their actions. They should look carefully at all the circumstances surrounding a decision or action. They should remain firm in their decisions and conscientiously perform the duty of the moment. They should avoid all types of duplicity and craftiness and not yield to the temptation to use pretexts or rationalization to excuse themselves from their obligations or from sin. It would be very helpful for the young to have a model, if only the general example of good-living Christians. Lastly, it is helpful to evaluate all one's actions in terms of salvation: what does this profit me toward eternal life

*Advanced souls* should still be solicitous to perfect the virtue of prudence through charity, striving to do all things for the glory of God. More and more should they try to conform to the pattern of Christ, asking what Jesus would do in a given situation. Being more immediately concerned with striving for the perfection of charity, they should conform to the higher norm of Christian living, which states that not all things that are lawful are fitting and proper for a holy Christian. Consequently, they should be more careful to avoid venial sin and the occasions of sin and should be more attentive and docile to the movements of grace and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. More and more they should interiorize the norms of Christian living so that they have the mind of Christ guiding them in all that they do.

*Souls highly perfected* in charity should dispose themselves to practice the virtue of prudence under the impulse of the gift of counsel.

### **The Gift of Counsel**

The gift of counsel is a supernaturally infused habit by which the Holy Spirit enables one to judge rightly in particular events what ought to be done in view of the supernatural ultimate end and personal sanctification. Whereas the virtue of prudence operates according to the dictates of reason enlightened by faith, the gift of counsel operates under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Thus it often commands actions for which human reason would never be able to give an explanation, nor would human reason alone, even with the light of faith, be able to come to such practical and particular judgments.

It is therefore evident that the gift of counsel is necessary in those cases in which an immediate judgment is required, but there is neither the ability nor the opportunity to make the decision under the virtue of prudence, which works always in a human mode. For example, it is at times difficult to know how to equate suavity with firmness, how to reconcile the necessity of guarding a secret with the obligation to speak the truth, the interior life with the apostolate, an affectionate love with perfect chastity. It is even more difficult for persons charged with government and administration -- in religion, in the family, in civil and economic life -- to be able at every instance to do that which is prudent. In many instances, the prudent action will have to be the result of the operation of the gift of counsel.

When the gift of counsel operates in souls, it produces marvelous effects, of which the principal ones are the following:

1. *It preserves one from the danger of a false conscience.* This is especially important for

moral theologians, spiritual directors, confessors, and preachers of the Gospel.

2. *It provides the solution to many difficult and unexpected situations and problems.* If a soul is habitually faithful to grace and intent on doing all for the glory of God, the gift of counsel will frequently come into play when human reason, either alone or enlightened by faith, would be incapable of making the proper judgment. The solution may not be one that human prudence would suggest or that reason would approve, but since it comes from the Holy Spirit working through the gift, it is always the right solution.

3. *It inspires superiors with the most apt means for governing others.* Prudence is not restricted to one's personal actions but is the primary virtue required for the government of others. Great indeed is the need for a delicate sense of judgment in the problems presented in the direction and government of others. Hence the gift of counsel is often necessary for the decisions and commands to be made by the religious superior, the spiritual director, and the parents of a family.

4. *It increases one's docility to legitimate superiors.* Strange as it may seem, the gift of counsel has as one of its most wonderful effects the beautiful trait of docility. God has determined that we should be governed by superiors in all the various phases of life, and the Holy Spirit, through the gift of counsel, inspires this subjection to lawful superiors.

In addition to the general means for disposing oneself for the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, there are special predispositions necessary for the actuation of the gift of counsel:

1. *Profound humility*, in order to recognize one's own weakness and ignorance, and thus have recourse to the Holy Spirit for light and guidance.

2. *Reflection and patience*, realizing that in some circumstances all possible human diligence is insufficient and that the Holy Spirit alone can perform the operation in us. But we must wait upon the Lord, who will help us in his own good time,

3. *Ability to listen to God's voice*, avoiding the noise and tumult of the world as much as possible and cultivating mental prayer practiced in solitude and recollection.

4. *Docility and obedience*, for there is nothing that so prevents the Holy Spirit from operating in us as does an independent and insubordinate spirit.

## **Justice**

The virtue of prudence is first in excellence and importance among the moral virtues, but the virtue of justice is first in the order of generation and development. The first moral lessons taught a child are lessons pertaining to justice, rights, and duties.

As an infused virtue justice is a supernatural habit that inclines the will constantly and perpetually to render to each one that which is due strictly.<sup>(2)</sup> We say that justice is a constant and perpetual disposition of the will because a habit requires more than an occasional act of virtue. This virtue, moreover, perfects the will and not the intellect, for it pertains to the practical order of regulating one's relations with one's neighbors. Further, it pertains to those things due to

another in the strict sense, unlike the virtues of charity, affability, and gratitude, which are based on a certain fittingness and not on a strict obligation. Hence for strict justice there must always be present: reference to another, strict obligation, and exact adequation (neither more nor less than what is due).

After prudence, justice is the most excellent of all the moral virtues, although it is inferior to the theological virtues and even to the annexed virtue of religion. Its importance in both personal and social life is evident. It puts things in their right order and thus prepares the way for true peace, which St. Augustine defines as the tranquillity of order, and Scripture defines as the work of justice.

In every kind of justice two things are required in order that one may be called just in the full sense of the word: to refrain from evil toward one's neighbor and society, and to do the required good for one's neighbor and society. These two aspects are, therefore, the *integral parts* without which perfect justice is impossible.

The close connection between the integral parts of justice and the first law of morality (do good; avoid evil) makes it evident that justice is essential for even natural human perfection. It is likewise required as the foundation for the perfection of charity, since it would be a strange paradox for an individual to attempt to operate according to the higher standard of charity while completely ignoring the demands of justice.

Moreover, justice is not a purely negative virtue, not merely a matter of refraining from evil toward one's neighbor or from violating the neighbor's rights. It requires, on the one hand, a rejection of such evil and, on the other hand, the faithful fulfillment of those obligations to which we are bound by various kinds of laws. And although it is generally true that it would be more serious to do evil than to omit doing the good to which we are obliged, in certain cases the sin of omission against justice is more serious by far than a sin of commission.

The virtue of justice admits of three species: legal justice, distributive justice, and commutative justice.

*Legal justice* is the virtue that inclines the members of a society to render to that society what is due in view of the common good or goal of the society. It is called legal because it is based upon, and determined by, the laws of the society in question, which laws bind in conscience if they are just. And since the common good of society normally takes precedence over the particular good of any member of society, justice sometimes requires that the individual relinquish personal goods in view of the well-being of the society as a whole.

*Distributive justice* is the virtue that inclines the person in charge of the distribution of goods or favors in a society to bestow these things proportionately, according to the dignity, merits, or needs of each one. Although the titles of justice may vary with the goods or the persons involved, distributive justice works on the principle of rendering to each what is his or her due. Thus the distribution of goods should be according to the needs of each person, and the bestowal of favors or offices should be according to the merits or abilities of each one. And although one may think that justice is measurable in mathematical equality, when it is a question of distributive justice it is rather a question of proportion, with the result that strict equality of distribution would often be an injustice rather than a justice.

*Commutative justice* is justice in the fullest sense of the word, since it has to do with the rights and duties of individual persons among themselves. It coincides almost exactly with the definition of justice itself: the constant and perpetual will of one individual person to render to another individual what is due in strict equality. Hence its transgression always involves the obligation to make restitution.

The potential parts of justice are those related virtues connected with justice by reason of one or another of its elements, namely, something owed to another by a strict obligation and in some measure of equality. On the other hand, these annexed virtues lack something of the perfect concept of justice, and for that reason they do not have the full force of justice. They are divided into two groups: those that are not measured in terms of strict equality, and those that are not based on the title of a strict right. The general means of fostering the virtue of justice are the following:

1. *Avoid even the slightest injustice.* It is extremely easy to form a false conscience in the matter of justice, saying that one or another moral law has no importance. Granted that there may be smallness of matter in many instances, the evils to be sedulously avoided are the cultivation of a disdain for little things because they are little, and losing sight of the frequency of small injustices that pave the way for a more serious fall.

2. *Never contract debts without necessity and pay one's debts promptly.* This is an excellent ascetical practice, namely, to learn to do without things that of themselves are not necessities. And when necessary debts have been contracted, the most important duty is to pay those debts owed in justice before contracting new ones.

3. *Treat the possessions of others as carefully as one's own.* Whether it be a question of things rented for use or shared in the family or religious community, it is common to find a lack of regard for the possessions of others. It is often the sign of selfishness if we assume the attitude that what is not ours need not be cared for.

4. *Do not harm the good name of another.* One's good name is of much greater value than created goods, and yet it is often the least respected. How frequently it is said that a certain fault of another is common knowledge and therefore there is no need to refrain from discussing it. Even worse is the frequency of rash judgment, ridicule, contumely, defamation. One must always speak the truth when one speaks, but this does not mean that one always has the right to reveal the faults of others. Both in private conversation and in modern newspapers and magazines, many sins are committed against justice in this matter.

5. *Avoid acceptance of persons,* which means favoring them without sufficient reason or denying them their lawful rights. This is a sin against distributive justice; it is committed not only in civil society but even in some ecclesiastical and religious communities. The basic rule that should determine the distribution of offices and honors and the application of punishments should be simply to give to each individual what the merits or faults require in justice. As regards the distribution or assignment of offices, the objective consideration should usually be conclusive, namely, what does the given position or office require, and which person has the capacity and talents to fulfill the task? One of the surest safeguards of peace and harmony in any community or society is distributive

justice on the part of the authorities or superiors.

Particular means for growing in justice can be listed under the headings of the three species of justice:

1. *Legal justice.* In a certain sense, the members of a society are also the servants and stewards of that society. Every society has its common good or goal protected by the laws leading to the attainment of that goal. In this sense, therefore, all members of a society are bound in legal justice to comply with the laws that further the common good. Any movement of separatism or rebellion is destructive of the society as such. Thus the citizens of a state, the members of the Church, the children in a family, and the religious in a religious institute should fulfill their obligations to the society to which they belong. They should be conscientious in fulfilling the laws of the society as perfectly as possible, unless special circumstances honestly allow for a dispensation or exemption.

2. *Distributive justice.* Superiors are administrators or stewards in the eyes of God. Even more, they are the servants of those they govern. The common good of a society or community must be preserved at all costs, and this common good is not necessarily the selfish good of the majority or a minority; it is the good or goal for which the society exists. Consequently, superiors should always judge in favor of the society as a whole, and in the distribution of goods or offices they should seek the individuals who will best contribute to that same common good of the society. .

3. *Commutative justice:* To give to each his own is a basic rule for the observance of commutative justice. Nothing is small in the eyes of God, and everything good can be an occasion for growth in grace and holiness. One of the severest blows we can deliver to our own self-love is to maintain a delicate sense of justice toward each of our fellow beings. This is not an area of like or dislike, of taste or feeling, but simply of doing what we are supposed to do, regardless of any other consideration.

Although it belongs to special moral theology to discuss and examine the various virtues in particular, there are certain virtues annexed to justice that are so essential to growth in Christian perfection that they demand treatment in any book on the theology of Christian perfection. For that reason, we single out those virtues having a special importance for those who are striving for the perfection of the Christian life and suggest that the reader refer to books on moral theology for a study of the remaining annexed virtues.

### *Religion*

The virtue of religion is a moral virtue that inclines us to give to God the worship due him as the first principle of all things. It is the most important of all the virtues derived from justice, and in perfection it surpasses all the other moral virtues, including justice itself. This is by reason of the excellence of its object, which is the worship of God, and in this sense it closely approaches the theological virtues.

Religion has various acts, both internal and external. The internal acts are devotion and prayer. The primary external acts are adoration, sacrifice, and vows. A detailed study of vows belongs in moral theology, and the remaining external acts -- offerings, tithes, oaths, adjuration, and praise -- are not of immediate importance in spiritual theology.[\(3\)](#)

*Devotion* consists in a promptness of will for giving oneself to the things pertaining to the service of God. Hence those who in some way devote themselves to God and remain completely subject to him are called devout. The essential characteristic of devotion is promptness of will, ever disposed to give itself to the things that pertain to God's service.

How, then, is the virtue of religion distinguished in this respect from the virtue of charity? Charity arouses devotion because love makes us prompter for the service of the one we love; devotion increases charity because friendship is preserved and increased by our services for our friend.

St. Thomas remarks that, as an act of religion, devotion always is directed to God and not to his creatures. Hence devotion to the saints should not terminate in the saints themselves, but it should pass through them to God. We venerate in the saints that which they have of God, that is to say, we venerate God in them. It is evident from this how mistaken those persons are who attach their devotion, not only to particular saint as an end in itself, but even to some particular image of a saint, without which they would have no devotion whatever. Priests and other persons who are entrusted with directing the piety of the faithful should instruct the faithful and correct abuses.

The principal extrinsic cause of devotion is God, who calls those he wishes and inflames in their hearts the fire of devotion. But the intrinsic cause so far as it pertains to us is meditation on the divine goodness and the benefits received from God, together with the consideration of our misery, which impels us to subject ourselves completely to God. The most proper effect of devotion is to fill the soul with spiritual joy.

*Prayer* is the second interior act of the virtue of religion. Unlike devotion, which is localized in the will, prayer pertains properly to both the intellect and the will. By reason of its extraordinary importance in the spiritual life, we shall dedicate an entire chapter to this matter (see Chapter 12).

*Adoration* is an external act of the virtue of religion by which we express the honor and reverence due to the divine excellence. Exterior adoration is an expression and an overflow of interior adoration, which is primary, and serves at the same time to arouse and preserve interior adoration. And because God is in all places, we can adore God both internally and externally in all places, although the most proper place is in his temple, because he resides there in a special manner. Moreover, the very atmosphere of a church or chapel helps to withdraw us from the noise and distractions of the world, while many holy objects contained there serve to arouse devotion, and the presence of other worshipers likewise nourishes the spirit of adoration.

*Sacrifice* is the principal act of the external and public worship of God. It consists in the external offering of a sensible thing, together with a real change or destruction of the thing, effected by the priest in honor of God, as a testimony of his supreme dominion and our complete submission to him.

A *vow* is a free and deliberate promise made to God concerning some good that is possible and better than its contrary. When made under the proper conditions, it is an excellent act of religion, which increases the merit of our good works by directing us to the worship and honor of God. By the same token, the voluntary transgression of a vow is a sin against religion, and if it pertains to

a matter already forbidden by precept, it constitutes a second sin and must be declared as such in confession. If the vows that are broken pertain to a person publicly consecrated to God, the sin committed against religion is a sacrilege. Such is not the case, however, with the breaking of a private vow, although it would surely be a grave sin against the virtue of religion -- of infidelity to God -- and would have to be declared explicitly in confession.

### *Piety*

The word *piety* can be used in various senses: (1) as a synonym for devotion, a religious spirit, the attention to things that pertain to the worship of God (thus we speak of pious or devout persons); (2) as signifying compassion or mercy, and thus we may say: "O Lord, have pity (piety) on us"; (3) as designating a special virtue derived from justice, the virtue of piety, which we treat here; (4) as referring to one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: the gift of piety.

As a special virtue derived from justice, piety is defined as a supernatural habit that inclines us to render to our parents, our country, and to all those connected with them the reverence and services due them. The material object of this virtue consists in all the acts of honor, reverence, service, and material or spiritual aid that are given to one's parents and relatives and country. The formal motive of these acts is that one's parents and country are the secondary principle of one's being and government. To God, as the first principle, is owed the special worship given him by the virtue of religion. To one's parents and country, as secondary principles, is owed the special reverence of the virtue of piety.

Accordingly, the virtue of piety has three different subjects to whom the debts of piety are owed: (1) one's parents, to whom this virtue refers primarily, because after God they are the principles of one's being, education, and government; (2) one's country, because that also is, in a certain sense, a principle of our being, education, and government insofar as it furnishes our parents -- and through them, us -- with a multitude of things that are necessary or helpful; (3) one's blood relatives because, although they are not the principle of our being and government, nevertheless our parents are in some way represented in them, since all proceed from the same family tree. By extension one can also consider as relatives those who form part of the same spiritual family, for example, the members of a religious order, who call the founder their father or mother.

From what has been said, it should be evident that the virtue of piety is distinct from other virtues resembling it, for example, charity toward one's neighbor and legal justice. Piety is distinguished from fraternal charity inasmuch as piety is based on the intimate union resulting from the same family tree, while charity is based on the bonds uniting the whole human race with God. Again, piety for one's country is distinguished from legal justice in the sense that the latter relates to one's country as a common good for all the citizens, while piety considers one's country as a secondary principle of one's own being.

### *Observance*

The virtue of observance is a supernatural habit regulating one's relationships to superiors other than God, parents, and civil authority (which belong to religion and piety respectively). By means of observance we give reverence and honor to those who possess a special dignity or authority and hence are deserving of respect. Persons who have positions of dignity deserve honor by reason of their excellence; they deserve obedience from their subjects or inferiors by



reason of the authority of their office or position. Thus, the virtue of observance is divided into two parts: honor and obedience; we shall discuss only the virtue of obedience.(4)

### *Obedience*

Obedience is an infused moral virtue that makes one's will prompt to fulfill the commands of a superior. The command may be verbal or written, but it may also be simply the explicit or tacit manifestation of the will of the superior. The obedience will be the more perfect as the individual is prompter to execute the will of the superior even before an express command is given. All subjects of all legitimate superiors are obliged to obey authority, whether that authority be one's parents, the civil officials, the pastor in a parish, the teacher in a classroom, a military officer, one's employer. However, we are not allowed to obey authority in matters that are unlawful, nor may we obey in matters involving sin or the proximate occasion of sin.

If one externally performs the act that has been commanded by a superior, but does so with internal rebellion, the obedience is purely material and is not a *virtue* in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless, even material obedience suffices to avoid breaking the vow of obedience in case the subject is bound by vow. But when one obeys both internally and externally, the obedience is then called formal obedience and is an excellent act of virtue.

As a virtue, obedience is inferior to the theological virtues. By reason of its object it is also inferior to some of the moral virtues (e.g., religion). But by reason of that which is sacrificed or offered to God, it is the most excellent of all the moral virtues because through the other virtues one sacrifices external goods (poverty), corporal goods (virginity), or certain goods of the soul that are inferior to the human will, which is sacrificed in the virtue of obedience. For this reason St. Thomas does not hesitate to affirm that the religious life, primarily because of the vow of obedience, is a true sacrifice offered to God.(5)

The classical division of the grades or degrees of obedience is as follows: (a) mere external execution; (b) voluntary obedience; and (c) submission of the judgment. St. Ignatius Loyola explains these grades in a letter to the fathers and brothers of the Society in Portugal.(6) The following outline gives the basic points of doctrine contained in the letter.

1. St. Ignatius desires that obedience should be the characteristic virtue of the Society because of the blessings produced by this virtue, because it is highly praised in Sacred Scripture, and because it is the compendium of all the other virtues. He states as the fundamental principle of obedience that one should see Christ in the superior, without thinking of the superior as an individual person.
2. Listing the grades of obedience, he states that the first is obedience of execution, which is of little value; the second grade is obedience of the will, which possesses the intrinsic value of the sacrifice of obedience, so that it is of great merit and it perfects man's free will; the third degree is obedience of the intellect. As regards obedience of the intellect, St. Ignatius states that it is *possible* because the will can control the intellect; it is *just* because it is reasonable to control one's judgment and to conform one's will to God's; it is necessary for the attainment of perfect subordination, for safeguarding oneself against the illusions of self-love, for preserving one's tranquillity in obedience, and for preserving union with God; and it is *perfect* obedience, because in this grade of obedience a man

immolates that which is most excellent, which implies a marvelous victory over self.

3. Then the Saint lists the general and particular means for achieving the third grade of obedience. The general means are humility and meekness. The particular means are to see God in one's superiors, to seek reasons in favor of the command that is given, and to accept the command blindly, that is, without any further inquiry, but with a docility similar to that which one should have in regard to matters of faith. This does not mean, however, that it would be opposed to the perfection of obedience if one were to state reasons to the superior for making a change in what has been commanded, so long as due conditions are observed. However, if a subject should make such a representation to his superior, he should do so with complete indifference and with full freedom.

4. In his final observation, St. Ignatius remarks that obedience also extends to those who have some charge or office under lawful authority. And he says that the prosperity of religious institutes depends on obedience because of the principle of subordination that applies to religious institutes. In his final exhortation he refers to the example of Christ in regard to obedience and the great reward that is earned through obedience.

The fundamental quality comprising all the others is that obedience should be supernatural, that is, inspired by supernatural motives. Only then is obedience a truly Christian virtue. Obedience inspired by any purely human motive, however right and lawful in itself, cannot be supernatural. But in order that the supernatural quality of obedience may be augmented and preserved, we shall enumerate some of the more important characteristics of Christian obedience. We do not imply that this list is exhaustive, but if we keep in mind the fundamental quality we have just mentioned, all the other characteristics of obedience will spring forth spontaneously.

1. A spirit of faith, by which the subject obeys and reveres a superior as another Christ, and looks upon the commands of the superior as coming from God.
2. The firm conviction that by obeying lawful commands of superiors we are fulfilling the will of God, and that, although a superior may make a mistake in commanding, the subject never makes a mistake in obeying lawful commands.
3. Obedience out of love of God and acceptance of difficult or distasteful commands in a spirit of sacrifice.
4. Promptness in fulfilling the commands that are given, realizing that we should not make Christ wait for our obedience but that we should be prompt to do his will.
5. Spontaneity in obedience, and even the attempt to anticipate the desires of the superior.
6. Humility and simplicity, so that we can perform the act of obedience as if it were the most natural thing in the world, without giving any attention to the difficulties involved.
7. Magnanimity, which gives virility to our obedience and provides us with the energy of heroes and the fortitude of martyrs.
8. Universality, so that at all times and to any superior whatever, we obey all commands without exception.

9. Perseverance, so that in time of joy or sorrow, in health or in sickness, regardless of any personal condition or taste, we would obey, realizing that obedience gives power and that the obedient person shall speak of victory.

### *Gratitude*

The virtue of gratitude has as its object the recompense, in some way, of a benefactor for some benefit that has been received. The benefactor, in giving us a gift to which we had no strict right, merits our gratitude, and in every noble heart the need to demonstrate this gratitude spontaneously springs forth when the occasion offers. On the other hand, the sin of ingratitude is a vile and ugly sin. Both gratitude and its opposite vice admit of various degrees, as St. Thomas states in the following summary:

[Gratitude] has various degrees which correspond in their order to the thing required for gratitude. The first is to recognize the favor received, the second is to express one's appreciation and thanks, and the third is to repay the favor at a suitable place and time according to one's means. And since the last in the order of generation is first in the order of destruction, it follows that the first degree of ingratitude is to fail to repay a favor, the second is to decline to notice and acknowledge that one has received a favor, and the third and supreme degree is to fail to recognize the reception of a favor, whether by forgetting it or in any other way. Moreover, since an affirmation implies the opposite negation, it follows that it belongs to the first degree of ingratitude to return evil for good, to the second degree to find fault with a favor received, and to the third degree to esteem kindness as though it were unkindness.[\(7\)](#)

### *Veracity*

The virtue of veracity inclines one always to speak the truth and to manifest externally what one is internally. This virtue is closely related to simplicity, which rectifies one's intention and preserves one against duplicity. It is also related to fidelity, which inclines the will to fulfill what has been promised.

We are not always obliged to speak the truth, but we are always obliged not to lie. When charity, justice, or some other virtue requires that we should not reveal the truth, it will then be necessary to find some way of not revealing it (silence, mental reservation), but it is never lawful directly and positively to tell a lie. Nor does a great good that would result from a lie make the telling of the lie licit.

### *Affability*

Affability is the social virtue par excellence, and one of the most exquisite manifestations of the true Christian spirit. It is defined as a virtue by which our words and external actions are directed to the preservation of friendly and agreeable association with others. Although it may seem at first glance that this virtue is nothing more than the external sign of friendship, there is this great difference between them: true friendship proceeds from love, and among Christians it should be a natural result of love of neighbor; affability, on the other hand, is a kind of friendliness that consists in words or deeds in our relations with others, requiring us to conduct ourselves in a friendly and sociable manner with all our neighbors, whether they be intimate friends or strangers.

There are numerous acts or manifestations of the virtue of affability, and all of them arouse sympathy and friendliness in our neighbors. Benignity, politeness, simple praise, indulgence, sincere gratitude, hospitality, patience, meekness, and refinement in words and deeds exert a kind of attraction difficult to resist. This precious virtue is of extreme importance, not only in one's association with friends, neighbors, and strangers, but in a special way within the circle of one's own family, where it is often most neglected.

### *Equity*

This virtue inclines us, in special circumstances, to depart from the letter of the law in order to observe better its spirit. The very weakness of a law lies in the fact that it looks to the preservation of the common good in a general way and cannot apply to every particular case. Legislators usually look to what commonly happens when they are framing laws, and yet they realize that there can be and usually will be exceptions. What is of great importance in this matter of the application and interpretation of laws is the preservation of the spirit of the law by understanding the motive and circumstances that made the law necessary. Whether it be a matter of interpreting the law promulgated by authority or the application of the law in a given situation, one should know the mind of the legislator in framing the law.

A good rule of thumb would consist in asking what the lawmaker would decide in circumstances that make the observance of the law onerous, or when there is a conflict of several laws. The virtuous person will always desire to do what is in accordance with right reason, charity, and the common good. Such persons will understand that no law binds anyone in circumstances that make observance of the law impossible. Superiors of all kinds should always remember that we do not live according to laws, but according to the Spirit. If superiors sincerely endeavor to listen to the Spirit, they will know when to make prudent adjustments and adaptations or even dispense entirely from a particular law.

### **The Gift of Piety**

The gift of piety is a supernatural habit infused with sanctifying grace, which arouses in the will, through the motion of the Holy Spirit, a filial love for God as Father, and a sentiment of universal love for all men and women as our brothers and sisters and as children of the same heavenly Father. The virtue of piety is an affective gift, and therefore it is radicated in the will in union with the other infused virtues also localized in the will. What is formal and proper in the gift of piety and distinguishes it from the virtue of religion, which venerates God as Creator or as the First Principle of everything that exists, is that it considers God as a Father who has engendered us in the supernatural life, giving us a physical and formal participation in his divine nature. In this sense, God is truly our Father, and the worship we give him as Father through the gift of piety is nobler and more excellent than that which we give him by the virtue of religion.

The principal secondary effect of the gift of piety is the sentiment of universal brotherhood with all others. St. Thomas expressly states that, just as through the virtue of piety we offer worship and veneration not only to our own parents but also to all blood relatives so far as they are related to the parents, so also the gift of piety is not restricted to the love and veneration of God, but extends to all so far as they are related to God.

The gift of piety perfects to a heroic degree the matter that falls under the virtue of justice and

the other virtues related to justice, especially those of religion and piety. What a great difference there is, for example, in the worship of God only under the impulse of the virtue of religion, which presents God to us as Creator and sovereign Lord, from the same worship under the movement of the gift of piety, which enables us to see God as a most loving Father! And as regards one's association with others, how much more exquisite is the affection we show to our neighbors when we realize that they are our brothers and sisters, children of the same heavenly Father.

Even as regards material things, the gift of piety can change one's outlook completely. For those who are governed by the gift of piety, the world and all creation are considered as the house of the Father, and everything in the universe becomes a testimony of his infinite goodness. Such persons are able to discover the religious meaning hidden in all things.

The following are the principal effects produced in the soul by the actuation of the gift of piety:

1. *It places in the soul a truly filial love for our heavenly Father.* This is the primary and fundamental effect of the gift of piety. The soul understands perfectly and experiences with ineffable sweetness the words of St. Paul: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, 'Abba!' (that is, 'Father'). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16).

2. *It enables us to adore the ineffable mystery of the divine paternity within the Trinity.* In its most sublime manifestations the gift of piety makes us penetrate the mystery of the intimate life of God by giving us a most vivid awareness of the divine paternity of the Father in relation to the Word. It is now no longer a question merely of his spiritual fatherhood of us through grace, but of his divine paternity that is eternally fruitful in the bosom of the Trinity. In view of this eternal and ever actual generation within the Trinity, the soul is impelled to be silent and to love, without any other language than that of adoration and tears. It is an adoration of God for his own sake and without any consideration of the benefits the soul has received from him.

3. *It arouses in the soul a filial confidence in the heavenly Father.* Intimately penetrated with the sentiment of its adoptive divine filiation, the soul abandons itself calmly and confidently to the heavenly Father. It is not preoccupied with any care, and nothing is capable of disturbing its unalterable peace, even for an instant. The soul asks nothing and rejects nothing. It is not concerned about health or sickness, a long life or a short life, consolations or aridity, persecution or praise, activity or idleness. It is completely submissive to the will of God and seeks only to glorify God with all its powers, desiring that all beings should realize their adoptive divine filiation and live as true children of God. There is nothing rigid or complicated in their spiritual life or practices of piety that could paralyze the impulses of the heart. These souls run to God as a child runs to its Father.

4. *It causes us to see in our neighbors children of God and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.* This is a natural consequence of our adoptive filiation through grace. If God is our Father, we are all children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ, either actually or potentially. Souls under the impulse of the gift of piety dedicate themselves to the works

of mercy for the unfortunate and look upon them as true brothers and sisters, serving them in order to please the Father of all. They see in each of their brethren Christ, their brother, and they do for their neighbor what they would do for Christ. And whatever works they perform, even those that require heroism, seem so natural and easy to them that they would be greatly surprised if anyone should consider them to be heroic. In their amazement, they would perhaps reply: "But he is my brother!" It is this same piety that caused St. Paul to be afflicted with the afflicted, to weep with those who wept, and to bear the weaknesses and miseries of his neighbor for the purpose of saving all (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

*5. It moves us to love all those persons and things that are related to the Fatherhood of God and the Christian brotherhood.* The gift of piety perfects and intensifies the soul's filial love for the Blessed Virgin, whom it considers as a tender Mother in whom it has the confidence that any child has in its mother. The soul loves the angels and the saints, whom it considers as brothers and sisters who are now enjoying the continual presence of God in heaven; it has a tender affection for the souls in purgatory, whom it assists by frequent suffrages; reverence for the Pope as a Vicar of Christ on earth, visible head of the Church and father of all Christians. It looks upon all lawful superiors as fathers and mothers-and endeavors to obey them with filial joy. In regard to its country, it would wish to see the spirit of Christ manifested in its laws and customs. It has a deep veneration for Sacred Scripture and reads the revealed word of God as if it were a letter sent from heaven by the heavenly Father. It has a respect for all holy things, and especially those articles used as instruments in the service and worship of God.

In addition to the general means of disposing oneself for the activity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as recollection, prayer, and fidelity to grace, the following practices are more immediately related to the gift of piety.

*1. To cultivate the spirit of adopted children of God.* We could never insist too much on the necessity of cultivating the spirit of filial trust and abandonment to our heavenly Father. God is our Creator and will be our Judge at the moment of death, but he is always and above all our Father.

The gift of fear arouses in us a respectful reverence for God. but this is in no way incompatible with the tenderness and filial confidence inspired in us by the gift of piety. We should constantly beg for the spirit of adoption, and should endeavor to do all things for the love of God in order to please our heavenly Father.

*2. To cultivate the spirit of universal kinship toward all humanity.* This is, as we have seen, the principal secondary effect of the gift of piety. We should strive ever to increase the capacity of our love so that we may embrace the whole world with the arms of love. We are all children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. With what persuasive insistence St. Paul repeated this truth to the early Christians: "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3:28). If we would do as much as we could to treat our neighbors as true brothers and sisters in God, we would undoubtedly attract to ourselves his merciful glance, which is delighted in nothing so much as in seeing us united in his divine Son. Christ himself desired that the world should know that we are his disciples by the love we have for each

other:

3. *To consider all things, even material things, as pertaining to the house of God.* What a profoundly religious sense is discovered in all things by those souls that are ruled by the gift of piety! St. Francis of Assisi is an example of those souls who saw and judged all things in this visible world as belonging in some way to the heavenly Father.

Although many souls do not attain the exquisite delicacy of the spirit of piety as manifested in these souls, how differently they could evaluate created things if they would strive to discover the religious meaning hidden - deep within them. The created universe is truly the house of the Father, and all things in it belong to him. If one could live in this world with this religious sense and appreciation of created things, the things themselves as vestiges of God could lead the soul to greater union with God.

4. *To cultivate the spirit of complete abandonment to God.* We will not attain this spirit perfectly until the gift of piety is intensely actuated in us, but we should try to do what we can to cultivate total abandonment to God. We should strive to remain indifferent in regard to the shortness or the length of our life, consolation or dryness in our spiritual life, and the many other questions that could cause us concern or anxiety. Our basic attitude should be that of complete filial abandonment to the divine will of our heavenly Father. Since we know for certain that he loves us as a father and that he cares for us even in our daily needs, it should not be too difficult for us to do the best we can in our daily life and to leave in his hands those things that are beyond our power.

## **Temperance**

The word *temperance* can be employed to signify either the moderation that reason imposes on every human act of passion, in which case it is not a special virtue but a general condition that should characterize all the moral virtues, or a special virtue among the moral virtues. As a moral virtue, temperance is a supernatural habit that moderates the inclination to sense pleasures and keeps them within the limits of reason illumined by faith.

We refer to temperance as a supernatural habit in order to distinguish it from the natural or acquired virtue of temperance. The proper function of temperance is to refrain or control the movements of the concupiscible appetite in which it resides, as distinct from the virtue of fortitude, which controls the irascible appetite. Although temperance should moderate all the sense pleasures to which the concupiscible appetite is drawn, it refers in a special way to the pleasures of taste and touch, because they provide the most intense sense delectation and are, therefore, most likely to draw the appetite beyond the rule of reason. That is why the special virtue of temperance is required.

Natural or acquired temperance is regulated simply by the light of natural reason, and therefore contains or restricts the functions of the pleasure emotions within rational or purely human limits; supernatural or infused temperance extends much further because it adds to simple reason the light of faith, which imposes superior and more delicate demands.

The virtue of temperance is one of the most necessary virtues in the spiritual life of the

individual. God has placed strong pleasure in the natural operations that are necessary for the conservation of the individual and the species. This is the reason for our strong inclination to the pleasures of taste and the sex function, which have a noble purpose intended by God as the Author of nature. But it is easy to go beyond the limits of reason and enter the area of the illicit and sinful. The infused virtue of temperance moderates and restrains those natural appetites.

The instincts, the functions, and the pleasures involved in the preservation of the individual or the species are good in themselves and have a noble purpose. Consequently, it is not a question of annihilating or completely suppressing these instincts, but of regulating their use according to the rule of reason, the light of faith, and one's particular vocation and circumstances of life. The infused virtue of temperance enables the individual to use these functions and enjoy their concomitant pleasures for an honest and supernatural end.

There are two integral parts assigned to the virtue of temperance: a sense of shame and a sense of honor. The *sense of shame* is not a virtue in the strict sense of the word, but a praiseworthy emotion or feeling that causes us to fear the disgrace and confusion or embarrassment connected with a base action. It is an emotion because it is usually accompanied by a change in the body, such as blushing; it is praiseworthy because the fear, regulated by reason, arouses an aversion to anything that is base and degrading. It should be noted that we are more ashamed of being embarrassed before wise and virtuous persons -- by reason of the rectitude of their judgment and the worth of their esteem -- than before those who have little education or virtue. Above all, we have a feeling of shame and a fear of embarrassment before our friends and the members of our own family, who know us better and with whom we have to live; with strangers the sense of shame is much weaker.

The *sense of honor* signifies a certain love or appreciation for the spiritual beauty and dignity connected with the practice of temperance. It is properly connected with the virtue of temperance because this virtue possesses a certain degree of spiritual beauty, and the beautiful is opposed to the base and ugly. Therefore a sense of honor pertains to the virtue that helps us to avoid base and ugly actions. The importance of cultivating a sense of honor can hardly be overemphasized, since sense pleasures readily lead to excess.

One should not, however, lose sight of the fact that the sense of honor and the sense of shame would cease to be virtuous if they were understood to forbid the lawful and reasonable use of the sex instinct. Their purpose as elements or parts of the virtue of temperance is to moderate the enjoyment of lawful sense pleasures and thus enable the individual to enjoy them in a manner in keeping with human and Christian dignity.

Since the virtue of temperance has for its purpose the moderation of the inclination to the pleasures proceeding from taste and touch, its species can be divided into two groups: those that refer to the sense of taste (abstinence and sobriety), and those that refer to the sense of touch (chastity, purity, virginity, and continence).

### *Abstinence*

This virtue inclines one to the moderate consumption of nourishment according to the dictates of reason enlightened by faith. As an infused supernatural virtue, abstinence is very different from the acquired virtue of the same name. The latter is governed by the light of natural reason alone,



and uses nourishment in the degree and measure required by the needs or health of the body. But the infused virtue of abstinence likewise takes into account one's needs in the supernatural order, as when one observes a penitential fast.

### *Sobriety*

In general, sobriety signifies moderation or temperance in any matter, but in the strict sense it is a special virtue that has for its object the moderation of the use of intoxicating drinks in accordance with reason enlightened by faith. The use of nonintoxicating drinks is regulated by the virtue of abstinence; its excess constitutes gluttony. Intoxicating drinks are the object of a special virtue because of the rapidity with which they may cause the loss of self-control and the ease with which one can form the habit of drinking to excess. When moderated by the virtue of sobriety, however, the use of intoxicating beverages is not only lawful but may also be an act of virtue in given circumstances. The use of intoxicating drinks is not evil in itself, as some have tried to maintain, but it may become evil by reason of some special circumstance.

### *Chastity*

This is the virtue that moderates the desire for venereal pleasures according to the necessities of life as judged by right reason illumined by faith. The use and enjoyment of the sexual function in accordance with the married state are both lawful and virtuous, but even those persons for whom this action is lawful have an obligation to observe conjugal chastity. For those who are not married there is a strict prohibition against the use and enjoyment of the sexual powers; this is restricted to the married state.

### *Purity*

Purity moderates the external acts that of their nature lead to, and prepare for, sexual union. Whereas chastity is concerned with the sexual act itself, purity is directed to certain circumstances related to chastity. Purity, like all the parts of temperance, must be judged according to the rights and duties of one's state in life according to the dictates of right reason illumined by faith. In other words, the practice of purity for married persons will be different from the purity required of the unmarried.

### *Virginity*

As a special virtue, distinct from and more perfect than chastity, virginity consists in the resolute will to preserve one's integrity of body by abstaining perpetually from all voluntary venereal pleasure. Perfect virginity voluntarily preserved for a supernatural motive is not only lawful but in itself is more excellent than matrimony. This is exemplified in the lives of Jesus and Mary, who are models of sanctity. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from the superiority of the state of virginity to the superiority of individuals who have vowed virginity, because spiritual excellence is measured in terms of charity, not virginity.

### *Continence*

This virtue strengthens the will in order to resist the disordered vehemence of the passions. It prevents evil by a disposition of the will that restrains the impetus of passion. Perfect chastity controls the passions to such an extent that they do not produce any vehement movements

contrary to reason; continence, on the other hand, resists the urge of passion when it arises, and thus a continent person may be subject to violent movements of passion. The proper material of the virtue of continence is the pleasures of the sense of touch, especially those connected with sex, although in a more general and less proper sense it can refer to other movements of passion.

### *Meekness*

The virtue of meekness has as its object the moderation of anger in accordance with right reason. Although it is listed as a potential part of the virtue of temperance, meekness resides in the irascible appetite because it is concerned with restraining anger. As a passion, anger in itself is neither good nor evil, and therefore there is such a thing as just anger. The virtue of meekness is, therefore, not a purely negative habit; its purpose is to enable an individual to use anger according to the rule of right reason.

Moreover, it would be a caricature of virtue to confuse meekness with timidity or cowardice. The meek do not lose the virtue when they give expression to just anger, any more than Jesus ceased to be meek when in anger he drove the merchants from the temple.

Indeed, if we were to fail to utilize anger on the occasions that demand it, we could be guilty of a sin against justice or charity -virtues more excellent than meekness. But since it is easy to be mistaken in judging the just motives of anger, we must always be vigilant lest we be overtaken by a sudden movement of passion that would carry us beyond the limits of justice and charity. In case of doubt it is always better to incline to the side of meekness than to the danger of excessive rigor.

### *Clemency*

Clemency inclines a person in authority to mitigate a punishment for a fault so far as right reason allows. It proceeds from a certain gentleness of soul that causes one to abhor anything that would cause sorrow or pain to another. Clemency does not refer to a complete and total pardon but to a mitigation of the punishment. It should not be exercised for unworthy motives, such as respect of persons or the desire to be liked, but it should be motivated by an indulgence and kindness that will not compromise the demands of justice.

### *Humility*

This is one of the fundamental virtues in the spiritual life. It is a virtue derived from temperance, and it enables us to restrain the inordinate desire for our own excellence, giving us a true evaluation of our smallness and misery before God. Humility derives from temperance because its proper function is to moderate the desire for our own greatness, and all moderation belongs to the virtue of temperance. Based as it is on self-knowledge, true humility enables us to see ourselves as we are in the eyes of God, not exaggerating our good qualities and not denying the gifts we have received from God. This virtue, therefore, implies our subjection to God, and for that reason St. Augustine attributes the gift of fear to the perfection of the virtue of humility.

How is it possible for persons who have received great gifts from God to recognize these gifts and at the same time be aware of their littleness and misery before God? St. Thomas answers this question by pointing out that we may consider two things in ourselves, namely, that which we have of God and that which we have of ourselves. Whatever pertains to defect and imperfection

is of ourselves; whatever pertains to man's goodness and perfection is from God.

It is, therefore, the comparison with the infinite perfections of God that constitutes the ultimate basis and foundation of humility. For that reason this virtue is closely related to the theological virtues and possesses a certain aspect of reverence for God, which relates it to the virtue of religion. In the light of this basic principle, one can understand the apparently exaggerated humility of the saints and the incomparable humility of Christ. As they grew in perfection, the saints received from God ever-increasing knowledge of his infinite perfections, and as a result of that knowledge they perceived with ever greater clarity the infinite abyss between the grandeur of God and their own littleness and weakness. Mary, the greatest of all God's creatures, was also the humblest.

Humility is based on truth and justice. The truth gives us a knowledge of ourselves, with the recognition that whatever good we have we have received from God; justice demands of us that we give God all honor and glory (1 Tim. 1:17). Truth requires that we recognize and admire the natural and supernatural gifts God has bestowed on us; justice demands that we glorify the giver of those gifts.

Humility is not the greatest of all the virtues. It is surpassed by the theological virtues, the intellectual virtues, and by justice. But humility is a fundamental virtue in the spiritual life, because it removes the obstacles to the reception of grace. Scripture expressly states that God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble (James 4:6). Hence humility and faith are the two basic virtues; they constitute the foundation of the entire supernatural structure.

Various classifications of the degrees of humility have been proposed by saints and spiritual writers, but they all agree on the basic element. A familiarity with the various degrees of humility is of great help in examining oneself in regard to the principal internal and external manifestations of this virtue. St. Bernard simplifies the degrees of humility by reducing them to three basic grades: (1) *sufficient humility* (to subject oneself to superiors and not to prefer oneself to one's equal); (2) *abundant humility* (to subject oneself to one's equals and not to prefer oneself to one's inferiors); (3) *superabundant humility* (to subject oneself to one's inferiors).

The three degrees of humility described by St. Ignatius Loyola are not restricted to the virtue of humility, but refer to the selfabnegation required in the Christian life. The following are the three degrees according to St. Ignatius: (1) *necessary* humility (the humility necessary for salvation), namely, that in all things we obey the law of God, and never do anything that would involve the commission of a mortal sin; (2) *perfect* humility, that is, we would not care to have riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short life, so long as we can serve God so faithfully that we would not commit a deliberate venial sin for all the world; (3) *most perfect* humility, that is, in imitation of Christ, we prefer to be poor with Christ; to suffer opprobrium with Christ, and to be considered a fool with Christ, rather than to be wealthy or honored or considered wise by the world.

### *Modesty*

Modesty is a virtue by which we observe proper decorum in our gestures and bodily movements, in our posture, and in the matter of dress. This virtue calls for a sense of dignity on the part of the individual and those who are in the company of that person. Ordinarily, a person is judged by

externals, and for that reason any uncontrolled movements are interpreted as signs of an inordinate and unruly interior. With good reason does St. Augustine recommend in his Rule that individuals should be especially careful to observe external modesty of deportment lest they scandalize others.

Modesty of dress requires conformity to the customs of the persons with whom one lives. One may violate the requirements of modesty of dress because of vanity, sensuality, or excessive interest in one's apparel. One can also go to the other extreme by being negligent, for example, if one were to be unreasonably negligent in dressing according to one's state in life, or were to seek attention by a deliberate flaunting of good manners.

### *Eutrapelia*

This special virtue regulates one's recreation and diversions according to the rule of reason. In discussing this virtue, St. Thomas begins by insisting upon the necessity of spiritual and bodily relaxations in order to restore the energies and powers that have been exhausted by labor. He points out, however, that three defects in recreation must be avoided: to recreate by means of harmful or sinful things, to lose all sense of propriety or seriousness in the midst of recreation, or to do anything that would be inordinate in regard to persons, place, time, or other circumstances.[\(8\)](#)

Moderation in pleasure is especially difficult for the young and for all who quickly respond to sensate pleasure, but it is also a problem for people of all ages and conditions. Given our propensity for satisfaction on the sense level, it is understandable that one may easily go to excess in the pleasures of taste and touch. Moreover, the temptations of youth to sins against temperance will not necessarily be the same type of temptations that assail the older person, who may be more inclined to excess in food or drink than in sexual matters. For that reason one should not equate temperance with control of the sexual instinct; it applies as well to the pleasures of the palate.

The following suggestions are given with a view toward fostering the virtuous and moderate enjoyment of sensate pleasure in accordance with the demands of temperance:

1. *Avoid occasions that stimulate the desire for sensate pleasure.* Here the dictum "know thyself" is applicable since individuals vary in their sensitivity to stimuli. Moreover, one's state of life must be taken into consideration. Many things that are lawful for married adults, for example, are not so for youth or for priests and religious. Those who know from experience where their weakness lies will also know to what extent they must avoid or protect themselves against particular persons, places, or things.
2. *Practice voluntary self-denial.* One should never eat or drink to satiety but should always take less than one's capacity. The sensate appetites can become habituated to moderation just as surely as they can become accustomed to excess.
3. *Keep a vigilant control over the sense of sight, the imagination, and memory.* Many temptations arise from within the individual because of the fantasies of the imagination, which arouse desire, or because of the memory of past pleasures. In this connection, control of the sense of sight must apply not only to objects or persons looked at, but also to books, movies, magazines, and television.

4. *Occupy oneself with safe and beneficial activities.* Hence the great benefit of athletics and exercise of all kinds, of having a hobby, of fidelity to the duty of the moment. Closely related to this is the practice of associating with persons of virtue and knowing how to enjoy wholesome recreation and relaxation.

5. *Cultivate a sense of Christian dignity and an awareness of the obligation to witness to Christ.* This is one of the strongest positive motivations for a temperate life. If we become more and more conscious of the Trinity dwelling in our souls through grace, we shall more likely live in accordance with our Christian vocation. If we are mindful of our apostolic duty to bear witness to Christ in our lives, we shall more readily refrain from all excess in sensate pleasure, as he did.

## **The Gift of Fear**

The gift of fear of the Lord, as we have seen, corresponds primarily to the theological virtue of hope, which it perfects by motivating the individual to avoid sin out of reverential fear of God. But it pertains secondarily to the virtue of temperance because that same reverential fear prompts one to avoid those sensate excesses to which we are strongly inclined. Therefore, the gift of fear controls the concupiscible appetite. This, of course, is also the object of temperance and its related virtues—to moderate the use and enjoyment of sensate pleasure. But to reach the perfection of the Christian life and the most intimate possible union with God, it is necessary that the concupiscible appetite be not only controlled but also purified. Servile fear or the fear of punishment may serve frequently to prevent one from yielding to the desire for sensate pleasure, but the gift of fear, which is filial fear born of love and reverence, seeks the purity required for union with God. The gift of fear of the Lord, therefore, is of great help in the active purgation of the sense appetite and prepares the way for the passive purgation of the senses.

The following are the effects of the gift of fear so far as it relates to temperance:

1. *A vivid awareness of the sanctity and purity of God.* This is a logical consequence of the reverential fear of God, accompanied by the filial fear based on love. It culminates in the love of God for himself and the desire to give him glory in every way possible.
2. *A loss of interest in the pleasure afforded by creature attachments.* The soul is an adult in Christ and has put away the things of a child as well as childish attachment to those things that cater to the body. The soul has lost its taste for the delights of this world and can find satisfaction and joy only in the things related to God.
3. *A lofty degree of humility.* Recognizing as it does the exalted majesty of God, the soul cannot help prostrating itself before him with a deep sense of its nothingness. As Christ said to St. Catherine of Siena: "Catherine, you are she who is not; I am he who is"; or the concept of the All and the nothing (*Todo y nada*) so dear to St. John of the Cross.
4. *A profound appreciation for the beauty of the spiritual life of grace.* As temperance is a virtue that provides the proper proportion in human life so that the beauty of virtue may shine forth, so the gift that perfects temperance will logically manifest in an even higher degree the splendor of the life of grace. Hence the virtue of purity has been called the

"angelic" virtue because in its perfection it enables one to live as if one were no longer in the body but dwelt on the higher level of the spiritual and divine.

Although we cannot directly merit or cause the actuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we can make use of certain means to dispose ourselves for the Holy Spirit to work in us when he so wills.

1. *Cultivate a love of solitude, recollection, and the faithful practice of mental prayer.*

This is always necessary in the Christian life, but it is especially helpful in relation to the perfection of temperance and the actuation of the gift that perfects temperance. Simply growing in the love of God through mental prayer and frequently being alone with him can wean us from the attachment to sense satisfactions.

2. *Be vigilant in keeping custody of the senses and making acts of love of God.* If we keep a guard over the senses, sense objects cannot arouse desire within us. And if we turn to God frequently during the day with acts of love, our love will be nourished and grow strong, at the same time weakening the desire for anything less than God.

3. *Do all things for the salvation of souls and the glory of God.* The works of the apostolate are the crowning of perfect charity if done for the glory of God, for we thereby bring not only ourselves to God, but others as well. When done for such a lofty motive, the service to others out of love will help us rise above the life of the senses and go a long way in purging our love of any taint of selfishness.

## **Fortitude**

The word *fortitude* can be understood in two principal senses. The first sense signifies in general a certain firmness of spirit and vigor of character, general conditions that must accompany all virtues if they are to be truly such. In the second sense it designates a special supernatural virtue, infused with sanctifying grace to strengthen the irascible appetite and the will so that they will not abandon the pursuit of the arduous or difficult good even when faced with grave danger to bodily health and life. This virtue has as its proper subject the irascible appetite because it is especially concerned with the control of fear and daring. However, it is necessary to mention the will because this faculty must intervene if fortitude is to be a true virtue, although the will itself is not the proper faculty in which fortitude resides. As regards the movements of fear and daring, fortitude will prevent unreasonable fear in the face of an evil that threatens, and will restrain the individual from unreasonably attacking an impending evil. Since the greatest natural evil is the loss of one's life, the virtue of fortitude is principally concerned with the fear of death.

The two acts, by which fortitude manifests itself in the external order are to attack and to endure. There will be occasions in which the individual is called upon to defend the good by means of attack, and there will be times in which the individual cannot attack but must resist by not yielding.

Of the two acts of fortitude, the principal and more difficult is to resist or to endure. Contrary to common opinion, it is more painful and more heroic to resist an enemy or to suffer an evil than to attack. Psychologically it is easier to attack an evil, especially when the passion of anger has

been aroused. But to suffer sickness or persecution or death with a tranquil and sturdy spirit requires the fortitude of a hero. For that reason the Greek drama portrayed the hero of the tragedy as a man who knew how to accept death courageously, and Christians have always considered the martyrs as the outstanding examples of Christian fortitude.

In its double activity of attacking and resisting evil, fortitude plays an important role in the spiritual life. There are countless obstacles and difficulties to be overcome along the road leading to perfection. To succeed in reaching the goal, we must resolutely begin a journey to perfection, we must not be surprised at the presence of the enemy, we must have courage to attack and conquer when prudence dictates, and we must have the constancy and perseverance to carry on without ever surrendering to the enemy. And even if we have made great progress in the spiritual life and have achieved a moral victory over the enemy, fortitude will still be necessary in order to endure the trials and purgations sent by God to test and strengthen and purify the spirit.

The virtue of fortitude has no subjective parts or species because it deals with a very particular matter that cannot be further subdivided. There are, however, integral and potential parts of fortitude. They refer to the same virtues materially but are differentiated by the fact that the integral parts of fortitude refer to the dangers of death, and the potential parts or annexed virtues refer to lesser dangers.[\(9\)](#)

### *Magnanimity*

This virtue inclines one to perform some great act worthy of honor. It is therefore incompatible with mediocrity, and in this sense it is a most praiseworthy virtue.

The virtue of magnanimity presupposes a noble and lofty soul. It is often described as greatness of soul or nobility of character. Magnanimous persons are a superior type of person. They are never envious, they are not rivals of others, and they do not feel humiliated or embarrassed by the good of others. They are calm and leisurely in their actions; they do not give themselves to many activities, but only to those of greater importance.

They are truthful, sincere, somewhat reserved in speech, and a loyal friend. They never lie, but they speak their mind without being concerned about the opinion of others. They are open and frank, and never imprudent or hypocritical. They are objective in their friendships, and yet do not close their eyes to the defects of their friends. They are never excessive in their admiration of other people, nor attached to anything. They look primarily to virtue and to that which is noble.

The petty affections or disagreements that cause so many difficulties in social life mean nothing to them. If they are injured by others, they quickly forget and forgive. They are not overjoyed at the praise and applause of others, nor are they saddened at the criticism they may receive from others. They do not complain about the things they lack, but they learn to do without. This virtue presupposes a high degree of perfection in the other virtues.

### *Patience*

The virtue of patience enables one to bear physical and moral sufferings without sadness of spirit or dejection of heart. It is one of the most necessary virtues in the Christian life because the trials and sufferings we must inevitably suffer in this life require the assistance of some virtue to keep us strong and firm lest we yield to discouragement and sorrow. Many souls lose the merit of their

trials and sufferings because they fail to exercise the virtue of patience. Indeed, they suffer even more than they would have because of their lack of conformity to the will of God.

The principal motives for the practice of Christian patience are the following:

1. Conformity with the loving will of God, who knows better than we the things that are good for us and therefore sometimes sends us suffering and tribulation.
2. The recollection of the suffering of Jesus and Mary, incomparable models of patience, and the sincere desire to imitate them.
3. The necessity of making reparation for our sins by the voluntary and virtuous acceptance of suffering in atonement for our sins.
4. The necessity of cooperating with Christ in the application of the fruits of redemption, bearing our sufferings in union with his in order to make up what is wanting to his passion (cf. Col. 1:24).
5. The prospect of an eternity of happiness that awaits us if we know how to suffer in patience. The suffering passes, but the fruit of having sanctified our suffering will never pass.

As with the virtue of humility, so also with patience do we distinguish various grades or degrees that give some indication of the perfection of the virtue in individual Christians. There are five fundamental degrees of patience:

1. Resignation without complaint or impatience to the crosses God sends us or permits to come to us.
2. Peace and serenity in the face of affliction, without any of the sadness or melancholy that sometimes accompany mere resignation.
3. Acceptance of one's cross for the love of God.
4. Complete and total joy, which leads one to give thanks to God for being associated with him in the mystery of the Cross.
5. The folly of the Cross, which prefers suffering to pleasure and places all one's delight in external or internal suffering by which one is configured with Christ.

### *Perseverance*

The virtue of perseverance inclines one to persist in the practice of the good in spite of the difficulties involved. To remain unmoved and resolute in the practice of virtue from day to day requires a fortitude of spirit that is provided by this virtue. All the virtues need the help of perseverance, because without it no virtue could be preserved and practiced over a long period of time, nor would any virtue ultimately attain its perfection. Although every virtue is by definition a habit difficult to remove and is, therefore, of itself a stable quality, the special difficulty arising from a lifelong fidelity in the practice of any given virtue requires the special virtue of perseverance. Thus we see how one virtue comes to the aid of another.



However, the virtue of perseverance, even when perfected, requires a special assistance of grace called the grace of perseverance.[\(10\)](#) St. Thomas briefly summarizes the difference between this virtue and the grace required for its exercise:

Perseverance has a double meaning. First, it denotes the habit of perseverance, which is a virtue. And as a virtue, it requires the gift of habitual grace as do the other infused virtues. Secondly, it may be understood as signifying the act of perseverance that endures until death, and in this sense it requires not only habitual grace but also the gratuitous help of God, which sustains man in good until the end of life.[\(11\)](#)

The reason for the necessity of a special grace from God to insure our final perseverance is that sanctifying or habitual grace does not change our free will, in the sense that grace alone is a guarantee that the just person will never sin. However just and however perfect we may be, we are always able to sin, and for that reason we need, over and above the infused virtue of perseverance, the special grace of final perseverance that the Council of Trent calls "that great gift."

### *Constancy*

Constancy is closely related to the virtue of perseverance but is distinguished from the latter by reason of a special difficulty to be overcome. The essential note of perseverance is that it gives firmness and strength of soul in the face of the difficulty connected with the prolongation of a virtuous life. Constancy strengthens the soul against the difficulties that proceed from any other external obstacle, such as the influence of bad example or special temptations from without.

The principal means of growth in the virtue of fortitude and in those virtues related to it are the following:

1. *Constantly to beg it of God*, for although it is true that this is a general means that applies to all the virtues, since every supernatural gift comes from God (James 1:17), when it is a question of the virtue of fortitude we need the special assistance of God, due to the laxity and weakness of our human nature, wounded by sin. Without the help of God, we can do nothing (John 15:5), but with his help we can do all things (Phil. 4:13). For that reason Scripture repeatedly insists on the necessity of asking help from God, who is our strength.
2. *To foresee the difficulties we shall encounter on the path of virtue*. St. Thomas recommends this practice to all Christians, and especially to those who have not yet acquired the habit of working with fortitude. In this way one gradually overcomes one's fear, and when difficulties actually arise, one will overcome them much more easily because one has anticipated them.
3. *To accept with a generous spirit the annoyances of daily life*. Every vocation in life is accompanied by its own particular crosses and difficulties, even if they be merely the monotony and boredom of one's daily activities. If we do not learn to accept the inevitable inconveniences and small trials of daily life, such as cold and heat, pain and discomfort, small illnesses and aches, contradictions and ingratitude, we shall never make any progress in cultivating the Christian virtue of fortitude.

4. *To meditate frequently on the passion and death of Christ.* There is nothing that so animates and comforts delicate souls as the contemplation of the heroism of Christ. He was a man of sorrows and was acquainted with infirmities (Isa. 53:3), and he left us an example of suffering so that we would follow in his footsteps. However great our sufferings of soul or body, we can raise our eyes to the Crucifix, and Christ will give us the fortitude to bear them. It is likewise helpful to remember the profound suffering of Mary, of whom it is said: "Come, all you who pass by the way, look and see whether there is any suffering like my suffering" (Lam. 1:12).

5. *To intensify our love of God.* Love is as strong as death (Song 8:6), and it does not yield to any obstacle in the pursuit of pleasing the beloved. That is what gave St. Paul the superhuman fortitude by which he overcame tribulation, anguish, persecution, hunger, danger, and the sword. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37). When one truly loves God, there are no longer any difficulties in serving him, and one's very weakness becomes the basis for hoping in him. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness .... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

## **The Gift of Fortitude**

The gift of fortitude is a supernatural habit through which the Holy Spirit strengthens the soul for the practice of virtue, with invincible confidence of overcoming any dangers or difficulties that may arise. In the operation of this gift, as of the other gifts, the soul acts by a kind of instinctive interior impulse that proceeds directly from the Holy Spirit. And although the virtue of fortitude has the same name as the gift by which it is perfected, the gift extends to all the heroic actions of the other virtues as well. One of the clearest marks of distinction between the virtue of fortitude and the gift of fortitude is the confidence one experiences in being able to overcome great dangers and difficulties. It is true that the virtue of fortitude gives strength to the soul for overcoming obstacles, but the gift imparts the confidence of success.

The gift of fortitude is absolutely necessary for the perfection of the infused virtues, and sometimes it is required for perseverance in the state of grace. As to the perfection of the other virtues by the gift of fortitude, we should recall that a virtue is called perfect when its act springs from the soul with energy, promptness, and perseverance. The continued perfection in any virtue is manifestly supernatural, and it can be explained only by the supernatural mode of operation of the gift of fortitude. Thus the perfection of any of the virtues will at some time or other require the operation of the gift of fortitude.

As regards the necessity of the gift of fortitude for perseverance in the state of grace, there are occasions in the lives of most Christians when they are confronted, suddenly and inexorably, with the decision either to practice virtue in a given instance or to commit a mortal sin. If the virtue of fortitude is not sufficiently perfect, it will be necessary that the gift of fortitude come into play so that the individual will have the supernatural strength to perform the act of virtue. Moreover, by the very fact that some temptations are sudden and unexpected, while the operation of the virtues of prudence and fortitude is usually slow and discursive, one will need the prompt intervention of the gifts of counsel and fortitude. It is precisely on this point that St. Thomas

bases his teaching on the necessity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for eternal salvation.

1. *It gives the soul relentless vigor in the practice of virtue.* This is an inevitable result of the supernatural mode by which the virtue of fortitude operates when under the influence, of, the gift of fortitude. At such times the soul does not feel any weakness or lack of confidence in the practice of virtue. It may suffer from the obstacles and dangers it encounters, but it proceeds against them with supernatural energy in spite of all difficulties.

2. *It overcomes all lukewarmness in the service of God.* This is a natural consequence of the superhuman energy imparted to the soul by the gift of fortitude. Lukewarmness retards many persons on the way to perfection. It is due almost always to a lack of vigor and fortitude in the practice of virtue. Lukewarm souls consider that it is too much of an effort to have to conquer themselves in so many things and to maintain their spirit from one day to another in the monotonous fulfillment of the details of their daily obligations. The majority of such souls give in to weariness and renounce the battle, with the result that henceforth they live a purely mechanical life of routine, if indeed they do not turn their back completely on the life of virtue and abandon the pursuit of perfection. Only the gift of fortitude, which strengthens the power of the soul in a supernatural way, is an efficacious remedy against lukewarmness in the service of God.

3. *It makes the soul intrepid and valiant in every type of danger or against every kind of enemy.* This is another of the great effects of the gift of fortitude and is particularly marked in the lives of the saints. The apostles themselves, gentle and meek by nature, and even cowards when abandoned by their Master on the eve of Good Friday, presented themselves once more to the world on Pentecost Sunday with a superhuman fortitude and courage. They were then afraid of no one, for they realized that it was necessary to obey God rather than man (cf. Acts 5:29). They confessed the teachings of Christ and sealed their apostolate with their blood. All of this was the supernatural effect of the gift of fortitude, which the apostles received in all its plenitude on the first feast of Pentecost. In addition to the examples of the apostles, we have countless examples of saints who have been raised up by God throughout the centuries to give testimony to his doctrine of love, to combat the enemies of his Church, and in many instances to lay down their lives for Christ. From the earliest days of the Church and the ages of persecution to our own century, there have been men and women and even children who have manifested in their lives the power and the valor that are imparted to holy souls by the gift of fortitude.

4. *It enables souls to suffer with patience and joy.* Although resignation is a praiseworthy virtue, it is nevertheless imperfect, and the saints do not manifest it in their lives once they have reached the perfection of virtue. We mean by this that, in a strict sense, the saints did not resign themselves to suffering; rather, they sought it voluntarily. Sometimes this "folly of the Cross" was manifested in extraordinary and terrifying acts of penance. At other times it found expression in the heroic patience with which holy souls endured the greatest conceivable sickness and pain, their faces radiant with joy, as in the case of St. Therese of Lisieux, who said that she had reached a point in which she could no longer suffer because all suffering had become sweet to her. This is the language of heroism that proceeds directly from the intense operation in the soul of the gift of fortitude.

5. *It gives the soul the quality of heroism in great things and in small things.* No greater fortitude is required to suffer the martyr's death at one stroke than to endure without failing the prolonged martyrdom of the heroic practice of virtue and the fulfillment of one's daily duties to the smallest detail. This principle is valid for every state of life, and it is a point that should be preached more frequently to the faithful. Given the weakness and instability of human nature, it is evident that for most people the most difficult test of fortitude consists in faithful perseverance in the performance of even the smallest duties of one's state in life.

In addition to the general means for the increase and strengthening of the gifts (prayer, recollection, fidelity to grace), the following are more immediately concerned with strengthening the gift of fortitude:

1. *To accustom ourselves to the exact fulfillment of our duties in spite of any repugnance.* There are some heroic acts that surpass our powers at any given moment, but there can be no doubt that, with the assistance of the ordinary grace that God denies to no one, we can all do much more than we actually do. We shall never arrive at the heroism of the saints until the gift of fortitude operates intensely in us, but this operation is not likely to be effected in us by the Holy Spirit as a reward for our spiritual sloth and voluntary lukewarmness. To those who do the best that they can, the assistance of God will never be lacking. On the other hand, we cannot complain at not receiving the help of God through the operation of the gift of fortitude if we have not done all that we can. We must pray as if it all depended upon God, but we must strive as if it all depended upon ourselves.

2. *Not to ask God to remove our cross but only that he give us the strength to carry it.* The gift of fortitude is given to holy souls so that they will be able to bear the great crosses and tribulations through which they must inevitably pass in order to arrive at the height of sanctity. If, on experiencing any kind of suffering, or on feeling the weight of a cross God sends to us, we begin to complain and to ask God to take it from us, why should we then be surprised if the gifts of the Holy Spirit and especially the gift of fortitude do not operate in us? If, on being tested in little things, God finds that we are weak, how can his purifying action proceed in us? We should never complain about crosses, but we should ask the Lord that he give us the strength to bear them. Then we should remain tranquil and remember that God will never be outdone in generosity.

3. *To practice voluntary mortification faithfully.* The person who freely embraces suffering no longer fears it and may eventually embrace it with spiritual joy as a means of proving one's love. This does not mean that one should imitate the saints who performed heroic penitential acts, for not all souls, and not even all the saints, were called to this degree of mortification. Normally there are numerous opportunities in daily life and in the fulfillment of one's duties of state in life for the practice of self-denial. Indeed, it is a paradox to attempt to perform extremely difficult acts of mortification and penance and then fail to bear the little crosses of daily life. The goal of mortification is to strengthen oneself in the face of temptation and thereby allow virtue to develop; the purpose of self-denial is to control one's natural inclination to excessive self-love, which greedily seeks its own satisfaction, and to cultivate generous gift -- love. And although difficult at the beginning, the practices of mortification can eventually become second nature, and at

that point one acquires the stability and fidelity that are characteristic of fortitude.

## CHAPTER NOTES

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, qq. 47-9.

*Ibid.*, q. 58.

*Ibid.*, q. 84.

For detailed information, see *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 102.

*Ibid.*, q. 186, aa. 7-8.

The letter was written at Rome on March 16, 1553, and can be seen in its entirety in *Obras de San Ignacio de Loyola* (Madrid: B.A.C., 1952), pp. 833-43.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 107, a. 2.

*Ibid.*, q. 168, aa. 2-4.

*Ibid.*, q. 128.

This doctrine was affirmed by the Council of Trent. See Denz.-Schön. 1572.

*Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 137, a. 4.

## 12

### Grades of Prayer

We are indebted to St. Teresa of Avila for the clearest and best classification of the grades of prayer. Her concept that the intensity of one's life of prayer coincides with the intensity of one's charity is based on solid theology and was confirmed by St. Pius X, who stated that the grades of prayer taught by St. Teresa represent so many grades of elevation and ascent toward Christian perfection.[\(1\)](#)

These grades are (1) vocal prayer, (2) meditation, (3) affective prayer, (4) prayer of simplicity, (5) infused contemplation, (6) prayer of quiet, (7) prayer of union, (8) prayer of conforming union, and (9) prayer of transforming union. The first four grades of prayer belong to the predominantly ascetical stage of the spiritual life; the remaining five grades are infused prayer and belong to the mystical phase of the spiritual life.

#### Vocal Prayer

Although we classify the grades of prayer under the headings of ascetical and mystical, there may be mystical prayer in the early stages of the spiritual life, and there may be a return to ascetical activity on the part of souls who are well advanced in mystical ways. Hence what is meant by ascetical and mystical signifies that which is predominant and not that which is exclusive. Little remains to be said concerning vocal prayer, since much of what we have already

written concerning the prayer of petition applies to the first grade of prayer.

By vocal prayer we mean any form of prayer expressed in words, whether written or spoken. This kind of prayer is the form used in public or liturgical prayer, but it is also much used by private individuals. St. Thomas gives three reasons why vocal prayer is suitable: (1) it arouses interior devotion; (2) it gives homage to God with our body as well as our mind and heart; and (3) it gives expression to the spiritual sentiments that flood the soul in prayer.[\(2\)](#)

We should observe that vocal prayer is not restricted to prayer of petition (although petition would surely be included); it likewise includes adoration, thanksgiving, contrition, and all the other sentiments an individual experiences in relation to God. We want to emphasize especially the use of vocal prayer as a means of arousing one's devotion or of giving expression to one's love of God, because this leads to the higher forms of prayer: discursive meditation and affective prayer.

It should also be noted that vocal prayer as the public liturgical prayer of the people of God gives greater glory to God than does private prayer and has a greater efficacy because it is the prayer of the Christian community. Yet, considering the one who prays, the Christian most perfect in love is the one who prays most perfectly.

The two requirements for vocal prayer are attention and devotion. What we have said concerning the attention required for prayer of petition applies here also; we would merely add that attention may be actual or virtual. Actual attention is present when those who pray have complete awareness of what they are doing here and now; virtual attention is that which is had at the beginning of prayer and extends throughout the prayer without being retracted, although there may be involuntary distractions. St. Teresa says:

That prayer which does not attend to the one it is addressing and what it asks and who it is that asks and of whom it asks, such I do not call prayer at all, however much one may move the lips. For although it is true that sometimes it will be true prayer even if one does not take heed of these things, it is more truly prayer on those occasions when one does.[\(3\)](#)

The second requirement -- devotion -- is complementary to that of attention. By attention we apply our intellect to the practice of prayer; by devotion we direct our will to God. Devotion, therefore, involves several virtues: charity, confidence, humility, reverence, and perseverance. Devotion is so important for vocal prayer that it would be better to recite one Our Father devoutly than to say many prayers in a routine and mechanical fashion, unless it is a question of prayers that must be recited by reason of some obligation.

Devotion should also be the measure for the duration of one's personal vocal prayers, for it is futile to attempt to pray well when one is fatigued. By the same token, public prayers should be arranged in such a way that they arouse the devotion of the faithful and do not cause tedium. "In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:7-9).

It is not possible to give any fixed rule or detailed directions for the formulas to be used in vocal prayer. Perhaps the best principle to follow is that given for the selection of books for one's

spiritual reading, namely, to use that which is beneficial. The words by which we express ourselves in vocal prayer will vary with our needs and our spiritual sentiments. Moreover, some persons find it difficult to express themselves, and therefore they make use of the prayers composed by others. Objectively, the best prayers are the Our Father, which was taught us by Christ himself, the prayers from the pages of Scripture (the Hail Mary, Gloria, Psalms) and the prayers in the liturgy. Unfortunately, their constant repetition readily degenerates into a purely mechanical recitation.

The necessity of fervent recitation of vocal prayer cannot be emphasized too much, because vocal prayer is one type of prayer that can never be omitted completely, even when one arrives at the height of sanctity. The time comes in the practice of mental prayer when the inferior grades yield to the superior grades as one progresses in union with God, but this never occurs with vocal prayer. It is always beneficial, either to arouse devotion or to give expression to the intensity and fervor of one's love to God. Any attacks on the practice of vocal prayer must, therefore, be interpreted as the sign of an evil spirit, and this spirit has been manifested by many deluded souls and false mystics in the history of spirituality.

## **Meditation**

Discursive meditation can be defined as a reasoned application of the mind to some supernatural truth in order to penetrate its meaning, love it, and carry it into practice with the assistance of grace. The distinguishing note of meditation is that it is a discursive type of prayer, and therefore attention is absolutely indispensable.

As soon as we cease to reason or discourse, we cease to meditate. We may have given way to distraction, deliberately turned our mind to something else, or passed on to affective prayer or contemplation, but without discursus there is no meditation.

### *Nature of Meditation*

How, then, is meditation distinguished from simple study or speculation on a supernatural truth? Unlike the latter activities, meditation is a form of prayer, and it is such by reason of its purpose or finality. Actually, meditation has a double finality, one intellectual and the other affective and practical. The intellectual purpose is to arrive at firm convictions concerning some supernatural truth; hence the importance of the intellect in meditation.

But one could acquire firm convictions by speculative study, and therefore this cannot be the principal finality of meditation nor that which makes meditation true prayer. The most important element in meditation is the act of love aroused in the will on the presentation of some supernatural truth by the intellect. As St. Teresa points out, meditation consists not so much in thinking a great deal but in loving a great deal.<sup>(4)</sup> When the will bursts forth with acts of love, an intimate contact is established between the soul and God, and then it is that the soul can truly be said to be praying. Discursus is merely a preparation for the arousal of love.

But a meditation is not completed by arousing love for the supernatural truth on which one has speculated. Any meditation that is properly made should terminate in a practical resolution for the future. Love cannot be idle; by its very nature it urges us to action. When the meditation has passed through the steps of discursus and acts of love, charity impels us to put love into action.

Failure to make efficacious resolutions is the reason why many souls who practice daily meditation get little or no practical benefit from this exercise of prayer. They insist too much on that which is merely a preparation for prayer. They pass the time in spiritual reading or speculation, but they do not make acts of love, nor do they make any practical resolutions.

Another element of the definition of meditation requires explanation: that of the subject matter. We have stated that meditation is the reasoned discursus on some supernatural truth, meaning any truth related to God and the spiritual life. By reason of the subject matter, some authors have made a further division of meditation into imaginative meditation, dogmatic meditation, liturgical meditation, moral meditation. One can meditate on a variety of subjects; e.g., some scene or mystery from the life of Christ, the life and virtues of Mary or the saints, a particular virtue to be acquired or vice to be uprooted, a truth from dogmatic theology, such as the attributes of God or the indwelling of the Trinity, the prayers and actions of the sacraments, the Mass, and the liturgy.

The guiding principle for subject matter is to select what is needed at a particular time and will be beneficial according to one's capacities. Consequently, it is important to insist upon prudence in the selection of the material for meditation. Not all subject matters are suited for all souls, not even for a given soul in varying circumstances. In general, young people or beginners in the practice of meditation will do well to utilize what has been called imaginative meditation (scenes from the life of Christ, Mary, and the saints), liturgical meditations, or moral meditations (which help one to uproot vices and cultivate virtue).

### *Methods of Meditation*

In selecting a method of meditation, two extremes should be avoided: excessive rigidity and inconstancy. At the beginning of the practice of prayer it is generally necessary to adhere to some method or other, because as yet the soul does not know how to proceed in the life of prayer. In these early stages it is important that the soul should not only follow a method, but that it should also select the most beneficial method, for the needs of souls are not identical.

As the soul progresses in the practice of prayer, however, and is more at ease in conversing with God, the method becomes less and less important and eventually may even become an obstacle to further progress. It should also be noted that, since we are not usually the best judge of our own needs, a prudent and wise spiritual director is of great help in leading the soul from one grade of prayer to another, so long as the director is not slavishly addicted to one method exclusively.

Although ancient writers such as St. John Cassian and St. Bernard spoke about methods of prayer, it was not until the sixteenth century that spiritual writers began to offer detailed methods of discursive prayer. Since that time, methods of prayer have been compiled or adapted by such writers as Louis of Granada, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. John Baptist de la Salle, and Cardinal Bérulle. We shall content ourselves with offering two outlines of methods of prayer and leave the others to the personal research of the reader.[\(5\)](#)

### *Method of St. Ignatius Loyola: [\(6\)](#)*

Preparation



acts of faith and reverence in the presence of God  
general preparatory prayer to ask the grace of making a  
good meditation  
composition of place (exercise of the imagination)  
petition for the special grace sought in the meditation

#### Body of the meditation

exercise of the memory to recall the material to be meditated upon  
exercise of the intellect by reflection and consideration of the material of the meditation and practical applications and conclusions to be drawn from it  
exercise of the will by arousing devout feelings and affections and by making practical, particular resolutions

#### Conclusion

colloquy or conversation with God  
vocal prayer, such as Our Father, Hail Mary, etc.

#### *Carmelite Method:*

##### Introduction

preparation  
reading

##### Meditation

imaginative representation of material  
reflection or meditation properly so called  
affective colloquy or conversation with God

##### Conclusion

thanksgiving  
oblation  
petition

Regardless of method, all meditation can be reduced ultimately to a basic framework containing all the essential parts of meditation: consideration of some supernatural truth, application of that truth to one's life, and the resolution to do something about it. These three steps, we believe, are

absolutely essential for true meditation; the other details may or may not be used according to the needs of individual souls.

### *Practice of Meditation*

What time of day is best for meditation? It is better by far to select the most opportune time of the day and then observe the same time each day. Regularity in prayer is of extreme importance, for it is easy to alter the schedule, then change the time for any pretext whatever, and ultimately abandon the practice of prayer.

It should be noted that not all times are equally satisfactory. As a general rule it is more difficult to meditate after a heavy meal, immediately after recreation, or when the mind is distracted or fatigued by many occupations. Most writers on the spiritual life state that the best times for meditation are early in the morning, the late afternoon before the evening meal, or late at night when one has finished all the duties and occupations of the day. But even this cannot be given as a hard and fast rule, and perhaps the best norm to be followed is to meditate when one's mind is most alert and one can be recollected.

The duration of meditation cannot be the same for all individuals or for all states of life. It should, so far as possible, be adjusted to the needs of each. Religious are usually obliged by their Constitutions to devote a definite period of time to mental prayer. Although there are various opinions concerning the length of time to be spent in meditation, it is reasonable to state that, if the time spent in meditation is too brief, most of the period is used in getting ready to pray and not in actual prayer; but if the time is too long, devotion is stifled and the period assigned for prayer becomes a period of penance.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that prayer should last as long as the soul is in a state of fervor and devotion, and that it should terminate when it can no longer be prolonged without tedium and continual distractions.<sup>(7)</sup> Whatever the length of time given to meditation, its influence should be felt throughout the whole day. In this way, as St. Thomas suggests, prayer can be constant. The use of fervent ejaculatory prayers will preserve the fire of devotion throughout the day. The important thing is that one lead a life of prayer; without it, one can hope to gain little from the particular times set aside for meditation.

We have already spoken of the place for prayer when we treated of vocal prayer, but something further needs to be said concerning meditation. The church is the most fitting place for meditation because of the sanctity of the place, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the solitude and recollection usually found there. Yet, meditation can be made in any place in which a person can be recollected and can concentrate on the material of the meditation. It is a question of particular dispositions, and the best rule of conduct is the one based on personal experience.

Posture during meditation is important because of the necessity of recollection and attention in discursive prayer. Some persons may find it most effective to meditate while kneeling, but for others the discomfort may prove a cause of distraction. But whether we are kneeling, seated, or standing, two extremes should be avoided: excessive comfort and excessive mortification. If we are too comfortable, we may find it difficult to keep our mind on the material of meditation, or we may even fall asleep. If we are too uncomfortable, the position may be a cause of distraction and will soon kill devotion.

From what has been stated, it should be evident that the practice of meditation is a great spiritual help. Numerous persons who live habitually in sin continue in that condition simply because they never reflect seriously upon the state of their souls. Some of them do not have malicious hearts, nor do they hate the things of God or their own salvation; they have simply given themselves entirely to purely natural activities and have neglected the things that are of importance to their soul.

One of the greatest proofs that their sad condition is due not so much to malice as to the lack of reflection is the fact that when they return to the practice of their religion, or attend a retreat or mission, they may experience a complete conversion of life. With good reason does St. Teresa maintain that the practice of mental prayer is necessarily connected with growth in virtue. It is, therefore, a great help for salvation to cultivate the practice of daily meditation.

Those who aspire to sanctity by giving themselves completely to the active life while neglecting the life of prayer may just as well forget about Christian perfection. Experience proves that there is absolutely nothing that can supply for the life of prayer, not even the daily reception of the Eucharist. There are many persons who receive Communion every day, yet their spiritual life is mediocre and lukewarm. The reason is none other than the lack of mental prayer, either because they omit it entirely or they practice it in a mechanical and routine fashion. We repeat that without prayer it is impossible to attain Christian perfection, no matter what our state of life or the occupation to which we dedicate ourselves.

### **Affective Prayer**

Although St. Teresa of Avila does not use the expression *affective prayer* in any of her writings, she does refer to this grade of prayer, [\(8\)](#) and it has been accepted by all the schools of spirituality.

Affective prayer may be defined as a type of prayer in which the operations of the will predominate over discursus of the intellect. There is no specific difference between affective prayer and meditation, as there is between meditation and contemplation; it is merely a simplified meditation in which love predominates. For this reason the transition to affective prayer is usually gradual and more or less easy, although this will vary with individuals.

Some persons are by nature so affectionate and responsive that they very easily rise from intellectual discursus to the movement of the will. Others, on the contrary, are so cold and rigid by nature that their prayer is almost entirely discursive, and they seldom give expression to affections of the will. Such individuals need more time and experience to arrive at the practice of affective prayer. The method of St. Ignatius is not as conducive to affective prayer as is the simpler method used by the Carmelites and the Franciscans.

When should we expect to make the transition from discursive meditation to affective prayer? Two extremes must be avoided: to leave meditation too quickly or too late. In practice, however, these extremes can easily be avoided if we take care to simplify discursive meditation gradually, without trying to force ourselves. It is almost certain that if we practice daily meditation we will from time to time experience affections that have been stimulated by some point in meditation. When this occurs, we should give ourselves gently to the movements of love, and as these moments become more and more frequent, we shall make the transition from discursive

meditation to affective prayer.

### *Practice of Affective Prayer*

Discursive meditation should lead to the practice of affective prayer, but it is impossible to practice affective prayer exclusively because the will is a blind faculty that needs direction and enlightenment before it can love and desire the good. For that reason discursive meditation and spiritual reading play an important part in the practice of affective prayer; they supply the material that stimulates the activity of the will.

Hence we must be careful not to terminate discursive meditation before the affections have been stimulated. This would be a waste of time and could also be the source of illusion. Neither should we force the affections; when they do not come forth spontaneously, or when they have run their course, we should return to discursive or vocal prayer and not try to prolong the affection by our own efforts.

Neither should we be anxious to pass from one affection to another. Rather, we should attempt gradually to simplify the movements of the will. The operations of the will should be reduced to unity, and the affections should be deep-seated rather than numerous. The practice of affective prayer is best guaranteed by the use of a discursive meditation that considers the material point by point and pauses at any moment in which the affections of the will have been stimulated. We should yield to this affection until it has run its course, and then return to the next point in the meditation. This is likewise a commendable method to be followed in spiritual reading or in the use of a manual of prayer. As soon as some thought has stimulated and aroused a movement of the will, we should stop reading and allow the will to perform its operation.

If properly used, affective prayer confers many benefits on the soul. Psychologically, it provides a delightful respite from the dry labor of discursive meditation. It also prevents us from becoming excessively introspective or relying too greatly upon our own efforts, as could happen easily if we were to devote ourselves exclusively to discursive meditation and never allow the will to break forth in acts of love.

Because affective prayer is essentially an operation of the will, it serves to deepen the union of the soul with God by acts of love. And since all the infused virtues are increased with the increase of charity, affective prayer is a powerful means for growth in virtue. It is likewise a great stimulus for the practice of the Christian virtues because of the sweetness and consolation it gives. It is, lastly, an excellent disposition and preparation for the prayer of simplicity.

### *Dangers in Affective Prayer*

But certain dangers and abuses must be avoided in the practice of affective prayer. First of all, we should never use force in order to produce the affections and movements of the will. It is of no avail to clench the fist, to distort the face, and to groan or sigh in an effort to produce an intense act of the love of God. The act of love must be aroused spontaneously, and this is best done by supernaturalizing one's motives and striving in all things simply and solely to give glory to God out of pure love.

Another possible danger in the practice of affective prayer lies in the fact that it often fills the heart with sensible consolation. Those who are easily stimulated to movements of affection may

erroneously judge themselves to be more advanced in perfection than they really are because they feel at times as if they are going into ecstasy. Unfortunately, many of these persons see no contradiction in the fact that in their daily life they are constantly falling into imperfections and venial sins. True progress in the spiritual life consists in the ever more perfect practice of the Christian virtues and not in the sweetness one experiences in prayer. Moreover, persons who place great value on sensible consolations are in danger of practicing prayer primarily for the delight it gives them. This is the spiritual gluttony that St. John of the Cross criticizes with severity.[\(9\)](#)

Lastly, there is the danger that persons who have tasted the delight and consolation of affective prayer may fall into slothfulness, which will prevent them from returning to the discursive meditation they had formerly practiced. It is a serious mistake to think that once the soul has enjoyed habitual affective prayer it need never return to the practice of meditation. St. Teresa asserts that sometimes it is necessary to return to the lower grades of prayer even after having experienced mystical contemplation.[\(10\)](#)

### *Fruits of Affective Prayer*

There is an infallible rule for judging the value of any kind of prayer: examine the fruits it produces. This is the supreme norm for the discernment of spirits, as given by Christ himself (cf. Matt. 7:16). The value of affective prayer cannot be measured by the intensity or the frequency of the sensible consolations that are experienced; it must be judged by the increasing perfection in the life of the individual. This means that the fruits of affective prayer should be a more intense practice of the Christian virtues, an increasing purity of intention, a spirit of self-denial and detachment, an increase in charity, and the faithful and exact fulfillment of the duties of one's state in life. Affective prayer, in spite of the consolations it gives, is not the goal or terminus of the life of prayer; it is only a step along the way to the perfection of prayer in the mystical state.

### **Prayer of Simplicity**

It seems that Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704) was the first author to use this expression,[\(11\)](#) but this type of prayer was recognized by St. Teresa as the prayer of acquired recollection, to distinguish it from infused recollection, the first grade of mystical prayer.[\(12\)](#) Other authors call this prayer the prayer of simple gaze, of the presence of God or of the simple vision of faith.

In the seventeenth century some writers began to call this prayer acquired contemplation. St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila never used that expression, and although there is no objection to the use of the term (it is simply the prayer of acquired recollection, according to St. Teresa, or the prayer of simplicity, according to Bossuet), many authors now restrict the word *contemplation* to the mystical grades of prayer. This is more faithful to the language of St. John of the Cross.

The prayer of simplicity was defined by Bossuet, as a simple loving gaze upon some divine object, whether on God himself or one of his perfections, on Christ or on one of his mysteries, or on some other Christian truth. It is a form of ascetical prayer that is extremely simplified. The discursus formerly used in meditation has now been transformed into a simple intellectual gaze; the affections that were experienced in affective prayer have been unified into a simple loving

attention to God. The prayer is ascetical, meaning that the soul is able to attain to this type of prayer by its own efforts with the help of ordinary grace, but often it is the transition point to mystical prayer.

The prayer of simplicity is thus the bridge between ascetical and mystical prayer. It is, as it were, the final disposition before the Holy Spirit begins to operate in the soul by means of his gifts. For that reason, one may frequently experience a blending of acquired and infused elements in the practice of the prayer of simplicity. If the soul is faithful, the infused elements will gradually be increased until they dominate the practice of prayer entirely. Thus, without any shock and almost insensibly, the soul proceeds gently from the ascetical practice of prayer to mystical contemplation. This is an indication of the unity of the spiritual life and of the fact that there is only one road to perfection.

### *Practice of the Prayer of Simplicity*

Because of its simplicity, there is no particular method for this type of prayer. It is simply a question of gazing and loving. It is useful, however, to keep in mind certain counsels. Before we actually enter upon the prayer of simplicity, we must take great care not to try to hasten the entrance into this type of prayer. So long as we are able to meditate and to practice affective prayer, we should continue with those types of prayer.

The contrary extreme should likewise be avoided. We should not continue the practice of meditation or even of affective prayer if we perceive clearly that we can remain before God in loving attention without any particular discursus or affective movement. St. John of the Cross severely criticizes spiritual directors who try to restrict souls to the practice of meditation when they have advanced far enough to enter the prayer of simplicity.[\(13\)](#)

It is fitting that the soul should dispose itself for this prayer by means of some material, as was done in the use of meditation, but it should abandon it immediately if the attraction of grace so inclines. The preparation should be very brief and should not be concerned with many details. The prayer of simplicity requires that the powers of the soul be intimately united in a loving gaze, and this requires that the object of attention should be simple and unified.

During the practice of the prayer of simplicity, the soul should strive to preserve the loving attention that is fixed on God, but without forcing itself. It must avoid distractions and slothfulness; but if it exerts too much effort it will destroy the simplicity of the prayer. Psychologically it is difficult for us to remain attentive over a long period of time, and therefore we should not expect, especially in the beginning, to be able to practice the prayer of simplicity for long periods of time. As soon as the loving attention begins to waver, we should turn to the use of affective prayer or simple meditation. All must be done gently and without violence. Nor should the soul be upset if periods of dryness occur. The prayer of simplicity is not always a sweet and consoling type of prayer; it is also a transition from ascetical to mystical prayer, and therefore the soul may experience the aridity that normally accompanies transitional states.

### *Fruits of the Prayer of Simplicity*

The fruits of the prayer of simplicity should be manifested in a general improvement and progress in the Christian life. Our entire life and conduct should benefit from the practice of this prayer. And since grace tends more and more to simplify our conduct until it is reduced to unity

in love, we should foster this tendency by avoiding every kind of affectation and multiplicity in our relations with God and our neighbor. This simplification of life should characterize those who have entered the prayer of simplicity. It should be especially manifested in a deep and continuous recollection in God.

Even when occupied with the ordinary duties of daily life, the soul should be interiorly gazing upon God and loving him. The presence of God should be especially felt during liturgical prayer and in the recitation of vocal prayer. The examination of conscience should be so implicit that a rapid glance reveals the faults and imperfections of the day: All external works should be performed with the spirit of prayer and with the ardent desire of giving glory to God, and even the most commonplace tasks should be permeated with the spirit of faith and love.

All the advantages of affective prayer over simple meditation are found as well in the prayer of simplicity, but noticeably increased. As affective prayer is an excellent preparation for the prayer of simplicity, so the latter is a disposition for infused contemplation. With much less effort than before, the soul achieves magnificent results in the practice of prayer. Thus, each new grade of prayer represents a new advance in the Christian life.

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to make a complete separation between ascetical and mystical prayer as manifested in any particular soul because persons in the ascetical state are capable of receiving certain mystical influences through the operations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and mystics will act in a purely ascetical fashion when the gifts are not actually operating. What is certain is that in the ascetical state there will be a predominance of ascetical activity, and in the mystical state the operations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit will be predominant. Consequently, it is not surprising that the gifts of the Holy Spirit should sometimes begin to operate while the soul is in the highest grade of ascetical prayer, namely, the prayer of simplicity.

### **Contemplative Prayer**

The word *contemplation* signifies knowledge accompanied by delight, and the object of the knowledge is usually of such a type that it arouses admiration and captivates the soul. Since contemplation is an operation of the cognitive powers, there is such a thing as a purely natural and acquired contemplation in the natural order.

But contemplation is a distinctive type of knowledge. It is an experimental knowledge in the sense that it calls into play the affective powers of the individual. Contemplation is, therefore, an operation in which one experiences the happy blending of the cognitive and the affective powers in an activity providing great delight. The knowledge involved is not discursive but intuitive; the movement of love is not toward the possession of the object loved but one of surrender to the object loved. Perhaps the best example of natural contemplation is found in the aesthetic experience of the beautiful.

#### *Supernatural Contemplation*

Supernatural or infused contemplation has been defined by various formulas, but the essential note that all definitions have in common is that supernatural contemplation is an experimental knowledge of God. Moreover, as a supernatural activity, infused contemplation requires the operation of faculties that are likewise supernatural, both in their substance and in their mode of operation. Consequently when we speak of contemplation as a grade of mystical prayer, we

restrict the word to signify the loving knowledge of God that is experienced through the operation of the gifts of wisdom and understanding, presupposing, of course, faith informed by charity. St. Teresa calls this prayer infused recollection.

For the sake of clarity and conciseness, we can summarize the theology of infused contemplation in the following statements, some of which apply likewise to the higher grades of mystical prayer and the mystical experience in general:

1. *Infused contemplation is not a charism or "gratia gratis data" but a grade of prayer made possible by the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to all souls with sanctifying grace.* Charisms or *gratiae gratis datae* are given for the good of others and do not sanctify the one who receives them, nor do they prove the sanctity of one who receives them. Infused contemplation, on the other hand, is ordained to the spiritual good of the one who receives it, and it is also meritorious and sanctifying. And since all souls in grace possess the gifts of the Holy Spirit, their operation in mystical contemplation does not constitute a charism, *gratia gratis data*, or an extraordinary phenomenon of the spiritual life.

2. *Infused contemplation necessarily requires sanctifying grace.* Infused contemplation is never given without the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and these are inseparable from grace. Moreover, contemplation is one of the effects of an intense love of God, which presupposes sanctifying grace and the virtue of charity.

3. *Contemplation requires the impulse of actual grace.* The reason for this is that contemplation is a supernatural act, and therefore it requires a previous movement of actual grace to reduce the supernatural powers from potency to act.

4. *The infused virtues of the affective order are not the immediate, formal, and eliciting principles of the act of contemplation, although they may serve as antecedent dispositions or consequent effects.* The affective moral virtues remotely prepare for contemplation by controlling the lower appetites; the virtue of charity has a direct influence on the act of contemplation by uniting the soul with God and then producing in the will the joy that is the delight of contemplation.

5. *The immediate eliciting principles of contemplation are the gifts of wisdom and understanding perfecting the act of faith informed by charity.* Since the faculty in which contemplation takes place is the speculative intellect, the power by which contemplation is produced must be one that perfects the speculative intellect. Therefore, contemplation requires the operation of the virtue of faith and the gifts of wisdom and understanding.

One and the same action, however, cannot proceed in exactly the same way from specifically distinct habits. Faith provides the substance of the act of contemplation by formally establishing contact with God as First Truth, but without giving a vision of the truth because the knowledge of faith is obscure.

The virtue of charity plays its part in contemplation as a proximate disposition whereby the object of faith is made present to the subject in a connatural manner. It is, therefore, indispensable that faith be informed by charity.

The intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit provide the supernatural mode by which contemplation



becomes an experimental knowledge.

The gift of understanding provides the formal mystical knowledge by making the object present as something known. The gift of wisdom perfects the virtue of faith by giving a knowledge of God that is not discursive but intuitive; it perfects the virtue of charity by giving a savory experience of God and supernatural mysteries.

### *Characteristics of Infused Contemplation*

Having considered the nature of contemplation from a theological point of view, we shall now describe the characteristics by which infused contemplation can be recognized and distinguished from other manifestations of the spiritual life.

1. *An experience of the presence of God.* Many authors of mystical theology place great emphasis on this characteristic and consider it the essential note of infused contemplation. God gives to the soul an experimental, intellectual knowledge of his presence. This characteristic is essential for mystical contemplation but not for mystical experience in general because the soul may lack the experience of the presence of God when it is undergoing the passive purification of the soul, which St. John of the Cross describes as a "purgative" contemplation.[\(14\)](#)

2. *The invasion of the soul by the supernatural.* The soul feels in an unmistakable manner that it is permeated with something it cannot describe with precision, but feels clearly is something supernatural. It is, in fact, an effect of the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which inundate the soul with supernatural life.

3. *Impossibility of producing the mystical experience by one's efforts.* The soul is fully aware of the fact that the experience it is enjoying has not been produced by its own efforts and that it will not last a second longer than is desired by the Holy Spirit, who causes it. The soul is a passive subject of a sublime experience it could not produce of itself. The reason is that contemplation is produced through the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and individual souls are unable by their own efforts to activate the gifts. The gifts are directly under the control of the Holy Spirit and they operate when he desires and only so long as he desires.

God works in the soul according to his own good pleasure. Sometimes the mystical experience begins, is intensified, and then gradually diminishes until it disappears entirely, and this is what happens most frequently. But at other times the mystical experience may appear and disappear suddenly. And since this is God's activity, it would be most imprudent for a spiritual director to command a particular soul to discontinue mystical prayer in order to return to ordinary prayer.

4. *In contemplation the soul is more passive than active.* We have already stated that the soul cannot contemplate whenever it wishes, but only when the Holy Spirit desires and in the measure and degree he desires. Under the action of the gifts, the soul reacts in a vital manner and cooperates with all its efforts in the divine movement, but it is an activity that is received, so to speak. This is the famous *patiens divina* that is experienced by all mystics. St. Thomas says that in the operations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit the human soul does not act as mover, but rather as the thing moved.[\(15\)](#)

5. *The experimental knowledge of God enjoyed during contemplation is not clear and distinct but obscure and confused.* St. John of the Cross explains this characteristic of infused contemplation

in The Ascent of Mount Carmel. The theological reason for this confused and obscure knowledge is that the contemplative light of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is cast upon the act of faith to illumine it extrinsically and subjectively, but not intrinsically and objectively, since faith is of things not seen. Only the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) will give us a clear and distinct contemplation of God and his mysteries, and this occurs in the beatific vision. In this life, however, so long as we live by faith, the knowledge of the contemplative must necessarily be obscure and confused.

Nevertheless, it is possible that certain extraordinary phenomena that are clear and distinct may occur during the mystical experience. There are certain *gratiae gratis datae*, such as visions and locutions, that present new infused species but are the result of a special divine action that is gratuitous and extraordinary. The extraordinary phenomena are not the normal activity of infused contemplation.

6. *Infused contemplation gives full security and assurance to the soul that it is under the action of God.* According to the testimony of mystics, so long as the contemplative activity continues, the soul cannot have the slightest doubt that God is acting upon it. Once the prayer is finished, the soul may doubt the experience, but during the mystical prayer it is impossible for the soul to have any doubts. It is true that this assurance admits of different degrees, just as there are different degrees of mystical prayer. The reason for this assurance and confidence is that the Holy Spirit gives the soul a certitude so firm that it would sooner doubt its own existence than the divine reality it is experiencing. As St. Paul says: "The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

7. *Infused contemplation gives the soul moral certitude that it is in the state of grace.* This is a natural consequence of the previous characteristics, but it is necessary to understand it properly in order to avoid erroneous notions. It is of faith and so defined by the Council of Trent that, without a special revelation from God, we cannot be certain that we belong to the number of the predestined, that we will not sin again, that we will be converted again after sin, or that we will receive the gift of final perseverance. Neither can we know with certainty whether we are in the state of grace.[\(16\)](#)

Those who enjoy mystical contemplation have a moral certitude of being in the state of grace, and this certitude is far superior to that possessed by ordinary Christians in the ascetical state. Mystical contemplation is produced by the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and these gifts necessarily presuppose the state of grace. But we repeat that this certitude is not absolute and infallible because this is never, given in this life except by a special divine revelation.

8. *The mystical experience is indescribable.* The mystics are unable to express clearly what they experience in their mystical activities. It is only by means of examples, comparisons and metaphors, or circumlocution that they are able to give some notion of what transpires during these operations. Unless a person has had the same experience, the descriptions given by mystics may seem to be exaggerated or open to misinterpretation. The reason is that the activity of the gifts transcends the discursive power of human reason. Mystical experiences are intuitive, and as such they can be experienced, but they cannot be expressed in human language.

9. *The mystical union admits of variations and fluctuations.* St. Teresa states that the mystical union may last for a long time, or it may sometimes be of short duration, according to the desires

of God, who communicates this experience.<sup>(17)</sup> Sometimes the mystical experience is so brief that it seems to be nothing more than a divine touch, and as a rule it does not remain in the same degree of intensity for a long time. During the period of intensification the soul yearns for the crisis that is to come, but as soon as that point is reached, the experience immediately begins to diminish.

10. *Mystical experience frequently causes reactions in the body.* Sometimes the intense spiritual delight experienced by the soul causes startling phenomena in the sensitive order. St. John of the Cross teaches, however, that this occurs only in beginners in the mystical life and that they should ignore these reactions and continue the practice of prayer. When contemplation is very intense, the organism may be changed visibly. The eyes become clouded and dull; respiration is weak and intermittent, with an occasional deep breathing as if trying to absorb the necessary quantity of air; the limbs are partly paralyzed; the heat of the body decreases, especially in the extremities. All these phenomena have been manifested time and again in mystical souls, and St. Teresa speaks of them in her works.<sup>(18)</sup>

The reason for the phenomena that accompany the mystical experience is that the human organism can react in only a certain number of ways, and when the spirit is absorbed in an intense activity, the body is necessarily affected. On the other hand, if we give ourselves completely and energetically to corporal things, the faculties of the soul are weakened for spiritual things. For that reason St. Paul warns that the carnal person cannot understand spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14).

11. *Mystical prayer often produces, a suspension or binding of the faculties.* Mystical contemplation may be so intense that it results in an ecstatic trance. When this occurs, it is inevitable that there should be a suspension of the sense faculties. Even if the contemplative activity does not produce this effect, however, it is frequently difficult and even impossible for the mystic to give attention to any other prayers or activities because of the absorption in God. Mystical activity tends to exclude everything that is alien to it, especially the operations that proceed from the effort of the subject. The practical advice to be followed during mystical activity is simply to submit to the action of God within the soul and to let ourselves be carried by the divine impulses. Only in the case of prayers or external works that are obligatory should we make every effort to fulfill our duties.

12. *Infused contemplation causes a great impulse for the practice of virtue.* This is one of the surest signs of true contemplation. The soul that does not leave its prayer with a great impulse toward solid virtue can be sure that it has not enjoyed truly contemplative prayer.<sup>(19)</sup> One of the marvelous facts of mystical experience is that a contemplative soul sometimes finds that it instantaneously possesses a degree of perfection in a certain virtue it has not been able to attain over a long period of time in spite of its efforts.

Yet it is necessary to avoid exaggeration in this matter. In the early stages of contemplative prayer, the transformation is not so profound that the soul is freed from its defects. For that reason spiritual directors would be greatly mistaken if they were to judge a person to be deluded if, after having experienced mystical contemplation, he or she is still subject to certain defects. Such defects are often caused more by weakness than by one's deliberate will. Mystical contemplation greatly aids the sanctification of a soul, but it does not instantaneously or necessarily produce a saint.

In the soul's progress through the ascetical phase of the spiritual life, the purgation and perfection of the various faculties have proceeded from the inferior to the superior powers, and this has likewise been the path followed by the soul in its progress through the ascetical grades of prayer. But in the mystical grades of prayer, where God is the primary mover through the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the divine activity begins with the highest faculty and progresses through the inferior faculties until the entire person is transformed in God. .

### *Practical Directives*

Spiritual directors should take great care to guide the soul that begins to receive the first lights of contemplative prayer. They must be especially careful not to place any obstacles to their advance in prayer. The following are the principal counsels to be given in this particular grade of prayer:

1. *Not to cease discursive meditation until one clearly perceives the call to a higher grade of prayer.* In the practice of prayer, as in the exercises of the spiritual life in general, souls should always be prepared to do as much as they can with the assistance of ordinary grace. It would be a source of great harm if they were to attempt to enter upon a mystical grade of prayer when the Lord has not yet called them to such a high degree of prayer. St. Teresa warned that, so long as the soul is not sure that God is drawing it to a mystical grade of prayer, it should not attempt to remain passive and inactive because that would produce nothing but aridity, and the individual would soon grow restless because of its inactivity.[\(20\)](#)

2. *Immediately to terminate all discursive prayer as soon as one feels the impulse of grace toward infused prayer.* This is a consequence of the foregoing counsel. It would be foolish to anticipate mystical prayer, but it would be tantamount to obstructing the action of God in the soul if souls were to attempt to proceed by their own efforts when grace impels them to the passivity of contemplation. The teaching of St. Teresa on this particular point should be read with great attention.[\(21\)](#)

Spiritual directors will usually have to exert great effort to convince the soul that it should immediately abandon itself to the action of God as soon as this is felt. Some souls become disobedient and stubborn at this point of their development. Accustomed as they are to certain vocal prayers and discursive meditations, it seems to them that it would be a waste of time to remain in a passive state, and they may have scruples about neglecting their customary private devotions. They do not realize that it is of much more value for a soul to experience even the slightest touch of the Holy Spirit than to practice all manner of spiritual exercises on their own initiative.

3. *To give themselves completely to the interior life.* Souls that receive the first mystical communications can usually suspect that God has predestined them for great things in the spiritual life. If they do not resist God, they can arrive at the summit of perfection. Fully convinced of the necessity of a conscientious correspondence with grace, they must definitively break with all the attachments that still keep them bound to earth, and must give themselves completely and with all their strength to the practice of virtue.

The director must especially insist upon the practice of habitual recollection, interior and exterior silence, the mortification of the senses, complete detachment from earthly things, profound humility, and, above all, an ardent love of God that will inform and vivify everything that they

do. They must therefore give themselves fully to the practice of prayer and remain attentive to the voice of God, which will call them frequently to the sweet and holy repose of contemplation. Nevertheless, they must take great care not to use violence on themselves, because God will come in his own time, and until he does, they should try to do all things gently and without violence under the assistance of ordinary grace.

## **Prayer of Quiet**

The prayer of quiet is a type of mystical prayer in which the intimate awareness of God's presence captivates the will and fills the soul arid body with ineffable sweetness and delight. The fundamental difference between the prayer of quiet and that of infused recollection, apart from the greater intensity of contemplative light and more intense consolations, is that the prayer of quiet gives the soul an actual possession and joyful fruition of the sovereign Good.

### *Nature of the Prayer of Quiet*

Infused contemplation principally affects the intellect, which is withdrawn from the other faculties, but the prayer of quiet especially affects the will. Although the intellect and the memory are now tranquil, they still remain free to realize what is occurring, but the will is completely captivated and absorbed in God. For that reason, the prayer of quiet, as its name indicates, tends to contemplative silence and repose. Since the other faculties remain free, however, they can be occupied with the work of the active life, and they may do so with great intensity. The will does not lose its sweet quietude, but the activities of Martha and Mary begin to merge in a beautiful manner, as St. Teresa points out.[\(22\)](#) Yet the perfect blending of the active and contemplative life will not be achieved until the soul has reached the state of union with God.

St. Teresa describes the prayer of quiet in the following way: "From this recollection there sometimes proceeds an interior quiet and peace that are full of happiness because the soul is in such a state that it does not seem to lack anything, and even speaking (I refer to vocal prayer and meditation) wearies it; it wishes to do nothing but love. This state may, last for some time and even for long periods of time."[\(23\)](#)

### *Effects of the Prayer of Quiet*

The sanctifying effects produced in the soul by the prayer of quiet are enumerated by St. Teresa in the Fourth Mansions of her Interior Castle: (1) great liberty of spirit; (2) filial fear of God and great care not to offend him; (3) profound confidence in God; (4) love of mortification and suffering; (5) deep humility; (6) disdain for worldly pleasures; and (7) growth in all the virtues.

### *Concomitant Phenomena*

The concomitant phenomena that usually accompany the prayer of quiet are *sleep of the faculties* and *inebriation of love*. In her autobiography St. Teresa listed the sleep of the faculties as a distinct grade of mystical prayer superior to the prayer of quiet, but in her later works she changed her opinion and considered the sleep of the faculties as an effect of the prayer of quiet in its highest degree of intensity.[\(24\)](#)

According to St. Teresa, the sleep of the faculties is a phenomenon in which the faculties are not

completely captivated, and yet they do not understand how they work. The sweetness and delight they experience are beyond anything they have known previously. The soul seems to be unable to advance or to turn back; it wishes only to enjoy this great delight. It is as if the soul were almost completely dead to the things of this world and enjoying God alone. It is a heavenly foolishness in which the soul learns true wisdom.[\(25\)](#)

Sometimes the intense delight produced by the sleep of the faculties causes a kind of divine inebriation, which is manifested externally in a kind of foolishness of love. Sometimes there are cries of love or even bodily movements such as leaps of joy or the singing of spiritual hymns. The love of God is so intense that it cannot be contained but must burst forth into external acts.[\(26\)](#)

### *Norms of Conduct*

The general rule of conduct for the soul in any of the states of contemplative prayer is to cooperate completely with the working of grace and to cultivate an increasingly profound humility. For the prayer of quiet in particular, the following rules should be carefully followed:

1. *Never attempt to force oneself into this grade of prayer.* It would indeed be futile, because mystical prayer cannot be attained by one's own efforts.
2. *Cooperate with the divine movement as soon as it is experienced.* One should not delay for a single instant under any pretext but should follow the divine movement with all docility and humility.
3. *Do not disturb the quiet of the will by attending to the activities of the lower faculties.* The memory and the imagination, since they are still free for their own operations, could easily become a distraction in the prayer of quiet. St. Teresa advises the soul not to pay any attention to these operations, but to ignore them until such time as God will bind them and captivate them [\(27\)](#).
4. *Scrupulously avoid any occasion of offending God.* St. Teresa warns that the devil frequently provides temptations and occasions of sin to souls who are in this degree of prayer, and she emphasizes the great damage that is done even by little acts of infidelity to grace.[\(28\)](#)
5. *Never abandon the practice of prayer in spite of any difficulty or obstacle.* St. Teresa places stress on this particular rule, and she repeats it again and again throughout her writings. She states that if a soul in this grade of prayer should fall into sin through weakness or malice, it can always recapture the good it had lost, but if it does not return to the practice of prayer, it will go from bad to worse.[\(29\)](#)

She also asserts that the soul should not abandon itself excessively to the sleep of the faculties. She states that some persons have such a weak constitution that as soon as they experience any spiritual consolation they mistakenly think it is a true spiritual sleep. The more they abandon themselves to this experience, the weaker they become physically, with the result that they think they are in a state of rapture. Actually, all they are doing is wasting their time and ruining their health. She makes it very clear that when there is a truly spiritual sleep of the faculties, there is no weakness or languor in the soul; rather the soul is filled with a great joy.

Moreover, the experience does not last for a long time, although the soul may return to this sleep of faculties. Nor is there any exterior sensation or rapture when this experience is truly from God. St. Teresa advises that persons of a weak constitution should sleep and eat well until they have regained their physical strength, and if their constitution still remains weak, they can take this as 'a sign that God is not calling them to the mystical degrees of prayer.'[\(30\)](#)

The inebriation of love should not be confused with a natural effervescence and sentimentality, which are often found in enthusiastic and impressionable individuals. And even if it is a question of a true phenomenon, the soul should not let itself be carried away by this experience, but should strive to control and moderate it.

Above all, one should not take this phenomenon as a sign that it is far advanced in the spiritual life, but should humble itself before God and never seek to practice prayer in order to obtain consolations from God. Spiritual directors should always insist on the necessity of the practice of virtue, and they should attach little importance to these phenomena, especially if they perceive that the soul is itself attaching great importance to them or is beginning to manifest a certain degree of vanity. In fact, when these phenomena are truly from God, the soul is usually submerged in true humility. Thus humility is the great touchstone for distinguishing true gold from dross.

### **Prayer of Union**

The prayer of union is that grade of mystical prayer in which all the internal faculties are gradually captivated and occupied with God. In the prayer of quiet only the will was captivated; in the sleep of the faculties the intellect was also captivated, although the memory and the imagination remained free. In the prayer of union all the interior faculties, including the memory and the imagination, are captivated. Only the external bodily senses are now free, but they too will be captivated in the following grade of prayer.

#### *Nature of the Prayer of Union*

The intensity of the mystical experience caused by the prayer of union is indescribable. It is superior beyond compare to that of the preceding grade, to the point that the body itself is affected by the working of God in the soul. Without being entirely captivated, the external senses become almost helpless and inoperative. The soul experiences divine reality with such intensity that it could easily fall into ecstasy. At the beginning, this sublime absorption of the faculties in God lasts but a short time (a half hour at most), but as the intensity increases, it may be prolonged for several hours.

The following excerpt from the writings of St. Teresa describes the prayer of union:

It seems to me that this kind of prayer is very definitely a union of the entire soul with God, although it seems that his Majesty desires to give permission to the faculties to understand and enjoy the great things that he is effecting there. It sometimes happens, and indeed very often, that when the will is in union, the soul understands that the will is captive and enjoying fruition and that the will alone is experiencing much quiet, while the intellect and the memory are so free that they can attend to other matters and be engaged in works of charity. This, although it may seem to be the same, is actually different from the prayer of quiet of which I have already spoken, partly because, in that prayer, the soul

would not wish to be occupied in anything else, or to be active, since it is enjoying the holy repose of Mary; but in this prayer it can also be Martha, so that it is, as it were, occupied in both the active and the contemplative life, performing works of charity and the duties of its state, and reading, although souls in this state are not masters of themselves and they realize that the better part of the soul is occupied elsewhere. It is as if we were speaking to one person while another person is speaking to us, with the result that we cannot be fully attentive to the one or the other.(31)

### *Signs of the Prayer of Union*

The essential characteristics of the prayer of union and the signs by which it can be recognized and distinguished from other grades of prayer are the following:

1. *Absence of distractions.* The reason for this is that the memory and imagination, which are the faculties that usually cause distraction, are now fixed on God and held captive. There may be a return to lower grades of prayer from time to time, and then distractions may again disturb the soul, but during the prayer of union distractions are psychologically impossible.

2. *Certitude of being intimately united with God.* The soul cannot doubt that it experiences God during the prayer of union. On leaving the lower grades of prayer, the soul may experience certain doubts or fears that it was not truly united with God, or that it was deceived by the devil, but in the prayer of union the certitude of experiencing God is so absolute that St. Teresa maintains that, if the soul does not experience this certitude, it did not have the true prayer of union. (32)

3. *Absence of weariness and tedium.* The soul absorbed in God never wearies of its union with the Beloved. It is overwhelmed with delight, and however long the prayer of union may last, the soul never experiences any fatigue. For that reason, St. Teresa says that this grade of prayer can never do any harm to the individual, no matter how long it may last.(33)

St. Teresa lists the principal effects of the prayer of union in the Fifth Mansions of her *Interior Castle*. The soul is so anxious to praise God that it would gladly die a thousand deaths for his sake. It has an intense longing to suffer great trials, and experiences vehement desires for penance and solitude. It wishes that all souls would know God, and it is greatly saddened when it sees that God is offended. The soul is dissatisfied with everything that it sees on earth, since God has given it wings so that it can fly to him. And whatever it does for God seems very little by comparison with what it desires to do. Its weakness has been turned into strength, and it is no longer bound by any ties of relationship or friendship or worldly possessions. It is grieved at having to be concerned with the things of earth, lest these things should cause it to sin against God. Everything wearies it because it can find no true rest in any created thing.

### *Concomitant Phenomena*

The prayer of union is usually accompanied by certain concomitant phenomena distinct from *gratiae gratis datae*. Although these phenomena do not occur at any definite moment and are transitory graces that God grants according to his good pleasure, they are usually experienced when the soul reaches this degree of prayer. There are four principal concomitant phenomena: *mystical touches, flights of the spirit, fiery darts of love, and wounds of love*. St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila give detailed descriptions of these phenomena.(34)



The *mystical touches* are a kind of instantaneous supernatural impression that gives the soul a sensation of having been touched by God himself. This divine contact imparts to the soul an ineffable delight that defies description. The soul sometimes utters a cry or falls into ecstasy. The touches themselves admit of varying degrees of intensity; the most sublime are those that St. John of the Cross describes as "substantial touches." The expression designates that the soul senses the mystical touches as if they had been experienced in the very center or substance of the soul, although in reality they are experienced in the spiritual faculties of intellect and will. St. John of the Cross warns souls that they should not attempt to experience these mystical touches by their own efforts but should remain humble and resigned before God and passively receive whatever he deigns to send them.(35)

*Flights of the spirit*, as the name indicates, are strong and unexpected impulses of love of God that leave the soul with a consuming thirst for God. The soul feels that it could never satiate its thirst for love, even if all creation were permeated with divine love. Sometimes the mere mention of God causes the soul to react with such a violent impetus that the body is overwhelmed by an ecstatic trance. A remarkable note in regard to these violent impulses is that they never cause any physical or mental harm to the individual, although any similar impulse in the purely natural order could be seriously harmful. St. Teresa wisely cautions individuals to make a careful distinction between those impulses of love that flow from some natural cause, and must therefore be controlled by reason, and the truly mystical touches that are passively received by the soul from God.(36)

According to St. John of the Cross, the *fiery darts of love* are certain hidden touches that, like a fiery arrow, burn and pierce the soul and leave it completely cauterized by the fire of love.(37) St. Teresa describes this phenomenon as a wounding of the soul, as if an arrow pierced the soul. It causes great affliction, and at the same time it is very delectable. The wound is not a physical one, but it is felt deep within the soul and seems to spring from the soul's inmost depths. It arouses profound desires for God and a kind of hatred of the body, which seems at that time to be an obstacle to the soul's fruition of God.

The *wounds of love* are similar to the preceding phenomenon, but they are more profound and more lasting.(38) St. John of the Cross remarks that the fiery darts of love are usually caused by the knowledge of God that the soul receives through created things, while the wounds of love are caused by the knowledge of the works of the Incarnation and the mysteries of faith. The effects of these wounds are similar to the effects of the fiery darts, but they are more profound. The soul lovingly complains to God at not being able to leave this life and to enjoy the intimate union with him in heaven. One of the best commentaries on this phenomenon is to be found in *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 9-11.

### **Prayer of Conforming Union**

The prayer of union, as we have seen, unites the soul intimately with God and is, in a sense, the last grade of mystical prayer, although it admits of degrees of intensity. St. Teresa treats of the prayer of union in the last three mansions of *The Interior Castle* and assigns the types of this prayer as follows: fifth mansions, the prayer of union; sixth mansions, spiritual betrothal; seventh mansions, spiritual marriage. But she likewise explains that these three are generically the same prayer; the difference lies in the degree to which God unites the soul to himself.(39)

Some authors, wishing to use St. Teresa's terminology, call this degree of union the spiritual betrothal or espousal; others call it the prayer of ecstatic union, taking the name from the predominant external phenomenon of this prayer. We prefer, however, to use the expressions conforming and transforming union for these last two degrees of mystical prayer; first, because some persons find the betrothal and marriage symbols distasteful, and secondly because the term *ecstatic union* stresses a concomitant phenomenon rather than the union between the soul and God.

### *Nature of Conforming Union*

In the prayer of simple union all the interior faculties of the soul are centered on God alone; only the external senses are still free. But in the prayer of conforming union God captivates even the external senses, with the result that the soul is totally divinized, so to speak, and prepared by God to move to the full and final commitment of the transforming union. This means that the conforming union is closely connected with the prayer of simple union and is indeed its expansion. St. Teresa says as much when she remarks that what there is in the fifth and sixth mansions is the same, but the effects are different [\(40\)](#)

In the prayer of conforming union, therefore, the soul loses the use of its external senses, either partially or totally, because all the interior faculties are absorbed in God and the senses are alienated from their proper natural functioning. It is with difficulty that the soul turns its attention to external activity, though it knows that sometimes it must "leave God for God" in performing its duties or services of charity for others. But the predominant sentiment of these souls is the longing for full and perfect union with God, accompanied by a longing for death. The soul now echoes the yearning of St. Paul to be dissolved and to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23) and the statement of St. Teresa as a child: "I want to see God, but to see God we must die."

St. Teresa has given us a clear and detailed description of the prayer of conforming union in *The Life* and in the sixth mansions of *The Interior Castle*.[\(41\)](#) St. John of the Cross treats of this grade of prayer in *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame*, but he says that although this would be a place to discuss the different kinds of rapture and ecstasy experienced by spiritual persons, "I pass over the subject because the blessed Teresa of Jesus, our mother, left notes admirably written upon these things of the spirit."[\(42\)](#) We shall, therefore, follow closely the teaching of St. Teresa in describing the conforming union, which she calls spiritual betrothal.

And now you are going to see what His Majesty does to confirm this betrothal, for this, as I understand it, is what happens when he bestows raptures which carry the soul out of its senses; for if, while still in possession of its senses, the soul saw that it was so near to such great majesty, it might perhaps be unable to remain alive ....

The position, in this case, as I understand it, is that the soul has never before been so fully awake to the things of God or had such light or such knowledge of His Majesty. This may seem impossible because, if the faculties are so completely absorbed that we might describe them as dead, and the senses are so as well, how can the soul be said to understand this secret? I cannot say, nor perhaps can any creature.[\(43\)](#)

St. John of the Cross speaks of the prayer of conforming union in similar terms:

That we may the better understand what flight this is, it is to be noted that, as we have

said, in that visitation of the divine Spirit the spirit of the soul is enraptured with great force, to commune with the Spirit, and abandons the body, and ceases to experience feelings and to have its actions in the body, since it has them in God. For this cause said St. Paul, with respect to that rapture of his, that he knew .not if his soul was receiving it in the body, or out of the body.(44)

In the ecstatic experience of the conforming union, the soul not only has contact with God in the very center of its soul, but also it seems to peer into the very essence of God and discover divine secrets. St. Teresa emphasizes also that ecstatic prayer is characterized by a new and great light, unlike any the soul has ever known before, so much so that the soul feels as if it has been in another world.

### *Mystical Ecstasy*

Ecstasy enters into the very nature and definition of the prayer of conforming union, and that is why some authors prefer to use the name ecstatic prayer. The soul experiences that it is in God and God is in the soul, and the concentration is so complete that all the faculties are absorbed in this union. It is, in a sense, the experienced fulfillment of the first precept of charity: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your . soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37).

Mystical ecstasy is therefore a concomitant or normal phenomenon of the prayer of conforming union. Unlike prophetic ecstasy, which is a *gratia gratis data*, mystical ecstasy is both sanctifying and meritorious. The essential element in this prayer, however, is the absorption of the soul in God; the ecstasy is a secondary but concomitant element. Both of these elements are necessary for true mystical ecstasy. Without the union with God in infused contemplative prayer, the ecstasy would be a natural ecstasy or trance, a falsification of mystical ecstasy caused by an evil spirit, or the *gratia gratis data* of prophetic ecstasy.(45)

The *efficient cause* of mystical ecstasy is the Holy Spirit working through his gifts. Operating through the gifts of wisdom and understanding, he uses the latter to illuminate faith and the former to stimulate charity to a most vehement love that causes the alienation of the senses.

The *formal cause* of ecstasy is an intense degree of infused contemplation, although not the maximum degree. A less intense form of contemplation would not cause the suspension of the faculties; the highest degrees of mystical prayer do not cause any ecstasy. When the individual is accustomed to the divine illumination and is strengthened sufficiently to withstand it, as occurs in the highest degrees of the mystical life, all ecstasy will disappear.

The principal forms of ecstasy are the gentle and delightful ecstasy and the violent and painful ecstasy. In the first, it seems that the soul is no longer in the body, and the body itself has the experience of losing its natural warmth. Nevertheless, this is accompanied by great sweetness and delight. This form of ecstasy is in no way harmful to health; rather, it often improves the individual's health.

In its violent and painful form, the bodily suffering is so intense that the individual can hardly bear it. It seems sometimes as if the entire body has been dislocated. St. John of the Cross states that it seems as if all the bones have dried up and that the body has lost all its strength. Sometimes the body becomes completely cold and appears as if dead.(46) The sweet and

delightful form of ecstasy is simply ecstasy; the painful form is called transport, flight of the spirit, or rapture.(47)

Ecstasy sometimes produces noticeable effects on the body and soul of the ecstatic. The ecstatic has no sensation of any material thing, and there is no awareness through vision of any objects in the vicinity, as can be proved by passing some object, even a bright light, in front of the opened eyes of the ecstatic. The vital functions seem to be interrupted: there is no evident sign of respiration, of circulation of the blood, or any movement of the lips. The sweet and gentle ecstasy is never harmful to bodily health, but often restores or improves it; after the violent ecstasy, on the other hand, the body sometimes remains exhausted and painful over a period of days.(48)

Perhaps only those who have experienced the ecstatic states of the prayer of conforming union can describe them properly and distinguish between ecstasy and transport of the spirit or rapture. But even St. Teresa found difficulty in doing so.

I should like, with the help of God, to be able to describe the difference between union and rapture, or elevation, or what they call flight of the spirit, or transport - it is all one. I mean that these different names all refer to the same thing, which is also called ecstasy. It is much more beneficial than union: the effects it produces are far more important, and it has a great many more operations, for union gives the impression of being just the same at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, and it all happens interiorly. But the ends of these raptures are both interior and exterior.(49)

### *Effects of Ecstatic Prayer*

It is possible to study ecstasy under three different aspects: the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. It would be very difficult to differentiate truly mystical ecstasy from natural or diabolical ecstasy by using the physical or psychological aspects exclusively. In fact, the physical and psychological manifestations of ecstasy are usually identical, whether the ecstasy has a natural, a divine, or a diabolical cause. Consequently, it is necessary to study the effects of ecstasy in order to judge whether it is truly mystical and of supernatural origin. "By their fruits you shall know them."

St. Teresa lists five different types of ecstasy in *The Spiritual Relations*, and she also provides us with the various phenomena that sometimes accompany each type. Some of these phenomena are extraordinary phenomena, while others are what we could call concomitant to the ecstatic prayer of the conforming union. Nor should one understand that a mystic will necessarily experience all five types of ecstasy; St. Teresa makes no such assertion, nor does she attempt to present the types as a series of ecstatic steps by which the soul reaches the transforming union.

The first kind of ecstasy comes on gradually and reaches the point at which the soul loses contact with its surroundings and is drawn to God alone. The soul is conscious of what is going on around it, but as if at a great distance; the impression of the union with God is so vivid that it may take the soul several days to adjust to its normal life and surroundings. This type of ecstasy results in a profound knowledge of God that causes the soul to have a great disdain for all created things. At the same time it is made aware of its own misery, the extent of its failures to serve God, and its great indebtedness to God. As a result, the soul grows in humility, feels an

ardent love for God and a consuming desire to serve him as perfectly as possible. Gladly would the soul accept martyrdom for the love of God.

The second type of ecstasy, called rapture, "comes through a sudden light shed by His Majesty in the very depth of the soul, with a swiftness of movement that seems to carry away the higher part of it and to separate the soul from the body." [\(50\)](#) The soul needs the courage to submit itself totally to God and to let him lead it where he will. If the soul is quite determined to die for him, the virtues will be all the stronger because of this and, with its deeper knowledge, there will also be an increase in the fear and love of God. At the same time, the soul experiences profound sorrow at ever having offended God and so desires that no one will ever offend him. "This, I think," says St. Teresa, "must be the source of its intense desires for the salvation of souls and its longing that it may itself have a part in this and that God may be praised as he deserves." [\(51\)](#)

In the third kind of ecstasy, flight of the spirit, "there seems to come out of (the soul) something swift and subtle which rises to its higher part and goes whither the Lord wills. More than this it is impossible to explain; it is like a flight, and I know nothing else with which to compare it." [\(52\)](#) The soul is better able now to occupy itself with the work given it by the Lord, and it enjoys great certitude and security. Three things in particular are bestowed on the soul in the flight of the spirit: knowledge of the greatness of God, selfknowledge and humility, and a supreme contempt for earthly things. Some' mystics at this stage also receive extraordinary phenomena: imaginative or intellectual visions, bodily levitation, or revelations.

The fourth type of ecstasy is caused by a spiritual impulse or transport resulting from the sudden remembrance, when the soul is not engaged in prayer, of its absence from God or something to that effect. It is a distressing type of ecstasy because nothing created can give comfort to the soul or satisfy its desires, but at the same time it cannot possess God as it desires. "It feels itself to be in a state of deep loneliness and total abandonment, such as cannot be described, for the world and all worldly things cause it distress, and no created thing can provide it with companionship; it seeks nothing but the Creator, yet sees that without dying it is impossible for it to have him . ... It sees itself suspended between heaven and earth and has no idea what to do .... It leaves the limbs so disjointed and the bones so racked that the hands have not power enough to write; it also produces grievous pains. Nothing of this is felt until that impulse has passed away." [\(53\)](#)

This, according to some authors, constitutes the passive purgation of the spirit, which is necessary before the soul can proceed to the transforming union, and according to St. Teresa, the only comparison of these pains is the suffering in purgatory. Visions are often associated with this type of ecstasy, and St. Teresa states that she experienced ecstatic impulses only after she had experienced the other types of ecstasy.

Lastly, St. Teresa speaks of the wound of love, which closely resembles the ecstatic impulse. It is not a question of physical pain, although it may result in severe bodily pain after the experience has passed. The interior sensation is like that of a fiery arrow shot into the soul, and the sudden impact may make the individual cry out when it happens. Yet the wound is one of such sweet delight that the soul would like it to continue. The experience itself may be of brief duration, or it may last several hours. The faculties of the soul are inactive as long as it lasts, and there is the usual drop in body temperature and slowness of pulse, but no bodily rigidity or suspended animation, though frequently the experience terminates in a true trance or a vision.

The effects of the wound of love are described by St. Teresa as follows: "These effects are desires for God, so quick and subtle as to be indescribable. As the soul finds itself tied and bound so. that it cannot have fruition of God as it would wish, it conceives a great hatred for the body .... It then sees how great was the evil that came to us through the sin of Adam."[\(54\)](#) The soul loses all fear of any trials and sufferings that may come to it; it has far more contempt for the world than previously; it is much more detached from created things; and it has a holy horror of ever offending God.

The *spiritual betrothal* or covenant between God and the soul occurs during an ecstatic union with God. In this ecstasy, says St. Teresa, "the soul has never before been so fully awake to the things of God or had such light or such knowledge of His Majesty."[\(55\)](#) The spiritual betrothal, as its name indicates, is essentially a promise of marriage, an espousal. It may be accompanied by a vision of Christ; the bestowal of a symbolic ring, the exchange of hearts, or a locution in which Christ formally espouses himself to the soul. The spiritual betrothal is the high point of the prayer of conforming union and at the same time the transition to mystical marriage. Father Marie Eugene states that in the three periods or phases that precede mystical marriage the first is one of preliminary mortifications, the second is the passive purgation of the spirit, and the third is the divine touches or visits in which occurs the spiritual betrothal.[\(56\)](#) Thus, the spiritual betrothal is a passage from the passive purgation of the spirit to the perfect union of the mystical marriage.

### **Prayer of Transforming Union**

The last grade of prayer is the transforming union, identified by many mystics as the spiritual marriage. It constitutes the seventh mansions of *The Interior Castle* of St. Teresa and is the highest degree of perfection that one can attain in this life. It is, therefore, a prelude to the beatific life of glory. This state is nothing less than a transformation into God, and St. John of the Cross does not hesitate to use such expressions as "transformed into God by love," "God of God by participation," and "more divine than human."[\(57\)](#) Such expressions may seem daring and even excessive when applied to the spiritual life of the soul, but they are fully justified by a usage that goes back to St. John, St. Paul, and the Fathers of the Church, especially the Eastern Church. St. John of the Cross says of this grade of prayer:

There is as great a difference between these states as there is between betrothal and marriage. For in betrothal there is only a consent by agreement, and a unity of will between the two parties, and the jewels and the adornment of the bride-to-be, given her graciously by the bridegroom. But in marriage there is likewise communication between the persons, and union.[\(58\)](#)

St. Teresa says practically the same thing:

There is the same difference between the spiritual betrothal and the spiritual marriage as there is between two betrothed persons, and two who are united so that they cannot be separated anymore.[\(59\)](#)

In this grade of prayer there is a total transformation of the soul into the Beloved. The soul has entered into its very center, so to speak, which is the throne room of the interior castle where the Trinity dwells through grace. There God and the soul give themselves to each other in the

consummation of divine love, so far as is possible in the present life. There is no more ecstasy, for the soul has now been strengthened to receive the full power of love, but in the brightness of an intellectual vision the soul experiences the Trinity with vivid awareness.

It sees these three Persons individually and yet, by a wonderful kind of knowledge which is given to it, the soul realizes that most certainly and truly all these three Persons are one substance and one power and one knowledge and one God alone; so that what we hold by faith the soul may be said here to grasp by sight, although nothing is seen by the eyes, either of the body or the soul, for it is no imaginative vision. Here all three Persons communicate themselves to the soul and speak to the soul and explain to it those words which the Gospel attributes to the Lord, namely, that he and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul which loves him and keeps his commandments.[\(60\)](#)

We can distinguish three elements in this loftiest degree of the prayer of union: transformation in God, mutual surrender, and the permanent union of love. As St. John of the Cross states:

The soul becomes brilliant and transformed in God, and God communicates to the soul his supernatural being to such an extent that the soul appears to be God and to have all that God has. Such a union is effected when God grants to the soul this supernatural mercy; as a result of which all the things of God and the soul are one in a participated transformation. The soul seems to be more God than soul and is truly God by participation, although it is true that its being, so distinct by nature, is possessed by the soul as something distinct from the being of God, as it was formerly, even though transformed, just as the window is distinct from the ray of light which illumines it.[\(61\)](#)

As to the mutual surrender, it is a natural consequence of the transforming union just described. Between God and the soul there are a perfect communication and the mutual gift of self, for which reason the prayer of transforming union is called a spiritual marriage. Lastly, St. Teresa teaches that in this grade of prayer, unlike the grades that preceded it, there is a permanency of union and love.

Concomitant with the permanent union of love is the soul's *confirmation in grace*. St. John of the Cross maintains that the transforming union never falters and the soul is confirmed in grace,[\(62\)](#) but St. Teresa warns that as long as we are in this world we must walk with caution, lest we offend God.[\(63\)](#) However, the apparent contradiction is readily resolved when we say that confirmation in grace does not mean intrinsic impeccability, for the Church teaches that it is an impossibility in this life. Nor is it a question of avoiding all venial sins in this life, for that would require a special privilege of grace as was bestowed on the Virgin Mary. Consequently, confirmation in grace must be understood as the special grace and assistance from God to avoid all mortal sins and thus have moral certitude of salvation.

### *Effects of Transforming Union*

Perhaps no one has described as clearly as St. Teresa the marvelous effects produced in the soul by the transforming union or mystical marriage. We shall summarize her description of these effects as given in her *Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chapter 3:

1. *A forgetfulness of self* so complete that it seems as if the soul no longer existed. There is no

longer any knowledge or remembrance of heaven or life or honor as regards the soul, so completely is it absorbed in seeking the honor of God. The soul lives in a state of forgetfulness so that it has no desire whatever in regard to self, but desires only to do what it can do to promote the glory of God, and for this it would gladly lay down its life.

2. *A great desire to suffer*, but now the desire does not disturb the soul as it did previously. So great is the soul's longing that the will of God be done in it that it accepts whatever God wills as the best for it. If he sends suffering, well and good; if not, the soul does not worry or fret about it as it did previously.

3. *Joy in persecution*. When the soul is persecuted, it experiences great interior joy and much more peace than formerly. It bears no enmity toward those who treat it badly or desire to do so. Rather, it conceives a special love for such persons, and if it were to see them in some affliction it would be deeply grieved and would do all in its power to relieve them. It loves to commend such persons to God, and would rejoice at relinquishing some of the favors it receives from God if it could bestow them on its enemies, and thus perhaps prevent them from offending God.

4. *Desire to serve God*. Whereas the soul formerly suffered because of its longing to die and to be with God, it now experiences a strong desire to serve God and to help any soul that it can. Indeed, it now desires not to die but to live for many years and to suffer the most severe trials if in this way it can be a means whereby God is praised. Its conception of glory is now connected in some way with helping Christ, especially when it sees how often people offend him and how few there are who are truly concerned about his honor.

5. *Detachment from everything created*. The desires of the soul are no longer for consolations because the soul realizes that now the Lord himself dwells within it. As a result, the soul experiences a marked detachment from everything, and a desire to be alone or to be occupied with something that will be beneficial to the soul. There is no more aridity or interior trial, but only a constant recollection in God and a tender love for him. There is no fear that this period of tranquillity may be caused by the devil, because the soul has an unwavering certitude that it comes from God. This experience takes place in the very center of the soul and in the highest faculty, into which the devil cannot enter.

6. *Absence of ecstasies*. Upon reaching this state, the soul has no more raptures, or very seldom. The great weakness that formerly was the occasion for raptures has now given place to a great strength granted by God. Nevertheless, the soul walks with great care and still does all in its power to strengthen itself with the help of God's grace. Indeed, the more it is favored by God, the more cautious it becomes and the more aware of its own littleness and humility.

### *Ideal of Christian Perfection*

Such is the bittersweet path that leads to the heights of contemplative prayer and the transforming union. It is the sublime ideal of Christian perfection, and it is offered to all souls in grace. When Jesus pronounced the precept: "You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), he was speaking to all souls without exception. The Christian life, if it is developed according to the supernatural powers that are inherent in it, will lead to the transforming union of charity, which is in turn the prelude to the beatific vision.

The highest perfection consists not in interior favors or in great raptures or in visions or



in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our wills so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realize he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might, and take the bitter with the sweet, knowing that to be His Majesty's will.[\(64\)](#)

## CHAPTER NOTES

Letter of March 7, 1914, cited by J. de Guibert, S. J., *Documenta ecclesiastica christianae perfectfonis studium spectantia* (Rome: Gregorianum, 1931), n. 636.

*Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 83, a. 12.

St. Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), First Mansions, Book I, Chap. 7. St. Thomas teaches the same doctrine in more technical language in *Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 83, a. 13.

*Ibid.*, Fourth Mansions, Book I, Chap. 7.

For detailed explanations, *Cf. Methods of Mental Prayer by Cardinal Lercaro* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957).

St. Ignatius composed at least six methods of meditation, as can be seen in his *Spiritual Exercises*.

*Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 83, a. 14.

See *The Life*, Chaps. 13-14.

*Cf.* St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book I, Chap. 6.

*The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4.

*Cf.* P. Pourrat, S. S., *Christian Spirituality* trans. W. Mitchell and S. Jacques (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1953), IV, 129.

*Cf. The Way of Perfection*, Chaps. 28-29; *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 3.

*Cf. The Living Flame of Love*, Chap. 3.

*The Dark Night*, Book II, Chap. 6, n. 1.

*Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 52, a. 2, ad 1.

*Cf.* Denz.-Schön. 1533; 1540; 1563; 156546; 1573.

*The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansions, Chap. 2, n. 4.

*Cf. The Life*, Chaps. 18-20.

St. Teresa speaks emphatically on this point; Cf. *The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 36; *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 3.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 3.

*Ibid.*

Cf. *The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 31, n. 5.

*Spiritual Relations*, V; Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 2, and *The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 31.

Cf. *The Life*, Chap. 16; *The Foundations*, Chap. 6; *Spiritual Relations*, V; *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions. Since *The Interior Castle* is the most mature work of St. Teresa, we consider that it contains her definitive teaching.

Cf. *The Life*, Chap. 16.

*Ibid.*, Chap. 16.

Cf. *Ibid.*, Chap. 17; *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 1.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 3.

Cf. *The Life*, Chap. 15.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, Chap. 3.

*The Life*, Chap. 17; d. also *The Interior Castle*, Fifth Mansions, Chap. 1.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Fifth Mansions, Chap. 1.

Cf. *The Life*, Chap. 18.

Cf. St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chap. 32; *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chap. 23; *The Living Flame of Love*, Chap. 2; *Spiritual Canticle* Stanzas 1, 7; St. Teresa of Avila, Chap. 29; *Spiritual Relations*, V.

Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chap. 32.

Cf. *The Life*, Chap. 29.

Cf. *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 1.

For the distinction between these two phenomena, Cf. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 7, and *The Living Flame of Love*, Chap. 2.

St. Teresa states in *The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansions, Chap. 4: "This (sixth mansion) and the last (seventh mansion) might be fused in one; there is no closed door to separate the one from the other." Again, in Seventh Mansions, Chap. 2, she says that there is no need of a door by which to pass on to spiritual marriage from betrothal.

*The Interior Castle*, Fifth Mansions, Chap. 2.

St. Teresa's description of the prayer of conforming union is the longest section eleven chapters of *The Interior Castle*. It is also in that section that she discusses the extraordinary mystical phenomena that sometimes accompany the last two grades of mystical prayer.

*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 12, n. 69; Cf. *The Living Flame*, Stanza 3.

*The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansions, Chap. 4.

*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 12.

Natural ecstasy can be divided into four types: fainting, somnambulism, hypnotic trance, and hysterical seizure. Diabolical ecstasy is a form of diabolical obsession.

See *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chaps. 1 and 2; *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 13 and 14.

Some authors classify ecstasy as a concomitant phenomenon of the mystical life and rapture or flight of the spirit as an extraordinary phenomenon. Following the teaching of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, we prefer to classify rapture as a more intense and vehement type of ecstasy.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansions, where St. Teresa describes in great detail the effects of ecstasy and rapture.

*The Life*, Chap. 20; Cf. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 12 and 13. St. Teresa also states in *The Spiritual Relations*, 5: "Raptures and suspensions of the faculties, in my opinion, are one and the same thing; I generally describe them as suspension, so as not to use the word rapture, which frightens people."

*The Spiritual Relations*, V.

*Ibid.*

*Ibid.*

*Ibid.*; Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansions, Chap. 4; *The Life*, Chap. 20.

*The Spiritual Relations*, V.

*Ibid.*, Chap. 4.

Marie-Eugene, *I am a Daughter of the Church*, trans. M. Verda Clare (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides, 1955), p. 536.

Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Stanza 2; *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 39; *The Dark Night*, Stanza 2.

*The Living Flame*, Stanza 3.

*The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 2.

St. Teresa, *op. cit.*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 1. This does not mean that an intellectual vision of the Trinity is a concomitant phenomenon of the transforming union and that every soul attaining this state would receive such a vision. St. Teresa is describing her own experience, though other mystics had the same experience.

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chap. 5.

*Cf. The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 22.

See *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chaps. 2 and 4.

St. Teresa, *Book of Foundations*, Chap. 5.

## 13

### Aids to Spiritual Growth

Although these aids to spiritual growth are not all of equal value, they do mutually assist one another. They are only secondary means of growth in perfection, however, and therefore no one of them should be used to the exclusion of the basic and fundamental means already discussed.

#### The Presence of God

The practice of the presence of God consists in recalling as frequently as possible that God is present in all places, especially in the depth of the just soul, and consequently in doing all things in the sight of God. Sacred Scripture and tradition are unanimous in stressing the importance and sanctifying effect of the practice of the presence of God. "Walk in my presence and be blameless," God said to Abraham (Gen. 17:1). The one necessarily follows from the other, for if we are convinced that God sees us, we will endeavor to avoid sin and will strive to be as recollected as possible in God's presence. If properly used, this spiritual practice will keep the soul in a spirit of prayer and will lead it to intimate union with God. St. Francis de Sales goes so far as to say that interior recollection accompanied by pious ejaculations can supply for any pious practice and that its absence cannot be remedied by any other.<sup>(1)</sup>

It is a theological fact that we are constantly in God's presence, which admits of five distinct types. The *presence of immensity* flows from the divine attribute of the same name; it signifies that God is truly present to all things, and this in a threefold manner: by *essence*, *presence*, and *power*. He is present by essence so far as he gives and preserves the existence of all things (creation and conservation), so that nothing could exist or continue to exist without God's presence. He is present by presence in the sense that absolutely nothing escapes his gaze, but all things are naked and open to his eyes. He is present by power in the sense that all things are subject to his power. With one word he creates; with one word he could annihilate whatever he has created.

God's presence *by indwelling* is a special type of presence effected through grace and the operations flowing from grace, in virtue of which God is present to the just soul as a friend and a father, enabling the soul to share in his own divine life.

God's *sacramental presence* is that which Christ enjoys in the Eucharist, so that he is truly present under the appearance of bread and wine.

God's *personal or hypostatic presence* is proper to Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, so that the humanity of Christ subsists in the Person of the Word.

God's *presence by manifestation* signifies that which is proper to him in heaven. So far as we are concerned, however, we shall be aware of this manifestation only when we enjoy the beatific vision.

Of these five types of presence, those which most directly affect the practice of the presence of God are the first two, namely, the presence of immensity, and the presence of indwelling. The first is verified of the soul at all times and under all conditions, even if the soul should be in the state of mortal sin. The second is found only in souls in the state of grace.

The practice of the presence of God has several consequences of great importance for the spiritual life. The following are the principal ones:

1. *It reminds us to avoid even the slightest deliberate fault.* If we are careful of our behavior in the presence of superiors or persons of dignity lest we offend them, how much more so in the presence of God, who sees not only our external actions but also our interior thoughts and movements.
2. *It impels us to do all things with the greatest possible perfection.* This is a natural consequence of love, especially if we are performing an action in the very presence of the one we love. Faithful observance of this norm is sufficient to lead a soul to the heights of sanctity. Although it is true that God does not demand perfection of us here and now, he does expect us to do the best we can at a given time.
3. *It enables us to observe modesty in our deportment at all times.* Whether alone or with others, those who are constantly aware of God's presence will maintain a sense of Christian dignity in all their actions and in their very bearing. To this end, it is important that souls in the state of grace be mindful of the indwelling of the Trinity.
4. *It increases our fortitude in the struggles of the Christian life.* It is much more difficult to overcome obstacles and to suffer trials when we are alone. But God is always with us to animate our courage and give us the positive assistance of his grace.

There are two principal methods of practicing the presence of God. The first consists in a kind of exterior representation by which we visualize God as ever present to us. We do not see him, but he is really there, and we cannot do anything that escapes his divine gaze. This method of practicing the presence of God is greatly aided by the use of crucifixes and other religious symbols placed in a prominent place.

The second method is that of interior recollection. It requires that one should live in an ever-increasing awareness of God's presence in the soul, whether by immensity or by the indwelling. The result of this method is a more profound understanding of what Jesus meant when he said: "The kingdom of God is within you." When properly used, interior recollection serves to unite the practice of the presence of God with a deep and intimate union with God. It is

also, therefore, one of the necessary conditions for cultivating a deep and abiding spirit of prayer.

Other methods for practicing the presence of God have been proposed by various writers: to see the hand of God in all the events of one's life, whether adverse or prosperous; to see God in all creatures; to see God in the person of one's superior and in one's neighbor. One should use the method that is most helpful in cultivating the practice of the presence of God.

### **Examination of Conscience**

As its name indicates, the examination of conscience is an investigation of one's conscience in order to discover the good or evil acts one has performed, and especially to verify one's basic attitude regarding God and personal sanctification. We are not referring to the examination of conscience made prior to confession, which is simply a review and enumeration of one's sins, but of an examination made in view of one's progress in holiness. It should take into account the strength or weakness of one's virtues, as well as the number and frequency of one's sins. To place too great an emphasis on one's failings may result in meticulousness, anxiety, discouragement, and even scrupulosity.

Spiritual writers are unanimous in stressing the importance of the examination of conscience as a spiritual exercise. Outstanding among them, of course, is St. Ignatius Loyola, who for a long time used no other methods of spiritual formation for his companions but the examination of conscience and the frequent reception of the sacraments.

St. Ignatius distinguishes two types of examination: general and particular.<sup>(2)</sup> The first is an overall view of one's spiritual state and those things that would contribute to the improvement of one's spiritual life. The second is focused particularly on some definite vice one is trying to eliminate or some virtue one is trying to cultivate.

The *particular examen* has three steps or points. First, on arising in the morning, one resolves to correct the particular fault one is trying to eliminate, or to avoid failure in the practice of the particular virtue one is trying to cultivate. Secondly, after the noon meal one makes an examination of the faults committed during the morning and resolves to avoid them in the afternoon. Thirdly, after the evening meal one repeats the examination and resolution as at noon.

The general examination proposed by St. Ignatius has five points: (1) give thanks to God for benefits received; (2) beg the grace to know one's sins and to rid oneself of them; (3) make a detailed examination, hour by hour, of one's thoughts, words, and deeds; (4) beg pardon of God; (5) resolve to amend one's life and recite the Our Father. The general examen is made once a day, before retiring.

In order to obtain the maximum benefit from the examination of conscience, it is necessary to know how to practice it. The following extract provides a more detailed explanation of the Ignatian method of examination:

1. One's spiritual exercises should be unified; otherwise they will not exert their influence throughout the day. The examination of conscience should be the bond of union for all of one's spiritual exercises and the great means of achieving unity in one's spiritual life.
2. Philosophy teaches us that acts are transitory, but habits are permanent. Hence we

should especially examine our habits. The mere knowledge of our acts will not give us an intimate knowledge of our souls. What resides in the sanctuary of conscience is not our acts, which have already passed away, but our habits or dispositions of soul. If we have succeeded in knowing them, we have verified the true state of our souls, but not otherwise.

3. In order to know our souls, it is necessary to ask ourselves this simple question: "Where is my heart" Immediately we shall find the answer within ourselves. The question makes us look into the intimate depths of the soul, and immediately the salient point stands out. This is an intuitive function, and it can be repeated many times during the day. There is no need for investigations, feats of memory, mathematical calculations. It is simply a rapid, all-inclusive glance that tells us at once the state of our souls. That is the mainspring of all our actions, and that is what must be corrected and made right if all else in our life is to go well.

4. The details and exact number of the external manifestations of our fundamental disposition of soul are of least importance. We don't waste time cutting the branches from a tree when we are going to cut down the whole tree. It is true that external acts reveal the internal condition, but we can discover this condition by looking at it directly instead of searching for it in the forest of external acts.

5. But if we attend exclusively to the principal interior disposition, shall we not lose sight of the other dispositions of soul, thus allowing them to grow in the darkness without paying any attention to them? There is no danger of this. The other dispositions of soul cannot emerge if one's whole soul is directed to God as a result of the examination. Moreover, the dominant inclination or disposition of soul is not always the same; one's defects are manifested according to circumstances, and as soon as a disposition comes to the fore, the examination of conscience overcomes and controls it.

6. But can we rest content with this glance? Does everything consist in seeing? By no means. It is necessary to rectify all disorders and to foster all good movements and inclinations. The glance at one's state of soul should lead to contrition and resolution. Contrition corrects evil, and resolution affirms good. Contrition looks to the past, and resolution prepares for the future. The resolution should be a particular one that will touch the special point dominating one's soul. It should place our hearts completely in the presence of God.

7. There are, therefore, three steps in the examination of conscience: a glance at one's state of soul, contrition, and resolution. All three can be utilized in the general and particular examens of which St. Ignatius speaks. In the general examen, the glance embraces one's predominant disposition throughout the day. Then it can extend to the secondary dispositions that have been manifested but have not been predominant. The particular examen is easier. As a matter of fact, it has already been done when one discovers one's fundamental predominant disposition of soul. The morning examen should be used to assure one's proper orientation during the day and the avoidance of the evils to which one is most exposed.

8. In this way, the examination of conscience will give unity and consistency to all of

one's spiritual life. By means of it one can avoid dangers and correct defects. It serves to reveal one's interior state, so that one cannot remain in evil but is obliged to advance in holiness.

There is no doubt that the faithful practice of examination of conscience will have profound effects on one's spiritual life. But in this, as in so many things, its efficacy depends to a great extent on perseverance. To omit the examination frequently or to make it in a purely mechanical fashion is to render it absolutely sterile. The soul that earnestly desires to become holy must be convinced that many of the other means of sanctification are frustrated if one does not make the daily examination of conscience.

### **The Desire for Perfection**

Of all the psychological factors that play a part in our spiritual life, a prominent place must be given to the sincere desire for attaining perfection. It is said that when St. Thomas Aquinas was asked by one of his sisters what she should do to reach sanctity, he answered her in one brief sentence: "Will it."

The desire for perfection is an act of the will, under the influence of grace, which aspires unceasingly to spiritual growth until one reaches sanctity. It is under the influence of grace because such a desire is manifestly supernatural and surpasses the exigencies and tendencies of pure nature. It must be constant in its aspiration for ever greater perfection, and it must not stop at any intermediate degree but must aspire to the heights of sanctity.

Sanctity is the supreme good we can attain in this life. By its very nature it is something infinitely desirable, but since it is also an arduous and difficult good, it is impossible to tend toward it efficaciously without the strong impulse of a will that is determined to attain it at any cost. St. Teresa of Avila considers it of decisive importance "to have a great and very determined resolve not to stop until one reaches it,"<sup>(3)</sup> without reckoning the difficulties along the way, the criticism of those around us, the lack of health, or the disdain of the world. Therefore, only resolute and energetic souls, with the help of divine grace, will scale the heights of perfection.

In order that it will possess the greatest possible sanctifying efficacy, the desire for perfection should have the following qualities:

1. *It should be supernatural*, that is, should flow from grace and be directed to the greater glory of God. This means that the desire for perfection is a gift of God, for which we should petition humbly and perseveringly until we obtain it. "Lord, make me want to love you!"

2. *It should be profoundly humble*, without reliance entirely on our own strength, but placing our trust in him from whom all graces flow. Nor should we aspire to sanctity for any other motive than to love and glorify God. In the beginning, it is difficult to avoid every trace of presumption and egoism, but it is necessary to be constantly purifying one's intention and perfecting one's motives until they are directed only to the glory of God.

3. *It should be filled with confidence*. Of ourselves we can do nothing, but all things are possible in him who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). Countless souls abandon the road to



perfection in the face of obstacles because, becoming discouraged and lacking confidence in God, they think that sanctity is not for them. Only those who persevere in spite of hardships will receive the crown of victory. '

4. *It should be the predominant desire.* All other goods must be subordinated to this supreme good. Hence the desire for perfection is not simply one among many, but it must be the fundamental desire dominating one's entire life. Those who wish to become saints must dedicate themselves to this task professionally, and this requires that they put aside anything that may prove an impediment. Many souls have failed in the pursuit of sanctity because they have fluctuated between the things of God and the things of the world.

5. *It should be constant.* Numerous souls, on the occasion of some great event, such as the termination of a retreat, reception of the religious habit or sacred orders, or profession of vows, experience a great spiritual impulse, as a result of which they resolve to dedicate themselves henceforth to the pursuit of sanctity. But they weary of the pursuit when they experience difficulties, and they either abandon the road to sanctity, or the desire becomes cool.

Or sometimes they grant themselves vacations or pauses, under the pretext of resting a while to recover their strength. This is a great mistake because the soul not only does not gain any strength but also is greatly weakened. Later, when it wishes to renew its efforts, a greater effort is required to recapture the spiritual gains previously made. All this could have been avoided if the desire for perfection had remained constant, without undue violence or extremes, but also without respite or weakness.

6. *It should be practical and efficacious.* This is not a question of wishful thinking but of a definite determination that must be put into practice here and now, using all the means at one's disposal for attaining perfection. It is easy to imagine that one has a desire for perfection because of occasional good intentions or certain noble sentiments experienced during prayer.

But a desire is efficacious only when it is put into execution. To desire perfection in a theoretical way and to postpone one's efforts until some later date is to live in an illusion. The individual passes from one delay to another, and life passes on, so that the person runs the risk of appearing before God with empty hands.

Since the desire for perfection is of such great importance in the struggle for holiness, one should note carefully the following means for arousing this desire:

1. *To beg for it incessantly from God.* Since the desire is supernatural, it can come to us only from above.
2. *To renew it frequently.* It should be renewed daily at the most solemn moment of the day, namely, at the moment of Communion; at other times, on principal feasts, the monthly day of recollection, during the annual retreat, on special anniversaries.
3. *To meditate frequently on the motives that inspire this desire.* The principal motives are the following: (a) our obligation to strive for perfection, (b) consciousness that this is the greatest good we can seek in this life; (c) awareness of the danger we risk if we do not

truly strive to sanctify ourselves; (d) recognition of the fact that the perfect imitation of Christ demands perfection and sanctity.

### **Conformity to God's Will**

Perfect conformity to the divine will is a most efficacious means of sanctification. St. Teresa of Avila says in this regard that those who begin the life of prayer must work and resolve and dispose themselves with as much diligence as possible to make their will conformable to that of God; in this consists the greatest perfection that can be attained on the spiritual way.<sup>(4)</sup>

Conformity to the will of God consists in a loving, total, and intimate submission and harmony of our will with that of God in everything he disposes or permits in our regard. When it reaches a perfect state it is known by the name of *holy abandonment to the will of God*; in its *less* perfect state it is called simply *Christian resignation*.

In order to understand this practice in an orthodox sense, it is necessary to keep in mind certain doctrinal points. In the first place, sanctity is the result of the action of God and the free cooperation of man. God is the director of the work of our sanctification, and therefore nothing should be done that is not in conformity with his plans and under the impulse of his grace.

The basis of abandonment to the will of God is charity. The reason is that love unites the will of the lover to the will of the beloved, and perfect abandonment requires the complete surrender of our own will to that of God. Perfect abandonment is found only in souls that are far advanced in perfection.

In order to attain this total abandonment, the following theological points should be meditated upon frequently:

1. Nothing happens that has not been foreseen by God from all eternity and willed or permitted by him.
2. God could not will anything that is not in conformity with the purpose for which he created all things, namely, his own external glory.
3. All things contribute in some way to the good of those who love God and persevere in his love (Rom. 8:28).
4. Abandonment to the will of - God does not excuse anyone; from fulfilling the divine will of expression by obeying the precepts and commands of God, and then submitting himself or herself as regards all things else to the divine will of good pleasure, without any anxiety.

From what has already been said, it should be evident that abandonment to the will of God is not only an excellent spiritual practice but also a necessary one for the attainment of sanctity. Its excellence lies in its incomparable efficacy for removing the obstacles that impede the action of grace, for making one practice the virtues as perfectly as possible, and for establishing the absolute dominion of God over our will.

The necessity of practicing abandonment to the will of God is based upon the following points:

1. *Divine right.* As God's creatures, we are also his servants. He created us, he conserves us, he redeemed us, he has made us for himself. We do not belong to ourselves, but we are God's (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19). We are also his children and friends through grace, but children should be subject to their father, and friends should be of one mind and one heart.
2. *Our utility.* Abandonment to God's will has a great sanctifying efficacy, and our sanctification is the greatest good we could seek in this world.
3. *The example of Christ.* All during his life on earth Christ fulfilled the will of his heavenly Father. He proclaimed this by his actions and openly professed it in words. His last words from the Cross were a submission and yielding of his whole being to the hands of his Father. Mary, too, handmaid of the Lord, practiced this total abandonment in imitation of her Son.

Having traced the general lines of the practice of abandonment to the will of God, we shall now offer some suggestions regarding the method of conforming to God's Will in the circumstances of daily life.

1. Whatever God positively and directly wills is best for us, even if for the time being it causes pain and suffering. In the face of incurable sickness or the death of loved ones, the only Christian attitude is: "Thy will be done." And if our love of God is strong enough to enable us to rise above simple resignation, and through our pain or sorrow give thanks to God, we shall have reached a high degree of abandonment to the will of God.
2. God never wills positively and directly that which refers to evil, which God cannot will as such. But in his infinite goodness and wisdom, God knows how to convert into good the evil he permits, and that is why he permits it. Hence we manifest a lamentable shortsightedness when, in the evils God permits to happen to us, we do not raise our eyes to heaven to adore God, who permits these things for our greater good. We must, therefore, strive to see in the injustice of men the justice of God, which punishes us for our sins, and even his mercy, which gives us an opportunity to make satisfaction for them.
3. It is necessary to conform ourselves to the will of God as known through his precepts and laws. It would be a grave error to attempt to please God with works freely selected by ourselves, and then disregard the laws he has imposed on us directly or through his representatives. The first things that we should observe conscientiously are God's commandments, the laws of the Church, the commands of superiors, and the duties of our state in life. "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).
4. The first and most basic step toward conformity of one's will with that of God is to avoid most carefully all sin, however small.

But what is to be done if we fall into a grave sin? It is necessary to distinguish two aspects of the sin: the offense against God and the humiliation of the sinner. The first

must be rejected completely, and one can never repent of it sufficiently. The second can be accepted with penitence and gratitude because one's humiliation through sin is a means of learning the significance of God's law (cf. Ps. 118:71).

5. The soul that wishes to attain perfect abandonment to the will of God must be disposed to practice the evangelical counsels. Religious make a vow to practice certain counsels in their daily life; lay persons are not called upon to do this, but they should observe the spirit of the counsels and carry them out in practice when the duties of their state in life permit. However, it would be an error for the laity gratuitously, to assume a manner of life proper to religious; the first duty of the laity, whether married or living singly in the world, is to fulfill the duties imposed by their particular vocation.

We do not know what God has decreed for our future, but we do know some things for certain: that the will of God is the supreme cause of all things; that the divine will is essentially good and beneficent; that all things, whether adverse or prosperous, contribute to the good of those who love God. Therefore, we should cultivate a holy indifference, not preferring health to sickness, wealth to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life, and so likewise with everything else, but that we desire and choose that which best leads us to the end for which we were created.

If the divine will is the supreme cause of everything that happens, and if the divine will is infinitely good, holy, wise, and powerful, then the more our wills conform to that of God, the more certain we can be that nothing evil will befall us. The evils that God permits will contribute to our greater good if we know how to utilize them in the way God desires.

But in order to understand the nature of holy indifference; the following principles should be kept in mind:

1. The purpose of holy indifference is to give oneself completely to God and to become utterly detached from self. It is not a stoical indifference to whatever befalls us, but an efficacious means of uniting our wills to, that of God.
2. This indifference applies only to the superior part of the soul, for it would be impossible to demand of our lower faculties that they remain insensate and indifferent. Therefore one should not be disturbed if one experiences the repugnance or revolt of nature, so long as the will accepts sufferings and trials as coming from the hand of God.
3. This indifference is not merely passive but truly active. In those instances in which the divine will is made manifest, the human will rushes forth to obey with generosity; in those cases in which the divine will is not yet manifested, the human will is perfectly disposed to accept and fulfill whatever God decrees as soon as his will becomes manifest.

Would it be permissible to reach such a point of indifference that one is disinterested in one's own salvation? By no means; God wills that all be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4), and he permits those to be condemned who have deliberately turned away from him and have died unrepentant. It is not that they could not have been saved, but they would not be saved. Hence to renounce one's own salvation under the pretext of practicing perfect abandonment to God's will would be in contradiction to God's will, as well as a violation of man's innate desire for perfect happiness. Moreover, since the glory of God is the prime motive for our existence, we should positively seek our own salvation, which is the

perfect way in which we give glory to God.

The blessings of complete abandonment to God's will are innumerable. In addition to those already mentioned, the following should be noted:

1. It gives a sweet intimacy with God, such as a child experiences with its mother.
2. The soul travels with simplicity and freedom, desiring only what God wills.
3. The soul remains constant and serene in all events of life because God wills or permits them.
4. The soul is filled with true joy that no one can destroy, because it wills whatever God wills.
5. One can expect a happy death if one remains faithful in abandonment to God's will.

### **Fidelity to Grace**

Fidelity in general signifies the faith and loyalty one person has for another. Fidelity to grace means loyalty or docility in following the inspirations of the Holy Spirit in any form in which they are manifested to us.

Inspirations are the interior attractions, movements, feelings of remorse, or the knowledge God causes in us, in order to arouse us and draw us to virtue and to good resolutions. Divine inspirations are produced in various ways. Even sinners receive them in order to be converted.

The Holy Spirit works in us according to his will (cf. John 3:8). Sometimes he enlightens us, as when he gives us the knowledge by which we may resolve a doubt; at other times he moves us, as when we perform some good action we had already intended to do; but most often he both enlightens and moves us at the same time. At times he inspires us in the midst of some work or even distraction, sometimes during prayer, at the times of Communion, or in moments of recollection and fervor. He rules and governs the adopted children of God in the ordinary events of daily life as well as in affairs of great importance. He does not always inspire us directly, however, but sometimes sends the inspirations through a secondary cause such as a good book, a sermon, or someone's good example. Nevertheless, in the last analysis the Holy Spirit is always the principal author of the inspiration.

It would be impossible to insist too strongly on the importance and necessity of fidelity to grace in order to advance on the way of perfection. It is, in a certain sense, the fundamental problem of the Christian life because it determines whether one will make constant progress toward the heights of sanctity. Practically the only task of the spiritual director is to lead the soul to a most exquisite and constant fidelity to grace. Without this, all other methods are doomed to failure. The theological reason for this can be found in the divine economy of actual grace.

Actual grace is necessary for every salutary act. Without actual grace it is impossible to perform the smallest supernatural action, even if the soul possesses sanctifying grace, the infused virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But actual grace is continuously offered to us in the fulfillment of

the duties of the moment. That is not all. In the ordinary economy of divine providence, God subordinates consequent graces to those graces that have previously been given. Therefore, infidelity to grace at a given time may deprive us of many other graces that God would have given us if we had used the earlier graces. Only in eternity shall we see that a great number of frustrated saints were such because of their infidelity to actual grace. It should be noted that we are not here speaking of serious sins, which cause the loss of habitual grace, but of those venial sins, which frustrated the action of the Holy Spirit.

The negative effects that follow infidelity to grace should be sufficient to impress upon the soul the importance of being faithful to the graces God gives, but it is also important that we understand the positive sanctifying value of fidelity to grace. We must rely on the inspirations and directions of the Holy Spirit if we are to purge ourselves of all evil and grow in goodness. Hence, we should strive to be so possessed by the Holy Spirit that he alone governs all our faculties and regulates all our interior and exterior movements. In this way we shall no longer live, but Christ will live in us, due to our faithful cooperation with the actual graces given us through the Holy Spirit. It may happen that an inspiration from God is met with repugnance, doubt, or difficulties, but it is necessary to overcome our unruly nature and to follow at any cost the inspirations that come to us from God. We can never reach perfection so long as we are governed and guided by a natural and human spirit because perfection requires that God should live in us and work through us according to his will.

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is to an act of virtue what temptation is to a sinful act. The Holy Spirit proposes the virtuous act to the intellect and arouses the will; the just person accepts and approves the inspiration and then carries it out. Possessing in our souls the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are given in order to make us docile to the inspirations and movements of the Holy Spirit, we may rightfully ask for these inspirations and expect them. Indeed, the *Veni Creator Spiritus* is nothing other than a litany of petitions to the Holy Spirit, asking him to grant us his inspirations and his graces.

Three things are necessary for our response to the inspirations from the Holy Spirit: (1) attention to the inspirations; (2) discretion for distinguishing them from natural inclinations or movements from the devil; and (3) docility in carrying out the inspiration.

1. *Attention.* We should consider frequently that the Holy Spirit dwells within us through sanctifying grace. If we were able to detach ourselves completely from all earthly things and withdraw to the silence and recollection of our own interior, we would undoubtedly hear the voice of God speaking within us. This is not a question of an extraordinary grace; it would be something completely normal and ordinary in the Christian life. Why then do we not hear the voice of the Holy Spirit? In the first place, because of our habitual dissipation. God is within us, but we live outside ourselves. The Holy Spirit says that he will lead us to solitude and will speak there to our hearts (cf. Hos. 2:16).

God does not choose to impose himself nor to take from us our own initiative. He does not force himself upon the soul; he does not enter if he is not wanted. And even if the soul is in the state of grace and enjoys the indwelling of the Trinity, God's presence is silent and hidden until the soul itself turns to him with love and attention.

Another reason why we do not hear the voice of God within us is our sensuality. The

animal man, says St. Paul, does not perceive the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14). For that reason it is absolutely indispensable that we cultivate and preserve a spirit of mortification. Indeed, one of the first things that is lost by those who give themselves over to the things of the world, and especially to sensual delight, is the taste for prayer and the things of God.

The third reason why we do not hear the voice of God is our own disordered affection. Even in seeking God, we may deceive ourselves and actually seek ourselves. It is not at all unusual to find persons who are externally very pious and observant in their religious duties, but inwardly filled with egoism and self-complacency. The will can easily deviate from God and seek the self as the object of love. It is easy to see, therefore, why those who seek themselves first, and even subordinate God to themselves, hear only the voice of their own desires, while God remains silent.

2. *Discretion.* The discernment of spirits is of great importance if we are to know for certain the spirit that moves us at a given moment. The following points will be of help in recognizing divine inspirations.

(a) The devil never inspires us to virtue, and neither does fallen human nature, as a rule, if it is a question of some virtuous act that is difficult.

(b) God does not generally inspire us to perform actions not in keeping with our state in life or particular vocation. In this respect we must be cautious lest we try to do what we personally wish to do, and then justify it by calling it an inspiration from God.

(c) St. Francis de Sales maintains that one of the best signs of the goodness and authenticity of an inspiration, and especially of an extraordinary one, is the peace and tranquillity with which it is received, because God does not use violence but acts sweetly and gently. This is another way of saying not to presume that the inclination to perform some extraordinary action, such as changing one's vocation or state in life, is an inspiration from God unless there are sufficiently grave reasons for making the change. If, on the other hand, a soul is upset and perturbed by what it considers to be an inspiration from God, it is not to be presumed that the inspiration in question is from God.

(d) Those who claim to be acting by divine inspiration and refuse to obey their superiors are impostors, says St. Francis de Sales.<sup>(5)</sup> The first question a spiritual director should ask in cases of doubt is whether or 'not such individuals are obedient to the laws of God and the Church and the duties of their state in life. The spirit of disobedience has been responsible for numerous apostates, heretics, and fraudulent mystics.

(e) In the ordinary events of everyday life, it is not necessary to deliberate or seek counsel. As a rule, it suffices simply to choose that particular action that seems to be in conformity with the divine will, and not be troubled by any scruples of conscience. In cases of doubt concerning matters of greater importance, however, one should always consult a spiritual director, one's superiors, or someone who is

able to make a prudent decision.

3. Docility. This is a quality by which one follows the inspiration of grace promptly, without waiting for a second movement of grace. This, of course, applies only in those cases in which the divine inspiration is clear, because we have already stated that in doubtful cases it is necessary to deliberate or to consult someone in authority. The soul should always be disposed to fulfill the will of God at any given moment.

Cardinal Mercier advised persons to spend some time each day in complete recollection and to address the Holy Spirit in the following words: "O Holy Spirit, soul of my soul, I adore you. Enlighten me, guide me, strengthen me, console me. Tell me what I ought to do. Give me your commands. I promise to submit myself to whatever you ask of me and to accept whatever you permit to happen to me. Grant only that I may know your holy will."

### **Plan of Life**

The plan of life is a schedule of the occupations and practices of piety an individual should perform during the day. The advantage of some kind of plan or schedule is that it gives a constancy and regularity to one's efforts toward greater perfection. Without a schedule, one may lose much time, fall into a habit of indecision, neglect duties or fulfill them carelessly, or develop the defect of inconstancy. If one has a fixed schedule of life, there is much less danger of vacillation and wasted time, of being caught unprepared by some unexpected event, and of falling away from the practices of piety that are necessary for the spiritual advancement of the individual. When one is faithful to a plan of life, it is much easier to supernaturalize all the activities of daily life and to be attentive to the duty of the moment.

However, the plan of life should be adapted prudently to one's particular vocation and duties of state in life. A plan of life that would be suitable for several classes of persons would lose its effectiveness by being too general. The requirements differ for persons in various vocations or states of life: the laity, diocesan priests, and persons in the consecrated life.

#### *The Laity*

Living as they do in the world, without a superior whom they are bound to obey in matters that touch their personal spiritual life, and without a rule to guide them in their efforts toward greater perfection, it is difficult for the laity to avoid the danger of extreme individualism in their practices of piety. They may prefer to follow their own personal tastes and inclinations rather than select those exercises most beneficial to them. It should be strongly emphasized that, although the laity have a great liberty as regards practices of piety and means of sanctification, they should take care to utilize the fundamental means of sanctification before selecting this or that secondary practice of piety. Thus the frequent use of the sacraments, devout attendance at Mass, fidelity in the practice of daily prayer, the performance of the works of mercy -- these are basic practices that should play a dominant part in the spiritual life of the laity.

It is not unusual to find that the laity put greater emphasis on certain private devotions or secondary means of sanctification and neglect those things that are of greater importance. Moreover, it frequently happens that the laity identify a plan of life with certain observances that are proper to the religious or priestly state. The life of the religious or the priest is not a life suited to the laity and consequently it would be a serious error for a lay person to attempt to live



an adapted form of the religious life. The plan of life utilized by a husband or wife, a father or mother, or a member of the various professions in the world should be orientated to an ever-increasing love of God but placed within the framework of the duties of the individual in his or her particular vocation or profession. Perhaps the best rule to follow in drawing up such a plan of life is to ensure that nothing in the schedule would make it impossible or difficult for the individual to fulfill the duties of his or her vocation or profession.

### *Diocesan Priests*

The diocesan priest and members of secular institutes are sometimes exposed to the same dangers and difficulties that threaten the lay person who has no definite plan of life. The diocesan priest must be in the world, but not of the world. His apostolate is such that it keeps him in constant contact with the people, and for that reason his way of life is evident to all. He must, therefore, be conscious of his personal obligation to strive for holiness and to give good example to the faithful. It goes without saying that he needs some schedule or plan of life as an individual Christian, and also in view of the demands of his priestly apostolate.

In this respect, he must avoid the same mistake the laity must avoid, namely, attempting to live a watered-down religious life. The diocesan priest is above all a man of the people, and although it may prove very satisfying to follow a plan of life that would provide many hours of recollection and solitude, he would run the risk of withdrawing too much from the people he has been sent to serve. At the other extreme, the diocesan priest without any plan of life is a constant contradiction in the eyes of his people; they cannot understand how a priest would be a worthy priest and still give no sign of regularity in the practices of the spiritual life. A priest is expected to be a man of temperate and regular habits, to be available at all times for the needs of his people, to have that delicate sense of prudence that enables him to be in the world without becoming worldly.

The diocesan priest should seek to draw up a plan of life enabling him to dedicate himself completely to his apostolate and at the same time to utilize certain hours of the day for his own personal sanctification. Unlike the religious priest, the diocesan priest does not have a schedule of daily life provided for him by a rule; except for the demands of his ministry and the care of souls, he is left to himself regarding the schedule of his daily life.

### *Religious*

Although religious have a definite schedule for community exercises, they also need a plan of life for their personal exercises. Community prayer and spiritual reading provide important material for meditation and private recollection, but there is still the question of arranging those hours that are left to the personal initiative of the individual religious. It is a strange paradox to find in a religious house certain individuals who attend the community exercises regularly and perform their duties faithfully but use their free time to do absolutely nothing. It is as if they erroneously believed that they should do nothing except that which is explicitly demanded of them by their rule or their superior.

This is obviously a serious misunderstanding of the function of the vow of obedience, for it is precisely in those hours of freedom from explicitly commanded duties that the religious manifest the intensity of their desire to perfect themselves. The religious, therefore, whether living in a

cloistered community or in one of the active institutes, will always have some free time that can be put to good use or simply wasted. It is for these free hours that the plan of life should provide, and it is in this area that the zealous religious will prudently arrange a schedule of life allowing for reasonable relaxation and at the same time preventing slothfulness.

It is a prudent practice to give the plan a period of trial. The first requisite is that the plan of life must be adapted to the duties of one's state, to one's profession or work, to one's disposition of spirit, to one's character and temperament, to one's strength of body, to the degree of perfection already attained, and to the attractions of grace. Moreover, the plan of life should be at once rigid and flexible. It needs a certain rigidity in order to give regularity and constancy to one's life; it must be flexible in order to allow for dispensations or adaptations when the need arises, or for substitutions and changes as one's needs vary. If there is a reasonable cause for departing from the schedule under given circumstances, the individual should not hesitate to do so, but one should never depart from the plan of life without a reasonable and justifying cause.

### **Spiritual Reading**

The attentive and assiduous reading of spiritual books is an efficacious aid to the practice of prayer and the acquisition of knowledge of spiritual doctrine. It is a laudable custom to have at hand a book of spirituality that can be read from time to time as one's occupation permits. A good book will not only renew the desire to strive for greater perfection, but it will impart invaluable knowledge concerning the spiritual life.

Not all spiritual books, however, have the same value or sanctifying efficacy. Objectively, Sacred Scripture should hold the first place, and especially those parts that are most instructive and doctrinal. Nevertheless, not all persons are able, for one reason or another, to obtain the maximum benefits from reading Sacred Scripture. This applies especially to the Old Testament, for there is no doubt that the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Epistles, can be read by all with great benefit.

The lives of the saints can also be a source of edification and instruction, but here it is necessary to remark that one should be selective in the choice of biographies. If too much emphasis is placed on the extraordinary in the life of a given saint, the reader may acquire a distaste for such books or a feeling of incredulity regarding the veracity of such phenomena. What is worse, the reader may attempt to imitate particular details in the life of a saint who belonged to a different age, a distinct culture, or lived in a state of life having little or nothing in common with that of the reader.

In general, one should select spiritual books that offer solid and practical doctrine regarding the Christian life. And since moods of the individual vary greatly, the book used at a given time is not always the one that is most beneficial at that time. Some books may be of great value in a particular period of a person's spiritual development but would cease to be of use later on. Other books would prove to be harmful to certain individuals because they are only beginners in the spiritual life, because of their lack of understanding of spiritual doctrine, or because of some particular defect at a given time.

Once a book has been selected for spiritual reading, it is of prime importance that it be read properly. Spiritual reading is not purely for reasons of study; it is an exercise of piety. Although

it is true that one derives much instruction through the reading of spiritual books, the ultimate purpose is to arouse one's love of God and to intensify one's desire for perfection. Hence the important thing is not to read many books but to assimilate what is read.

Sometimes it is very beneficial to reread certain sections of a book or to return again and again to the same book so that its doctrine can be deeply impressed upon the mind and heart. The important thing to be kept in mind about spiritual reading is that we

should use a book as long as we need it and can derive benefit from it. Sometimes it is necessary to resist the temptation to change books frequently, without ever finishing any one book.

It would be equally erroneous, however, to believe that we must necessarily finish every book that is started. If we begin a book that proves unsatisfactory, the prudent thing to do is to select a different book rather than waste time on something that is not beneficial. If the book is properly selected and properly read, we will easily pass from reading to prayer, and sometimes the two exercises will be so closely connected that we will not know when we ceased to read and began to pray.

### **Holy Friendships**

Father Lacordaire (1802-61) once said that true friendship is a rare and divine thing, a sure mark of a noble soul, and one of the greatest rewards of true virtue. We read in Sacred Scripture that a faithful friend is a powerful protector and that anyone who has found such a friend has found a treasure (Sir. 6:14-16). The truth of these statements is evident from daily experience. A virtuous friend is one of the greatest inspirations for the conquest of self and the practice of good.

True friendship is an alliance of souls who are united to do good. It is disinterested, generous, sincere, and patient to the point of heroism. True friendship does not know the meaning of duplicity or hypocrisy; it does not deny the defects that exist in the friends, but it enables them to love each other in spite of their defects and weaknesses. Neither is it a sensual love, because the love of true friendship must be a love that seeks primarily, not the good of oneself, but the good of the other. That is why the love of friendship is synonymous with true charity.

There are three outstanding advantages that flow from a true and holy friendship. In the first place, a friend can be an intimate confidant to whom one can open the heart and receive advice and counsel when confronted with problems and doubts. Secondly, a friend can be a prudent and sympathetic corrector who will frankly point out one's defects and prevent many acts of imprudence. Thirdly, a friend will console in times of sorrow and will know how to select the proper words and remedies in times of trial.

If true friendship has been highly praised, even by pagan philosophers, as one of the greatest blessings in a person's social life, it is reasonable to expect that it can be a powerful aid in the attainment of perfection. The struggle for perfection is the work of a lifetime, and it demands fidelity in the face of many obstacles. Even heroic souls have experienced the discouragement that comes from the recognition of the loftiness of the goal and the weakness of human nature. The love of a friend who has the same high ideals can be a source of encouragement and inspiration in times of darkness. Through all the centuries of the Church's existence there have been outstanding examples of holy friendship in the lives of the saints.

Since human love can so easily become tainted with selfishness and sensuality, however, it is necessary that one maintain a strict vigilance lest one's love should exceed the limits of virtue and become an occasion of evil. For if it is true that a good friend is a powerful stimulus to virtue, it is no less true that one of the most destructive forces in the Christian life is that of a sinful friendship. St. Francis de Sales warns that it happens frequently that a human friendship begins in a virtuous manner but imperceptibly but surely becomes mixed with sensual love and finally terminates in carnal love.[\(6\)](#)

For this reason it is extremely important that one know the signs by which one can determine whether a friendship is sensual. The first and most evident sign of a sensual friendship is that it is *exclusive*. This exclusiveness is shown by the fact that the two friends withdraw from the company of others in order to be alone, are annoyed if others join their company, and are jealous of each other to the point of becoming angry if one sees the other in the company of a third party. Secondly, a sensual friendship is characterized by *possessiveness*, which may reach such a point that one cannot tolerate the absence of the other, seeks to prolong conversations and visits unduly, and dominates the other person. Thirdly, sensual friendships are obsessive. At the slightest provocation one's thoughts turn to the friend; on entering a room the first person sought is the friend; the imagination seems always to be focused on the face of the friend, and this to the point of distraction in prayer or in the performance of one's duties.

In order to avoid this type of friendship, which is harmful to the spiritual life, the best remedy is to prevent such a friendship from developing. As soon as any of the signs have been noticed, one should react as to the symptoms of a disease. If, however, such a friendship has already been allowed to develop, it may be necessary to avoid any drastic and sudden measures but rather to let the friendship gradually cool until it can be rectified. Spiritual directors and confessors, who are prone to react violently to such friendships and to demand of their penitents an immediate and definitive break between the friends, may unwittingly cause a psychological upheaval more serious than the disorder they hoped to cure.[\(7\)](#)

## **Spiritual Direction**

Spiritual direction is the art of leading souls progressively from the beginning of the spiritual life to the height of Christian perfection. It is an art in the sense that spiritual direction is a practical science that, under the guidance of supernatural prudence, applies to a particular case the principles of the theology of Christian perfection. It is orientated to the perfection of the Christian life, but this direction must be given progressively, that is, according to the strength and need of the soul at a given time. The direction should begin as soon as the soul has definitely resolved to travel along the road to Christian perfection and should continue through all the phases of that journey.

Although it is true that individuals have attained sanctity without a spiritual director -- which proves that spiritual direction is not absolutely necessary -- normally those who have reached perfection have had the counsel and advice of a spiritual director. In the ordinary providence of God, spiritual direction of some kind is morally necessary for the attainment of Christian perfection.

Is it necessary that the spiritual director be a priest? We can answer without hesitation that normally the director should be a priest. There are many reasons for this.

First of all, the priest usually has both the theoretical and the practical knowledge required for the direction of souls. Second, the function of spiritual director is closely related to the office of confessor. A third reason is the grace of the priesthood. Fourth, the practice of the Church forbids any person who is not a priest, even religious superiors, to probe into matters of conscience.<sup>(8)</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible that in a particular case spiritual direction could be given by a prudent and experienced person who is not a priest. There is ample testimony in the history of the Church to justify such direction because of peculiar circumstances; for example, some of the hermits in the desert and the primitive monks who were not priests, and the direction given by St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola before his ordination, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Teresa of Avila.

How does one receive the office of spiritual director? If it is a question of a priest, he receives the remote power from God and the Church when he is ordained to the priesthood and given the commission to sanctify souls through his priestly ministry. But the direction of a particular soul is based upon two essential factors: the free election of the one directed and the free acceptance by the director. No human power can oblige any individual to accept spiritual direction from a particular director. Even religious and seminarians retain their liberty when it is a question of the choice of a personal spiritual director. When a bishop assigns a particular priest to be confessor to religious, this is done simply to facilitate the weekly confession of the religious, but it in no way obligates any religious to take that priest as a spiritual director.<sup>(9)</sup> The office of confessor is not necessarily identified with the office of spiritual director.

On the part of the director, it should be observed that a pastor and those priests who are officially given the care of souls in a parish are bound in justice to hear the confessions of their subjects whenever they reasonably request it. In case of urgent necessity, all confessors are bound in charity to hear the confessions of the faithful.<sup>(10)</sup> Spiritual direction in the strict sense of the word, however, even in those cases in which it is given during sacramental confession, is a function completely distinct from the administration of the sacrament of penance. There is no divine or ecclesiastical law, therefore, which imposes upon any priest a strict obligation to accept the office of spiritual director. A priest is always free to accept or to refuse such an office, although it is true that he would be performing an excellent act of charity if he were to accept the office.

Since it frequently happens that spiritual direction is given during sacramental confession, it is necessary to point out the difference between confession and spiritual direction. The purpose of spiritual direction is to lead a soul to the perfection of the Christian life, and therefore the spiritual director is essentially a teacher, counselor, and guide. The confessor is above all a judge who possesses power in the internal forum and can, within the limits of his jurisdiction, strictly obligate the penitent. His basic mission is to pardon sins in the name of God, and to do this it is sometimes necessary for him to dispose the penitent for valid sacramental absolution. The spiritual director as such does not possess jurisdiction in the internal forum; he cannot obligate the person directed unless the individual has voluntarily made a promise of obedience to the director; nor does he have as his purpose the forgiveness of sin, but the gradual perfection of the soul in view of sanctity.

This raises the question of whether it is necessary or fitting that the spiritual director should also be the ordinary confessor of the one who is directed. The answer is that it is not strictly

necessary, but it is fitting and convenient. It could not be said that one's spiritual director must of necessity be the confessor, because the two functions are distinct and separable.<sup>(11)</sup> Moreover, it may happen that a priest is a good confessor but does not possess the qualifications necessary for the direction of a particular soul. But because of the intimate relation between the offices of confessor and spiritual director, it is fitting that one and the same person fulfill both functions whenever possible. There are several reasons for this: it gives greater authority to the director; it makes it possible to give spiritual direction in the confessional; it enables the director to know the soul more perfectly.

We have mentioned that some priests may be qualified as confessors but not suitable as spiritual directors. This signifies that there are definite qualities required for the office of spiritual direction. Some of these qualities are essential to spiritual direction as such; others are required of the person who is to give the direction. The first may be called *technical* qualities, and the second may be considered as *moral* qualities.

### *Technical Qualities of the Director*

Perhaps no writer has outlined with such clarity and precision the technical qualities of a good spiritual director as have St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. She states that a good spiritual director should be learned, prudent, and experienced. St. John of the Cross also maintains that a director should be learned, prudent, and experienced, and he places great emphasis on experience.

**Learning.** The learning of a spiritual director should be extensive. In addition to having a profound knowledge of dogmatic theology, without which he would be exposed to error in regard to matters of faith, and of moral theology, without which he could not even fulfill the office of confessor, the spiritual director should have a thorough knowledge of ascetical and mystical theology. He should know, for example, the theological doctrine concerning Christian perfection, especially regarding such questions as the essence of perfection, the obligation to strive for perfection, the obstacles to perfection, the types of purgation, and the means of positive growth in virtue. He should have a detailed knowledge of the grades of prayer, the trials God usually sends to souls as they advance from the lower to the higher degrees of prayer, and the illusions and assaults of the devil that souls may encounter.

He also needs to be well versed in psychology so that he will have an understanding of various temperaments and characters, the influences to which the human personality is subjected, and the function of the emotions in the life of the individual. He should also know at least the basic principles of abnormal psychology and psychiatry so that he will be able to recognize mental unbalance and nervous or emotional disorders.

A priest should realize that, if he is not competent to direct a particular soul, he should advise the individual to go to someone who possesses the necessary knowledge. A priest incurs a grave responsibility before God if he attempts to direct a soul when he lacks sufficient knowledge. In recent times, with the wider dissemination of knowledge of mental illness, the priest must especially be warned that, as regards the field of psychiatry and the therapeutic methods proper to that branch of medicine, he is a mere "layman" and is incompetent to treat mental sickness. If he suspects that a penitent is suffering from a mental illness, he should direct that individual to a professional psychiatrist, just as readily as he would expect a psychiatrist to refer spiritual

problems to a clergyman.

**Prudence.** This is one of the most important qualities for a spiritual director. It comprises three basic factors: *prudence in judgment*, *clarity in counseling*, and *firmness in exacting obedience*.

If a spiritual director lacks prudence, he is usually lacking several other virtues as well. Prudence enables an individual to do the right thing under given circumstances. Spiritual direction is not concerned with the general doctrine of spiritual theology, nor with theoretical situations that one may imagine, but with the individual soul placed in concrete circumstances at a given moment or in a given phase of spiritual growth.

The director is not called upon to make decisions regarding general doctrine; most people could find such answers in any standard manual of spiritual theology. The director's role is precisely to recognize the particular circumstances of a given situation and to give the advice needed at that moment. In order that the advice be prudent, a spiritual director must have the empathy by which he is able to place himself in the given circumstances and must have the patience to listen attentively. Of the various factors that militate against prudence, the following are especially common: lack of knowledge of the various states of the ascetical and mystical life, lack of understanding of human psychology, prejudice in regard to particular states of life or particular exercises of piety, lack of humility, excessive eagerness to make a judgment.

The second characteristic of prudence in the spiritual director is clarity in the advice given to the one directed and in the norms of conduct prescribed. In order that he may be clear in his direction, he must possess clarity in his own mind. In speaking to the soul he is directing, he should avoid any vague or indecisive language, but should always express himself in concrete and definite terms. He should resolve problems with a yes or a no and, if necessary, he should take the time for further deliberation before making his decision. If a soul perceives that the director is not sure of himself, it will lose confidence in him, and his direction will lose all its efficacy.

Moreover, the director should always be sincere and frank, without any partiality or selfish motives. It would be a serious fault if a director were to avoid offending the person directed lest that person should go to some other priest for direction. Those priests who place great importance in attracting and retaining a large number of followers are, by that very fact, disposing themselves to failure as spiritual directors. The director should never forget that he acts in the name of the Holy Spirit in directing souls, and that he must endeavor to treat those souls with kindness and- understanding, but with firmness and utter frankness.

The director must also take care that he does not become the one who is directed. Some persons are extremely competent in getting their own way in everything, and even the director is in danger of falling under their power. For that reason, once the director is certain of his decision and the course that should be followed; he should state his mind with unyielding firmness. The individual must be convinced that there are only two alternatives: to obey or to find another director.

But the director should not forget that he should never demand of a soul anything that is incompatible with its state of life or vocation, its strength, or present condition. He should realize that there are some things that can be demanded of advanced souls but could never be required of

beginners; that some things would be perfectly fitting in dealing with a priest or religious but not with a lay person. Excessive rigor does nothing but frighten souls and may cause them to abandon the road to perfection. There is, therefore, a world of difference between firmness in demanding obedience and an excessive rigidity that discourages the soul of the penitent.

**Experience.** This is one of the most precious qualities of a good spiritual director. Even if he is less perfect in knowledge and somewhat deficient in prudence, experience can make up for these deficiencies. This does not mean that the experience of the director must necessarily flow from his own spiritual life, for he may obtain the benefits of experience from his observation and direction of others.

As regards the personal experience of the director, if it is a question of the guidance of the average Christian, he needs little more than the experience any priest can obtain from the faithful fulfillment of his duties in the sacred ministry. If it is a question of advanced souls who have already entered the mystical stages of the spiritual life, it is desirable that the priest himself have some experience of those higher stages. If he lacks this, a delicate sense of prudence, coupled with competent knowledge of the mystical states, will suffice in the majority of cases.

But personal experience alone is not sufficient to make a spiritual director as competent as he ought to be. There are many different paths by which the Holy Spirit can lead souls to the summit of sanctity. It would be a serious mistake for a director to attempt to lead all souls along the same path and to impose on them his own personal experiences, however beneficial they may have been for himself. The spiritual director should never forget that he is merely an instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit and that his work must be entirely subjected to the Holy Spirit. If, through a lack of understanding of the variety of divine gifts and the multiplicity of roads to perfection, he were to force all souls to travel by the same road, he would become a veritable obstacle to the workings of grace in the soul.

#### *Moral Qualities of a Spiritual Director*

The moral qualities indispensable for a good spiritual director are piety, zeal for the sanctification of souls, humility, and disinterestedness. Because there are so few who possess all these qualities, there are also few competent spiritual directors. Yet it should not be thought that a person who is unable to find a perfect spiritual director will be unable to reach perfection. If the soul has an ardent desire for sanctification and strives faithfully to cooperate with all the graces God bestows, it will not fail to reach sanctity, even if the spiritual director does not possess all the qualities that are necessary. Indeed, such a soul could possibly attain perfection even without a spiritual director. It is not the director who makes saints; sanctification is essentially the work of God and the cooperation of the soul.

**Piety.** It is easy to understand the necessity of piety in a spiritual director, and St. John of the Cross insists upon this quality with great emphasis.<sup>(12)</sup> The piety of the spiritual director should be permeated with the great truths of the Christian life. It should be eminently Christocentric and orientated to the glory of God. The director should likewise be animated with a profound sense of our adoptive filiation so that he can see God above all as a loving Father. He should have a most tender affection for Mary, the Mother of God and our mother. He should practice recollection and be detached from the things of the world. A director who is animated with these sentiments will be perfectly at home in the direction of souls. He will understand their language



and will be able to communicate with them. His own experimental knowledge of God and divine things will give him an understanding that no acquired science could ever provide. There can be no doubt whatever that piety is the first and most basic moral quality a good director of souls should possess.

**Zeal for the Sanctification of Souls.** The director's ardent zeal for the sanctification of souls is a natural consequence of his personal piety. Zeal, as St. Thomas explains, is an effect of intense love. The love of God impels us to labor for the extension of his kingdom in souls, and the love of those souls enables us to forget ourselves so that we think of nothing but of sanctifying them in and for God. This is the zeal that urged St. Paul to become all things to all men in order to gain all, and gave him that beautiful sympathy by which his whole being was united with others in their joys and sufferings and sorrows (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22). Lacking this ardent zeal, spiritual direction will lose its power because the director himself will have lost the stimulus for persevering in his efforts in spite of any difficulty, and the direction will become an oppressive burden.

Zeal, however, is always in danger of degenerating into a stubborn inflexibility that would be most harmful to the person who is being directed. For that reason it must be counterbalanced by a basic goodness and sweetness of character. The spiritual director should be animated by the same sentiments that animated our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If the director is excessively rigorous and lacks compassion, he will discourage the soul and may even cause it to abandon the work of its sanctification. The director needs compassion especially in dealing with souls who are strongly tempted, who find it difficult to open their hearts to the director, or who are weak and inconstant by nature. For that reason the goodness and kindness of the spiritual director should enable him to be truly paternal in striving to form Christ in the souls whom God has entrusted to him.

**Humility.** The director also needs a profound humility, and this for three reasons. In the first place, God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble. Of what value is all human knowledge and wisdom if one is lacking in humility? Second, the spiritual director needs humility so that he will distrust himself when necessary and not rush forward to solve difficulties without reflection. Humility will cause him to study and meditate and to consult others more learned than himself. In this way he will avoid many of the mistakes and embarrassments that occur to those who are too proud to doubt themselves. Third, humility in a director attracts souls, while pride repels them. In this respect also the director should imitate Christ, who said of himself that he is meek and humble of heart and that he seeks only the glory of his Father.

**Disinterestedness.** Lastly, the director should love souls in a disinterested manner, that is, he should not seek to guide them because of any self-satisfaction or consolation that he would receive, but simply and solely to lead them to God. St. Augustine states emphatically that those who lead the sheep of Christ as if they were their own and not Christ's, show that they love themselves and not the Lord. By means of this disinterested love the director will forestall many temptations that could arise in regard to pride and sensate affections, and he will be able to respect the liberty of the souls he directs.

We have already stated that both the director and the soul directed enjoy complete freedom. If this freedom is to be respected, the spiritual director must never show any annoyance if a soul

leaves his direction, and he should certainly not look upon other directors as his rivals or competitors. In order to preserve his detachment and disinterest, the spiritual director should never, under any circumstances, accept any gifts as a recompense for the work he has done for a particular soul, and he should never impose upon it any kind of sacrifice or mortification that is undertaken for his benefit.

### *Duties of a Spiritual Director*

We have already mentioned that the function of the confessor and that of the spiritual director are not the same, although spiritual direction is frequently given in the confessional. The following seem to us to be the principal duties of a spiritual director:

1. *To know the soul that is directed.* The director should have a profound knowledge of the person he is to direct—character, temperament, good and evil inclinations, defects, likes and dislikes, powers and energy. He should have a knowledge of the individual's past life, at least along general lines, so that he will know the principal temptations to which the soul is subjected, means used to overcome those temptations, the graces received from God, the progress in virtue and by what means, the individual's present dispositions, the intensity of the desire to strive for perfection, the sacrifices the individual is willing to make in order to attain sanctity, and the obstacles and difficulties at the present time.

Nothing should be put in writing, either by the director or the one directed. It is easy for a penitent to imagine that such written accounts may one day rank with the autobiographies of certain saints, and there is always the possibility that they may fall into the hands of the wrong persons. Moreover, it is usually difficult to judge accurately a written account of one's personal experiences. Hence all information given to the director should be given orally. Unlike the confessor, who should normally believe whatever the penitent declares in the confessional, the spiritual director is not obliged to believe everything that he hears; indeed, there are occasions when he should examine and question the person before making any decision.

2. *To give instruction.* The spiritual director is expected to instruct the person under his guidance, thus making it possible for the individual to solve his or her own problems and difficulties whenever possible. Spiritual direction has as its goal the perfection of the individual, and the ideal is to enable the individual to walk or even to fly to the summit of sanctity. Like any form of counseling, spiritual direction should be given only when necessary. If the director dominates the individual excessively and makes that person come to him for decisions or permissions in unnecessary and sometimes foolish things, the subject becomes increasingly weaker and more dependent on the director. It is not unusual to find spiritual directors who violate this basic rule and nullify any good they could accomplish by making themselves the focal point of all their direction. The only exception would be in dealing with souls who are scrupulous or excessively curious, because with such persons the only method of treatment is to exact unquestioning obedience.

The instructions given by the director should avoid all controversial points in the theology of Christian perfection, all abstruse and disputed questions in speculative

theology, and in general anything that would serve to sharpen the curiosity of the person directed without giving an understanding of spiritual matters. His instructions should be based on those fundamental points commonly accepted by all theologians rather than any particular devotion or spiritual exercise, which may be perfectly orthodox and commendable in itself but not suited to the taste or present need of the person directed. He will above all avoid any word or action that could be interpreted as disapproval or disdain of any other school of spirituality.

3. *To encourage the soul.* Few souls, even among those who are advanced, are so self-sufficient that they do not need to be encouraged. The spiritual director is not only called upon to give instructions and to solve difficulties, but also required to be a true educator who makes a positive contribution to the spiritual formation of the soul under his direction. Sometimes the best possible way of contributing to this formation is by means of encouragement and stimulation. To that end, the director should endeavor to infuse in souls a healthy optimism founded on confidence in God and distrust of self. Souls must be made to realize that they are individually called to perfection and that they can attain it if they are faithful to the graces God gives them. If they fail or become discouraged, the director should lift them up and make them see that discouragement at their failure can be more harmful to their spiritual life than the failure itself.

It would be impossible to measure the harm that is done to souls by severe and harsh treatment from the director at the precise moment in which the disheartened individuals need assistance and confidence and encouragement to resume the difficult journey toward perfection. Frequently there is nothing that so animates a soul as to be received with kindness and understanding when it expected to be censured and scolded by the director.

4. *To control the spiritual life of the person directed.* The soul should not take any important step without the approval of the spiritual director. The plan of life, the method of prayer, the practices of piety, the practice of mortification, the work of the apostolate, the material of the examination of conscience - all can be controlled by the spiritual director as the need arises. But the direction should be limited strictly to those things that concern the soul's growth in holiness. The spiritual director should take care that he does not become an intolerable burden to the person directed by interjecting his authority into those matters that are of petty consequence or are not related to the spiritual life.

By the same token, he should never allow the penitent to insert family matters, business affairs, or human preoccupations into the interviews or conferences. As soon as he perceives that the person is beginning to wander from the matter that pertains to the spiritual life, he should immediately and definitively put an end to such discussion. In order to prevent any such digression, the spiritual director should always be in control of the conversation and should insist that all matters be discussed as briefly and as directly as possible. If from the very start of the spiritual direction he restricts the individual to a succinct discussion of the matter at hand, he will avoid wasting much precious time and will prevent the direction from degenerating into pious conversation or purely social visits.

5. *To correct defects.* The spiritual director will have to know how to unite sweetness of character with the obligation of correcting the fault of the person directed. Although the

purpose of spiritual direction is eminently positive-to lead the soul to the height of perfection-he cannot achieve that goal without the negative aspect of uprooting defects. It does not suffice for the director to be concerned simply with the correction of voluntary faults; he must likewise understand and seek to remedy the predispositions to sin that are found in the individual person. Thus the precipitation, inconstancy, superficiality, and sensuality, which predispose to various sins, must be corrected so that the personality can be integrated and properly disposed for the practice of virtue. As regards voluntary faults, the spiritual director will never allow the individual to excuse himself for his fall by blaming them on his temperament or some external circumstance.

The particular examen will be utilized as a means of discovering the occasions that provided the temptation and the causes that disposed for the deliberate fault. Although he must avoid discouraging the individual, the director must make the subject realize that voluntary imperfections are incompatible with the perfection of charity.

6. *To direct by progressive stages.* Spiritual direction should be progressive and accommodated to the soul's degree of virtue, temperament, age, and circumstances of life. If the direction given is far above the needs and capacities of the soul, the soul will become disheartened and discouraged because more will be demanded of it than it is capable of doing. If, on the other hand, the soul has advanced beyond the type of direction that is given, the wings of the soul will be tied so that it cannot soar to God.

The director must, therefore, discern what are the needs of the soul at a given time, and then take care that the direction given will satisfy those needs. When he wishes to intensify the spiritual life of the soul, he may propose things by way of a trial or test, in order to see how the soul reacts. He need not and should not tell the soul that this is his method, but he should take every precaution not to hold the soul back when God wishes to lead it to a higher stage, and not force the soul to a higher stage when it is not yet ready to make the step. Growth in the spiritual life, like any other kind of growth, must be gradual and continuous.

Consequently, the spiritual director should know the various steps that mark the phases of growth from the beginning of the ascetical life to the transforming union, and in dealing with particular individuals he should expect that they will not remain static in any given phase, but that they will progress in gradual stages from one phase of the spiritual life to another. And although it is, true that God could take a soul in his arms, so to speak, and carry it from one stage of life to a much higher stage, this is not to be presumed in any given case, because it is not the ordinary working of God's grace.

7. *To observe secrecy.* The spiritual director is obligated to observe absolute secrecy in regard to the confidences he has received from the persons he directs, not only because many of these things are in some way connected with the internal forum, but also because the office of spiritual director obligates him to natural secrecy. The obligation to secrecy is especially important when it is a question of advanced souls who have experienced certain extraordinary phenomena and supernatural charisms. Although a director who comes into contact with such phenomena may have a strong inclination to discuss these things, he should remember that, as a rule, the narration of such things does nothing more than arouse morbid curiosity in others and dispose the director himself to feelings of

pride and self-complacency.

### *The Person Directed*

Since spiritual direction involves two persons, the success of the direction *is* not guaranteed by the mere fact that the director possesses all the necessary qualities and understands the purpose and function of spiritual direction. There are also definite requisites demanded of the soul that receives the spiritual direction, and these requisites flow, first of all, from the nature of spiritual direction itself and, secondly, from the relationship of the person directed with the spiritual director.

The direction itself cannot be successful unless the person directed possesses the following qualities:

1. *Sincerity*. This is the first and most important quality because without it any kind of direction is impossible. The spiritual director has to know all: temptations and weaknesses, desires and resolutions, good and evil inclinations, difficulties and trials, successes and failures. If he is to guide the soul to greater perfection, his hands are tied unless he has sufficient knowledge of the soul. Although the spiritual director need not also be the confessor, it would be impossible to give any spiritual direction if the director were to know nothing of the sins and imperfections of the individual.

One should reveal to the director whatever has any importance in regard to the spiritual life, but it is not necessary, and it would even be an abuse, to give him a detailed account of petty trifles and insignificant events. But what is revealed should be revealed with all frankness and sincerity, without condoning or excusing one's failures or exaggerating one's virtues.

2. *Obedience*. The director does not possess any authority by which he can demand strict obedience. Spiritual direction is a matter of perfect liberty on the part of the director and the person directed. By the very fact that a person seeks the help of the director, however, the two are not on an equal footing; the director is in a position of superiority as the master and guide.

Granted the voluntary submission of a person to the director, the director has a right to expect docility and obedience from the one directed. If these are lacking, there can be no spiritual direction. The soul should obey simply and without discussions or personal interpretations. And it should be noted that even worse than disobedience is the duplicity by which a soul would so ingratiate itself with the director that he would command it to do only the things the soul wants to do. This does not mean, however, that an individual may not take the initiative in order to make a manifestation of conscience or to point out particular difficulties or obstacles that the director perhaps did not see.

What is to be thought of the vow of obedience that some persons have taken to their spiritual director? In general, this is not advisable because of the disadvantages connected with it (i.e., too much responsibility for the director, anxiety for the person directed, too much passivity, unnecessary visits and interviews). In any case, the director should never take the initiative and suggest that a person make a vow of obedience to him, for this would be an abuse of his authority and his office. It would be an even greater abuse if a

director were to add to the vow of obedience the promise never to change directors or never to consult anyone else.

But if an individual voluntarily and repeatedly requests permission to make a vow of obedience to the director (for an increase of merit), it could be permitted under the following circumstances: (a) that the vow be made for a short period of time and then renewed if desired; (b) that the person making the vow be perfectly normal, serene, and balanced; and (c) that the vow may be revoked if any difficulties or anxieties arise.

What is to be done if a conflict arises between the commands of a lawful superior and those of a spiritual director? One must unhesitatingly obey the superior, even if one has taken a vow of obedience to the director. It should be noted that private vows taken by religious are null and void without the approval of their superiors. And even if one has received permission of a religious superior to make a vow of obedience to one's director, the superior never loses the power over the subject that is the result of religious profession.

3. *Perseverance.* The very nature of spiritual direction requires that the person directed should persevere in seeking the help and guidance of the director. Spiritual direction is rendered sterile by the frequent change of directors, by absenting oneself for long periods, by the constant change of spiritual exercises and means of sanctification, or by letting oneself be led by a caprice of the moment instead of following the instructions received from the director. When serious reasons justify a change, a person should not hesitate to find a new director, but that is something quite distinct from the fickleness and inconstancy manifested by some persons in changing from one director to another under the slightest pretext.

4. *Discretion.* The person receiving spiritual direction should never forget that, if the director is obliged to the seal of confession or to natural' secrecy, the one receiving direction is obliged to observe silence

concerning the director. As a general rule, a person should never reveal to others the particular admonitions or counsels received from the spiritual director. Such advice is given to a particular person in view of particular circumstances and does not apply to other persons living in different circumstances. Many directors have suffered greatly as the result of the indiscretion of their penitents, and this is sufficient reason for a director to refuse to continue the direction of such a person.

The principal qualities required of the person directed in relation to the director are respect, confidence, and supernatural love.

1. *Respect.* The person directed should see in the director not merely a man gifted with certain qualities, but the representative of God and of Christ. No matter what defects or perfections he may have in the natural order, the director must be regarded with respect precisely as a director and guide of the spiritual life. This profound respect will be most useful, not only in fostering the docility and obedience of the person directed, but also in serving as a brake to any excessive attachment or sensual affection for the director.

2. *Confidence.* In addition to respect, there should be absolute confidence in the director.

It should be a confidence that is truly filial, and so absolute that one can always be perfectly natural and frank when dealing with the director. If the person directed is timid and selfconscious, the spiritual direction will never be completely efficacious.

3. *Supernatural love.* Once a person has cultivated a filial confidence toward the director, it frequently happens that a true love develops for the director. This is one of the most delicate problems in the relationship between the spiritual director and the person directed. There is nothing unlawful about a love for one's spiritual director so long as the love remains on a supernatural level. The lives of the saints give countless examples of this type of holy love. The difficulty lies in keeping the love on a purely supernatural level.

It is not at all unlikely that, in many instances, the love of a woman for her spiritual director is purely natural, proceeding from the normal affinity that exists between a woman and a man. The love could also be the result of the paternal interest and affection manifested by the director and a sense of gratitude for all that he has done for the individual. The danger that lies in the love of friendship between a director and a woman is augmented by the fact that the director necessarily must know about matters of conscience, temptations, and even sins. Even if a director is convinced that there is no danger to himself or his penitent, he must always be conscious of the danger of scandal to others: As a consequence of all this, the person directed should make every effort to see the director as another Christ, to confer with him only when necessary, and scrupulously to avoid any manifestation of human affection.

In such matters, the director must have a most delicate conscience and a refined prudence, without going to the extreme of being excessively timid, suspicious, or gruff. If it is a question of a mutual sensible affection recognized by both parties, it would be more prudent for the individual to seek another spiritual director. The reason for this is not only the obvious danger that such a friendship may easily degenerate into sensual affection, but also that under those conditions it would be difficult to have true and efficacious spiritual direction.

If the director experiences a sensible affection for the person directed, he should examine it before God in order to discover whether such an affection disturbs his spirit, places him in danger of temptation, impedes the liberty he should have as a spiritual director, or is the source of some other danger. In this case, without revealing his feelings to the person directed, he should find some reasonable cause for abandoning the direction. If, in spite of the sensible affection, he does not experience any danger of temptation or any obstacle to the direction, he may proceed with the direction, but always keeping a prudent vigilance over himself.

If, finally, the director realizes that his penitent has developed a sensible affection for him and he himself does not return that affection, he should examine whether or not such an affection is disturbing the person's peace of soul or provoking temptation. If so, he should advise and even command that the individual seek another spiritual director. If there is no danger that the affection of the penitent may degenerate into a sensual love, he may continue the direction of that individual, but he should be very careful, lest by some imprudent word or act he should augment that human affection.

### *Selection of a Spiritual Director*

Some persons (for example, cloistered nuns or persons who do not have access to several priests) are not in a position to choose their own director. In such cases one must do as well as possible with the person available and supply for any deficiencies by consulting books.

Apart from these particular cases, the choice of a spiritual director should be made in the following way. The first thing to be done is to ask God in prayer for the grace and light to proceed prudently in this important matter. Then one should investigate who among the available priests possesses the prudence, experience, and learning necessary for a good director. Under no circumstances should the choice be made because of one's natural inclinations toward a particular priest, although it should be recognized that it would be more difficult to open one's heart with confidence to a priest for whom one feels repugnance or antipathy. It is not advisable to ask the priest immediately to be the spiritual director, but one should test him for a time to see whether or not he will be able to fulfill the task of director.

It may sometimes be necessary to find a different spiritual director, although one should not readily believe that it is necessary to change directors. The reasons that are sufficiently serious for changing one's spiritual director can be listed under two heads: if the direction has become useless or harmful. Spiritual direction becomes useless when, in spite of one's good will and sincere desire to advance in holiness, one does not feel toward the director the respect, confidence, and frankness that are indispensable for the efficacy of the spiritual direction. It would also be a futile effort if one perceives that the director never makes corrections of one's defects, does not encourage progress in virtue, does not solve problems, and shows no special interest in the sanctification of the individual.

The direction would be harmful if the person directed discovers that the director feeds the vanity and complacency of the individual, readily tolerates one's faults and imperfections, or judges things from a point of view that is too natural. Or if the director wastes time by frivolous conversations, by asking questions out of simple curiosity, or in discussing matters not related to growth in holiness. Or when one perceives that there has developed a strong sensible affection on the part of one or both; when the director imposes obligations that are beyond one's strength or incompatible with the duties of one's state in life; or when one perceives clearly that the advice given has been harmful instead of helpful. It should be noted, however, that one may easily be mistaken in making judgments concerning the competence of the director and the efficacy of the direction, and for that reason it is imperative that one deliberate before making a change in spiritual directors.

Would it be fitting to have several directors at the same time? Although there have been cases in which a person had several spiritual directors, in general it is not prudent to do so. There is always the danger of a difference of opinion and a conflict as a result of discrepancy in the advice given. Nevertheless, it is perfectly compatible with the unity of direction to seek advice from other competent persons when an especially difficult or extraordinary problem arises. As we have already stated, the director himself, if he is prudent and humble, will take the initiative and advise the penitent to consult another person. But apart from these special cases, the unity of spiritual direction must always be preserved, especially when dealing with scrupulous persons, and this unity is best preserved by having one director.



### *Spiritual Direction by Correspondence*

The last question to be answered in the matter of spiritual direction concerns direction given by mail. If it is a question of an isolated case in which an individual requests advice or the solution of a problem by mail, there is no reason why such direction should not be given in a letter, if one observes the necessary precautions required whenever confidential matters are discussed by letter. If advice is requested by persons who already have their own spiritual director, great caution should be observed, especially if one is not sure of the good faith and discretion of the person who is asking advice. Sometimes individuals seek an answer in writing from another priest in order to show this letter to their own director and confront him with advice that is contrary to what he has given. If it is necessary for one priest to correct the advice given by another priest, this should be given as an amplification and further application of the advice already given rather than a complete and total rectification.

But what is to be said of spiritual direction given entirely by mail? It may happen in exceptional cases that it is the only way in which a person can receive spiritual direction, and even apart from these cases there are examples of direction by mail in the lives of the saints (for example, St. Francis de Sales and St. Paul of the Cross).

But the disadvantages far outnumber the advantages of spiritual direction by letter. It is morally impossible for the director to acquire an intimate knowledge of the person directed unless there is oral communication between them. It is very difficult to express and describe one's interior life in writing; it is equally difficult to understand another person from a written account. Moreover, the spiritual director is not able to make corrections immediately, as he could do if the person were actually speaking to him. Another disadvantage is that letters may easily fall into the hands of others.

In practice, the spiritual director should not be willing to accept the direction of a soul through correspondence unless he already knows the individual and the person has no other recourse. In the actual writing of letters, the director should never write a single line that would in any way constitute a violation of the seal of confession. If he does receive such material in letters from the person directed, he should destroy the letter as soon as he has read it and should severely forbid the individual from writing such things in the future, under penalty of discontinuing the spiritual direction.

Whatever direction is given in writing should be brief and objective. The spiritual director should scrupulously avoid any terms of affection, pet names, excessively cordial salutations, and anything that smacks of sentimentality. Those who have had experience in spiritual direction by mail have been most succinct in their answers, sometimes writing a few words on the letter itself and returning it to the sender without any signature.

If in some cases it is necessary to write at greater length, the director should confine himself to the problems or questions presented and to the instruction, exhortation, or correction the matter demands. He should observe the greatest prudence and delicacy, and should always remember that, in spite of his own good will, there is always the danger of false interpretations and rash judgments. His letters should always be such that he never has anything to fear in this respect. Lastly, both he and the person directed must avoid any kind of secret or clandestine correspondence.

## CHAPTER NOTES

*Cf. Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. J. K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1949), Part II, Chap. 13.

*Spiritual Exercises*, nn. 24-43.

*The Way of Perfection*, Chap. 21; *The Life*, Chap. 13, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946).

*Cf. The Interior Castle*, Second Mansions, n. 8.

*Cf. Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. B. Mackey (New York: Doubleday, 1942), Book VIII, Chap. 12.

*Cf. Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, Chap. 20.

For an excellent treatment of friendship among priests and religious, see P. Conner, *Celibate Love* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1979).

*Cf. Codex Juris Canonici*, can. 530.

*Ibid.*, can. 519-23.

*Ibid.*, can. 892.

Canon 891 states that the rector of a seminary or the director of novices may be spiritual directors to their subjects but may not be the ordinary confessors.

*Cf. The Living Flame of Love*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.- Newman, 1957), Canticle 3.

## 14

### Discernment of Spirits

It is indispensable for the direction of souls and for the study of extraordinary mystical phenomena to be able to distinguish the various spirits under which an individual may act or be acted upon. As used here, the word *spirit* refers to two different types of motivating factors or powers. The spirit of an *individual* refers to the *internal* inclination to good or evil, and it manifests itself with such regularity that it must be considered a personal trait. Thus, if a person has a propensity to prayer, he or she is said to possess the spirit of prayer; if there is a tendency to arguments and altercations, he or she is said to possess a spirit of contradiction, etc. Understood in this sense, the spirit of a person is usually the result of both temperament and character.

But it is also possible for an individual to come under the influence of a spirit that is *extrinsic* to the personality, whether from *God* or the *devil*. For that reason it is the function of the discernment of spirits to judge whether a given act or repetition of acts flows from the spirit of God, the diabolical spirit, or the spirit of the individual.

There are two types of discernment of spirit: acquired and infused. Acquired discernment of spirits is complementary to ordinary spiritual direction and can be cultivated by all who use the proper means. Infused discernment of spirits is a charismatic gift or *gratia gratis data*, which is granted by God to certain individuals. It is extremely rare, even among the saints, but when it occurs it is infallible because it is the result of an interior movement or inspiration received from the Holy Spirit, who cannot err.

Acquired discernment is absolutely necessary for a spiritual director. St. John of the Cross places great stress on the importance of discernment, pointing out that the priest who presumes to take charge of the direction of souls without such knowledge is guilty of temerity.<sup>(1)</sup> It is therefore important to examine the various means by which one can acquire the art of discernment of spirits.

1. *Prayer*. This is the most important and fundamental means. Although we are speaking of an acquired art, personal effort would avail nothing without the special assistance of the Holy Spirit through the virtue of prudence and the gift of counsel. Hence it is not only a question of the constant practice of prayer, but the particular petition by which the director requests of God the prudence necessary for the direction of souls and the light to be able to discern the will of God for some particular soul at a given time. It does not suffice to possess a theoretical knowledge of the spiritual life and the ways to perfection; one needs to know the practical and concrete application of these principles in particular cases. It is certain that God will answer these prayers with special graces that he gives to all rightly disposed souls so that they may fulfill their duties.

2. *Study*. The spiritual director likewise needs a vast amount of knowledge acquired through study. He should be familiar with the general principles of spiritual theology contained in Sacred Scripture, speculative theology, the masters of the spiritual life, and the lives of the saints. He should be especially careful not to restrict himself to a particular "school" or method of spirituality, but should have a broad and sympathetic understanding of the variety of schools and methods of the spiritual life.

3. *Personal experience*. Self-knowledge is a basic requirement for any kind of direction of others. While it is true that each person has unique traits and characteristics, there is also a common pattern possessed by all and, unless one understands oneself, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to understand others. Under this same heading we may include that sympathy or rapport that enables the director to place himself in the position and circumstances in which others find themselves, according to the statement of St. Paul: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Moreover, if the spiritual director himself has not attained some degree of virtue and self-mastery, it is not likely that he will be able to understand their condition, especially when they enter upon the higher stages of the spiritual life. Holiness of life is of inestimable value in acquiring the art of discernment of spirits.

4. *Removal of obstacles.* Under this heading we may place all the defective qualities that are an impediment to the understanding and direction of souls. One of the greatest obstacles is the spirit of self-sufficiency, which prevents the director from seeking the advice of those who are more learned or more experienced than himself. Secondly, the director must avoid at all costs an excessive attachment to the one he is directing, for this attachment will cloud his judgment and cause him to be too sympathetic. He must strive to be as objective as possible and avoid the inclination to judge according to purely human standards. He will never be precipitous in his decisions but will subject them to mature reflection.

## **Types of Spirits**

Spirits can be summarized under three headings: *the divine spirit, the diabolical spirit, and the human spirit.* God always inclines us to the good, working either directly or through secondary causes; the devil always inclines us to evil, working by his own power or through the allurements of the things of the world; the human spirit may be inclined to evil or to good, depending upon whether the individual follows right reason or selfish desires.

Due to the basic indifference of many purely natural inclinations, it *is* evident that they may be used for good and for evil, and while grace does not destroy nature but perfects and supernaturalizes it, the devil utilizes human weakness and the effects of original sin to further his evil aims. Moreover, it may happen that, in one and the same inclination or action, various spirits are intermingled, making it difficult to discern which spirit has the predominance at a given time. The spirit of God and the spirit of the devil cannot be operating at the same time, since they tend to opposite goals, but God can direct or intensify a naturally good inclination, or the devil may divert those inclinations to evil. And even when the divine spirit predominates in a given action, it does not follow that all the antecedent or consequent movements and inclinations are likewise divine and supernatural. It frequently happens that purely human and natural movements introduce themselves, consciously or unconsciously, and cause the action to lose some of its supernatural purity. This is one of the factors making it almost impossible for the director or theologian to discern clearly the divine element in extraordinary mystical phenomena.

Moreover, it is not at all unusual in the lives of mystics that their mystical and truly supernatural operations are interrupted by purely natural activities or that, with God's permission, a diabolical influence is introduced. It is not easy to determine when the action of God terminates and when the natural or diabolical movement begins. If the director is familiar with the signs of the various spirits, however, he will have sufficient grounds for making a prudent judgment in each case. It will not always be a situation in which one spirit is operating exclusively, but even if there is a mixture of several spirits, one or another will always predominate.

### *The Divine Spirit*

The following characteristics are general signs of the divine spirit.

1. *Truth.* God is truth and cannot inspire anything but truth in a soul. If a person believed to be inspired by God, therefore, maintains opinions that are manifestly against revealed truth, the infallible teaching of the Church, or proven theology or philosophy or science,

it must be concluded that the individual is deluded by the devil or is the victim of excessive imagination or faulty reasoning.

2. *Gravity*. God is never the cause of things that are useless, futile, frivolous, or impertinent. When his spirit moves a soul it is always for something serious and beneficial.

3. *Enlightenment*. Although one may not always understand the meaning of an inspiration from God, the effect of any divine movement or impulse is always enlightenment and certitude rather than darkness and confusion. This is true both for the effects on the individual who receives the inspiration and its effects on others.

4. *Docility*. Souls that are moved by the spirit of God accept cheerfully the advice and counsel of their directors or others who have authority over them. This spirit of obedience, docility, and submission is one of the clearest signs that a particular inspiration or movement is from God. This is especially true in the case of the educated, who have a greater tendency to be attached to their own opinions.

5. *Discretion*. The spirit of God makes the soul discreet, prudent, and thoughtful in all its actions. There is nothing of precipitation, lightness, exaggeration, or impetuosity; all is well balanced, edifying, serious, and full of calmness and peace.

6. *Humility*. The Holy Spirit always fills the soul with sentiments of humility and self-effacement. The loftier the communications from on high, the more profoundly the soul inclines to the abyss of its own nothingness. Mary said, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say" (Luke 1:38).

7. *Peace*. St. Paul speaks frequently of the peace that comes from God (Rom. 15:33, Phil. 4:9), and Jesus mentions peace as one of the manifestations of his spirit (John 14:27). This is a quality that always accompanies communications from God; the soul experiences a profound and stable serenity in the depths of its spirit.

8. *Confidence in God*. This is a counterpart and necessary consequence of true humility. Recognizing that of itself it can do nothing, as St. Paul says, the soul throws itself on the power and mercy of God with a childlike trust. Then it learns that it can do all things in him (Phil. 4:13).

9. *Flexibility of will*. This sign consists primarily in a certain promptness of the will to subject itself to the inspirations and invitations of God. Secondly it consists in a facility in following the advice and counsel of others, especially if they are superiors, confessors, or spiritual directors. It is opposed to the rigid and unyielding will that is characteristic of those who are filled with self-love.

10. *Purity of intention*. The soul seeks only the glory of God in all that it does and the perfect fulfillment of the will of God, without human interest or motivation out of self-love.

11. *Patience in suffering*. Suffering is frequently the best touchstone for revealing the true worth of an individual. No matter what the source of the suffering, or whether it is justly

received or not, the soul bears it with patience and equanimity and uses it as a means of further perfection.

12. *Self-abnegation*. The words of Christ himself are sufficient evidence that this is a sign of the spirit of God: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

13. *Simplicity*. Together with veracity and sincerity, this characteristic is never lacking in those who are truly motivated by the spirit of God. Any duplicity, arrogance, hypocrisy, or vanity must be attributed rather to the spirit of the devil, the father of lies.

14. *Liberty of spirit*. First of all, there is no attachment to any created thing, not even to, the gifts received from God. Second, all is accepted from the hands of God with gratitude and humility, whether it be a question of consolation or trial. Third, while all duties and spiritual exercises are performed with promptness and punctuality, the soul is ready to leave even the most consoling and profitable exercise as soon as the charity of God calls it elsewhere. Liberty of spirit enables the soul to live in a state of constant joy and eagerness for the things of God.

15. *Desire to imitate Christ*. St. Paul says that it is impossible to have the spirit of God without having the spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). For that reason St. John of the Cross states that the soul that aspires to perfection must have a desire to imitate Christ in all things by conforming its life as much as possible to his.

16. *Disinterested love*. We mean by this kind of love all the characteristics St. Paul attributes to true charity (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

### *The Diabolical Spirit*

*Normally diabolical influence on the individual Christian is restricted to simple temptation, although it is not likely that the majority of temptations proceed from the immediate and direct intervention of the devil. At other times, with God's permission, the devil may concentrate his power on an individual by means of diabolical obsession or diabolical possession.*

**Diabolical Obsession.** Obsession occurs whenever the devil torments a person from without and in a manner that is so intense that there can be no doubt about his presence and his action. In simple temptation the diabolical action is not so evident; absolutely speaking, it could be due to other causes. But in true and authentic obsession, the presence and activity of Satan are so clear and unequivocal that neither the soul nor the director can have the least doubt of it. The soul is aware of its own vital activity and government of its faculties, but it is at the same time clearly aware of the external activity of Satan, who tries to exert violence on the individual.

Obsession can affect the interior faculties, especially the imagination, or the external senses in various manners and degrees. The attack on the imagination differs from ordinary temptation only by reason of its violence and duration. Although it is difficult to determine exactly where simple temptation ends and true obsession begins, we can say that when the disturbance of the soul is so profound and the tendency to evil is so violent that the only possible explanation lies in some external force (even when there is nothing evident externally), it is certainly a case of diabolical obsession. It can take many different forms.

Sometimes it is manifested as a fixed idea that absorbs all the energies of the soul; at other times the images and representations are so vivid that the subject feels that he or she is dealing with concrete reality. Again, it may refer to one's duties and obligations, toward which one feels an almost insuperable repugnance, or it may be manifested by a vehement desire for something one is obliged to avoid.

This seizure has repercussions in the emotional life because of the intimate relation between the emotions and the cognitive faculties. The soul, even in spite of itself, finds itself filled with obsessive images that arouse doubt, resentment, anger, antipathy, hatred, despair, or dangerous tenderness and an inclination to sensuality. The best remedy against such assaults is prayer, accompanied by true humility, self-disdain, confidence in God, the protection of Mary, the use of the sacramentals, and obedience to one's director, from whom none of these things should be hidden.

Bodily obsession is usually more spectacular, but in reality it is less dangerous than internal obsession, although the two normally occur together. External obsession can affect any of the external senses, and there are numerous examples of this in the lives of the saints. The eye is filled with diabolical apparitions. Sometimes they are very pleasant, as when Satan transforms himself into an angel of light to deceive the soul and fill it with sentiments of vanity, selfcomplacence, etc. By these and similar effects the soul will recognize the presence of the enemy. At other times Satan may appear in horrible and frightening forms in order to terrify the servants of God and to withdraw them from the practice of virtue, as one can discover in the lives of numerous saints. Or the devil may present himself in a voluptuous, form in order to tempt souls to evil.

Other senses besides sight are also affected. The ear is tormented with frightful sounds and shouts, with blasphemy and obscenities, or with voluptuous songs and music to arouse sensuality. The sense of smell sometimes perceives the most pleasant odors or an unbearable stench. The sense of taste is affected in various ways. Sometimes the devil arouses feelings of gluttony by producing a sensation of the most delicious food or most exquisite liquors the individual has never actually tasted. But usually he arouses a most bitter taste in the food that is taken, or he mixes repulsive objects with the food so that it would be dangerous or impossible to swallow or to digest.

Finally, the sense of touch, which is diffused throughout the whole body, can be subjected in countless ways to the influence of the devil. Sometimes there are terrible blows upon the body; at other times there are sensations of voluptuous embraces or caresses; or God may permit that his servant be tested by extreme experiences of sensuality, without any consent on the part of the one who suffers these things. Obsession may be due to any one of the following causes:

1. The permission of God, who wishes thereby to test the virtue of a soul and to increase its merits. In this sense it is equivalent to a passive trial or a mystical night of the soul.
2. The envy and pride of the devil, who cannot bear the sight of a soul that is trying to sanctify itself and to glorify God to the best of its ability, thereby leading a great number of other souls to salvation or perfection.
3. The natural predisposition of the person obsessed, which gives the devil an occasion to

attack the individual at his weakest point. This reason is of no value in regard to external obsession, which has; nothing to do with the temperament or natural predispositions of the obsessed, but it is valid for internal obsession, which finds a fertile soil in a melancholy temperament or in one inclined to scruples, anxiety, or sadness. Nevertheless, however violent the obsession, it never deprives the subject of liberty, and with the grace of God he or she can always overcome it and even derive benefit from it. It is only for this reason that God permits it.

One needs much discretion and perspicacity to distinguish true obsession from the various kinds of nervous illnesses and mental unbalances that are very similar to it. It would be foolish to deny the reality of diabolical action in the world, especially sine it is expressly mentioned in the sources of revelation and has been proved countless times by the experiences of many saints. In modern times there has been a tendency to exaggerate the purely natural causes of all phenomena, and perhaps the greatest victory of the devil is that he has succeeded in destroying the belief in his terrible power. On the other hand, many apparently diabolical phenomena are due to natural causes, and it is a fundamental principle advocated by the Church that one may not attribute to the preternatural order anything that can probably be explained by purely natural causes.

The director will proceed prudently by bearing in mind the following observations and guidelines:

1. Obsession usually occurs only in souls that are far advanced in virtue. As regards ordinary souls, the devil is content to persecute them with simple temptations. Therefore, the director should first investigate the type of soul with which he is dealing, and in this way he will be able to conjecture as to the diabolical or purely natural origin of the apparent obsession.
2. It is important to investigate carefully whether one is dealing with a soul that is normal, balanced, of sound judgment, and an enemy of any kind of exaggeration or sentimentality; or whether, on the contrary, one is dealing with a disquieted, unbalanced, weak spirit, with a history of hysteria, tormented by scruples, or depressed by reason of an inferiority complex. This rule is of exceptional importance, and very often it is the decisive rule for making a judgment. It will be very difficult to differentiate between the manifestations of diabolical influence and those that follow from a nervous disorder, but-it is possible to do so. The director should not yield to the temptation of oversimplifying the matter by attributing everything to one cause or the other. He should give to the patient the moral counsels and rules that pertain to his office as a director of souls and then refer the individual to a trustworthy psychiatrist, who can treat the other manifestations that proceed from a mental disorder.
3. The authentic manifestations of true diabolical obsession will be sufficiently clear if they are revealed by visible signs such as the moving of an object by an invisible hand, the marks of bruises or wounds that proceed from an invisible attack. These effects cannot be attributed to any purely natural cause, and when the person who suffers them gives all the signs of equanimity, self-possession, sincerity, and true virtue, the director can be certain that he is dealing with a case of obsession. We have already said that the devil does not usually obsess the ordinary soul; nevertheless, God sometimes permits



diabolical obsession in these souls or even in hardened sinners, as a salutary expiation for their sins or to give them a vivid idea of the horrors of hell and the necessity of abandoning sin to be freed from the slavery of the devil. But ordinarily only souls of advanced virtue suffer the obsessive attacks of the devil.

4. Once it has been proved that one is dealing with a case of diabolical obsession, the director should proceed with the greatest possible patience and tenderness. The tormented soul needs the assistance and advice of someone to whom it can give its complete confidence and one who will in turn speak to the soul in the name of God. The director's principal concern should be to encourage the soul and make it understand that the attacks of hell are futile so long as the soul places all its confidence in God and does not lose its interior serenity. He will remind the soul that God is with it and will help it conquer: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Also, at the side of the suffering soul is Mary, our tender Mother, as well as the guardian angel, whose power is greater than that of the devil. The director will advise the soul never to lose its tranquillity, to hold the devil in utter disdain, to fortify himself or herself with the sign of the cross and with other sacramentals, especially holy water, which has great efficacy against the attacks of the devil. Above all, he will warn the soul never to do anything that the devil suggests, even if it appears good and reasonable. He will demand a detailed account of everything that happens and will never permit the soul to conceal anything, however difficult and painful it may be to reveal it. Finally, he will try to make the soul understand that God can use the devil as an instrument for purifying the soul and that the best way of cooperating with the divine plan is to abandon oneself entirely to God's holy will, ready to accept anything that God may decree, and asking' the grace of never yielding to the violence of the temptations.

5. In more serious and persistent cases, the exorcisms prescribed in the *Roman Ritual* are used, or other formulas approved by the Church are put into effect. But the director will always do this in private and even without advising the penitent that he is going to exorcise him or her, especially if he fears that this knowledge would cause a great disturbance to the soul. For a solemn exorcism it is necessary to obtain express permission from the local ordinary and to follow the prescribed precautions.

**Diabolical Possession.** Diabolical possession is a phenomenon in which the devil invades the body of a living person and moves the faculties and organs as if he were manipulating a body of his own. The devil truly resides within the body of the unfortunate victim, and he operates in it and treats it as his own property. Those who suffer this despotic invasion are said to be possessed.

However it may be manifested, the presence of the devil is restricted exclusively to the body. The soul remains free, even if the exercise of conscious life is suspended. Only God has the privilege of penetrating into the essence of the soul. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of the violence of the devil is to disturb the soul and to draw it to sin. But the soul always remains master of itself, and if it is faithful to the grace of God, it will find an inviolable sanctuary in its free will.

Two periods can be distinguished in diabolical possession: the period of crisis and the period of

calm. The periods of crisis are manifested by the violent onslaught of evil, and its very violence prevents it from being continual or even very prolonged. It is the moment in which the devil openly reveals himself by acts, words, convulsions, seizures of anger or impiety, obscenity, or blasphemy. In the majority of cases, the victims lose consciousness of what is happening to them during this seizure, as happens in the great crises of certain mental disorders. When they regain consciousness they have no recollection of what they have said or done or, rather, of what the devil has said or done in them. Sometimes they perceive something of the diabolical spirit at the beginning of the seizure when he begins to use their faculties or organs. In certain cases the spirit of the possessed remains free and conscious during the crisis and witnesses with astonishment and horror the despotic usurpation of its body by the devil.

In the periods of calm there is nothing to manifest the presence of the devil in the body of the possessed. One would think that the devil had gone. Nevertheless, his presence is often manifested by some strange chronic illness that exceeds the categories of pathological disorders known to medical science and resists every form of therapeutic remedy. Moreover, diabolical possession is not always continuous, and the devil may leave for a time and then return later to continue his possession. The devil can come and go as he pleases, so long as he has God's permission to take possession of the person.

Lest we expose ourselves to derision, it is necessary to be extremely cautious and prudent in making pronouncements concerning diabolical possession. There are countless nervous disorders presenting external symptoms very similar to those of possession, and there are also some poor unbalanced souls or perverse spirits that have a remarkable facility for simulating the horrors of possession. Fortunately, the Church has given us wise rules for discerning fraud and for making judgments that are certain. The first thing to be recognized is that authentic cases of possession are very rare, and it is much better to make a mistake on the side of incredulity than to be too anxious to admit diabolical possession. The extreme agitation of the victim, the blasphemies that are uttered, the horror manifested for holy things—none of these are of themselves sufficient proof. These symptoms give nothing more than a conjecture of the possibility of diabolical possession, but they are never infallible signs because they could proceed from malice or from some natural cause.

**Remedies for Possession.** The *Roman Ritual*, after recommending prudence and discretion before making a judgment, indicates certain signs that allow for a diagnosis to ascertain the authenticity of diabolical possession: speaking in a, strange and unknown language or understanding perfectly one who speaks in an unknown language; perceiving hidden or distant things; manifesting strength beyond one's age and condition. There are other similar symptoms, and the more numerous they are the greater proof they offer of a true diabolical possession.

Ordinarily, possession occurs only in sinners and precisely as a punishment for sin. There are exceptions, however, when diabolical possession is used by God as a means of purification.

Whatever will weaken the power of the devil over a person can be utilized as a remedy against diabolical possession, but the *Roman Ritual* specifies certain principal remedies:

*Sacramental confession.* Since the usual purpose of diabolical possession is punishment for sin, it is necessary above all to remove the cause of possession by a humble and sincere confession. It will have a special efficacy if it is a general confession of one's

whole life, because of the humiliation and renewal of soul it presupposes.

*Holy Communion.* The Roman Ritual recommends frequent Communion under the direction and advice of a priest. Holy Communion, however, should not be given to a possessed person except in moments of calm, and one must also take great care to avoid any danger of irreverence or profanation, as the Ritual prescribes.

*Fasting and prayer.* A certain type of devil cannot be cast out except through fasting and prayer (Matt. 17:20). Humble, and persevering prayer, accompanied by fasting and mortification,, obtains from heaven the grace of a cure. This particular remedy should, never be omitted, even when all the others are used.

*The sacramentals.* Objects blessed by the prayers of the ,Church have a special power against the devil. Holy water has particular efficacy, as has been verified on countless occasions.

*The cross.* The Ritual prescribes that the exorcist should have a crucifix in his hand or before his eyes. It has been verified many times that the devil will flee merely at the sight of a crucifix. The sign of the cross has always been used by Christians as a safeguard against the devil, and the Church makes special use of it in the rite of exorcism.

*Relics of the saints.* The Roman Ritual also recommends the use of relics in the rite of exorcism. The most precious and venerated of all relics, and those that inspire the greatest horror in the demons, are the particles of the true Cross because they remind the demons of the definitive victory that Christ won over them on Calvary.

*The holy names of Jesus and Mary.* The name of Jesus has a sovereign power to put the devil to flight. He himself promised in the Gospel: "They will use my name to expel demons" (Mark 16:17). The apostles used the Holy Name in this respect: " 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you, come out of her!" Then and there the spirit left her" (Acts 16:18).

The name of Mary is also terrifying to the devils. The examples of its salutary efficacy are innumerable and fully justify the practice of Christian piety that sees in the invocation of the name of Mary a powerful remedy against the attacks of the devil.

In addition to these remedies, which any Christian can use against the power of the devil, the Church has instituted other official means whose use is reserved to her ministers. These are the various exorcisms.

In private any priest may use the rite of exorcism, but for solemn exorcism it is necessary to verify with certainty the reality of diabolical possession and then obtain the express permission of the bishop for the exorcism. In addition, the exorcist should prepare himself carefully by means of sacramental confession, fasting, and prayer, and then perform the rite in a church or chapel (and only in exceptional circumstances in a private home), in the company of serious and pious witnesses (but only a few), and with sufficient assistants who will be able to control the patient in moments of crisis. The interrogations should be made with authority, but they should be few in number, as is indicated in the *Roman Ritual*. The witnesses will observe silence and remain in prayer but should never interrogate the devil. The sessions should be repeated as often

as is necessary until the devil is cast out. Once this has taken place and the liberation of the patient is verified, the exorcist should petition God to command the devil never again to enter the body he has just left. The exorcist should give thanks to God and exhort the liberated patient to bless God and carefully to avoid sin lest he or she fall again under the domination of the devil.

A person may also come under the power of the devil by reason of the habitual practice of evil or the uncontrolled desire to experience extraordinary mystical phenomena or receive charismatic graces. In the first case a confessor may, unknown to the penitent, apply an abbreviated form of exorcism when giving absolution to habitual sinners. In the second case it is necessary to exercise discernment of spirits when the person claims to have received some special grace or favor from God.

**Signs of the Diabolical Spirit.** We have already enumerated the signs of the divine spirit, but since the devil may disguise himself as a good spirit and even cause what appears to be authentic mystical phenomena, it is helpful to mention briefly the various signs of the diabolical spirit.

1. *Spirit of falsity.* The devil is the father of lies, but he cleverly conceals his deceit by half-truths and pseudo-mystical phenomena.
2. *Morbid curiosity.* This is characteristic of those who eagerly seek out the esoteric aspects of mystical phenomena or have a fascination for the occult or preternatural.
3. *Confusion, anxiety, and deep depression.*
4. *Obstinacy.* One of the surest signs of a diabolical spirit.
5. *Constant indiscretion and a restless spirit.* Those who constantly go to extremes, as in penitential exercises or apostolic activity; or neglect their primary obligations to do some personally chosen work.
6. *Spirit of pride and vanity.* Very anxious to publicize their gifts of grace and mystical experiences.
7. *False humility.* This is the disguise for their pride and self-love.
8. *Despair, lack of confidence, and discouragement.* A chronic characteristic that alternates with presumption, vain security, and un-'founded optimism.
9. *Disobedience and hardness of heart.*
10. *Impatience in suffering and stubborn resentment.*
11. *Uncontrolled passions and strong inclination to sensuality,* usually under the guise of mystical union.
12. *Hypocrisy, simulation, and duplicity.*
13. *Excessive attachment to sensible consolations,* particularly in their practice of prayer.
14. *Lack of deep devotion to Jesus and Mary.*
15. *Scrupulous adherence to the letter of the law and fanatical zeal in promoting a cause.* This characteristic readily opens the door to diabolical influence in reformers and demagogues.

Once the spiritual director is certain that a person is acting under the influence of a diabolical spirit, he should: (1) make the individual realize that he or she is a toy of the devil and must resist his influence; (2) encourage the individual to pray to God for the grace to overcome the devil; (3) advise the person to act quickly and with disdain for the devil as soon as the influence is perceived, performing the opposite from what is suggested or felt.

*The Human Spirit*

The signs of a purely human spirit have been described by Thomas à Kempis in Book 3, Chapter 54 of *The Imitation of Christ*. His words should be pondered carefully, for he explains the struggle between grace and the human spirit, wounded by sin and strongly inclined to self-love.

The human spirit is always inclined to its own satisfactions; it is a friend of pleasure and an enemy of suffering of any kind. It readily inclines to anything that is compatible with its own temperament, its personal tastes and caprices, or the satisfaction of self-love. It will not hear of humiliations, penance, renunciation, or mortification. If any director or confessor goes against its inclinations, he is immediately branded as inept and incompetent. It seeks success, honors, applause, and pastimes. It is always a great promoter of anything that will arouse admiration or notoriety. In a word, the human spirit neither understands nor cares for anything except its own egoism.

It is sometimes difficult in practice to judge whether given manifestations proceed from the devil or from a purely human and egoistic spirit, but it is always relatively easy to distinguish between these two and the spirit of God. It will be possible in most cases, therefore, to determine that a given spirit could not possibly be from God and that it must be combatted, even if one is not sure whether it is in fact from the devil or the human, ego.

The following contrasts may serve as general rules for distinguishing between the diabolical and the human spirit. Natural impulses and inclinations are spontaneous; they can usually be traced to some natural cause or disposition; the stimulation of the senses acts upon, the interior powers, and they often persist in spite of prayer. Diabolical impulse or suggestion, on the other hand, is usually violent and difficult to prevent; it arises unexpectedly or with the slightest provocation; a mental suggestion excites the senses and disappears as a rule with prayer. Self-denial and rectitude of intention are excellent remedies against the spirit of egoism.

In this respect the spiritual director and confessor will do well to keep in mind the general rule for discernment of spirits: if there is a possible natural or diabolical explanation for a given phenomenon, it cannot be presumed that it is supernatural in origin. The following are the principal *doubtful* reasons or situations:

1. To aspire to some other state in life after having made a prudent and deliberate selection for the existing state.
2. To be attracted to rare phenomena or to singular exercises not proper to one's state in life. When God desires such things he will give unmistakable proof of his will; the test is obedience and humility.
3. An inclination to practice extreme corporal penances. God has demanded them of some souls, but this practice is not in the workings of ordinary providence.
4. A desire for sensible consolations in the practice of prayer or the exercise of the virtues.
5. The "gift of tears" or the strong inclination to concentrate on the sorrowful and penitential aspects of religion.
6. Exclusive devotion to some particular mystery or pious exercise, which easily leads to

a distortion of orthodox theology.

7. Extraordinary favors, such as revelations, visions, stigmata, when they occur in a person of little sanctity. The extraordinary graces do not necessarily presuppose sanctity or even the state of grace, but God does not ordinarily grant these gifts except to his servants and friends.

By way of conclusion, we again warn directors and confessors to proceed with great caution in making judgments in matters involving the discernment of spirits. It is easy to make a mistake. In cases of extraordinary phenomena, it should be noted that, as a rule, when these things proceed from God, the soul first experiences great fear and humility and then peace and consolation. If these things come from the devil they often begin with feelings of sensible consolation and satisfaction, but later they cause confusion, anxiety, and restlessness.

Lastly, apropos of the inclination some persons experience to change their state of life (and usually to go to a higher and stricter form of life), the director will bear in mind that it is quite possible that a grace is given by God but without God's wanting the person actually to change one's state in life.

For example, a priest who is actively engaged in the apostolate may experience a strong desire to spend more time in prayer and solitude. In trying to understand the reason for this strong inclination, he may erroneously judge that it is God's will that he enter the Carthusians or the Trappists. Such is not necessarily the case, however, for it may be that the only thing that God is asking of the priest is that he be less involved in the whirlpool of activity and that he dedicate more time each day to prayer and recollection.

We would state the following as a general rule for the solution of such cases: if an individual has prayerfully and seriously selected the state of life in which he or she is, then he or she must present a serious positive cause for changing this state of life. Otherwise, the will of God is the present state of life. Another practical test is to see whether the individual is performing the duties of the present state in life with all fidelity; if not, the person should not even think of changing to another state.

### **Psychosomatic Phenomena**

The foregoing discussion on the divine spirit, the diabolical spirit, and the human spirit serves as a logical introduction to the study of extraordinary phenomena. Any phenomenon of religious experience must be attributed to one of those three causes - God, the devil, or some natural power. There is no other possible explanation.

#### *Natural Causes of Extraordinary Phenomena*

The naturally caused phenomena comprise all those mysterious and paranormal happenings for which we do not as yet have a complete scientific explanation, but there is substantial evidence that they lie within the power of nature (e.g., telepathy, extrasensory perception, and certain phenomena of spiritualism). This subject belongs to the field of parapsychology.

However, in mystical theology we also have to deal with phenomena that have all the appearances of authentic mystical phenomena but are really natural in origin or blended

somehow with the supernatural. We do not know with certainty all that nature is capable of producing, but we can know what nature could never possibly do. In other words, we have as our basic norm the principle of contradiction, which often leaves us with nothing more certain by way of conclusion than mere possibility or evident impossibility. In any event, the following rule must be followed most strictly: *one may not definitely attribute to a supernatural cause that which could possibly have a natural (or diabolical) explanation.* Thus two extremes will be avoided, namely, to see the supernatural or miraculous in every unusual phenomenon or to refuse to recognize anything but the natural in any kind of phenomenon.

The natural causes may be grouped under the following general headings: physiological or constitutional factors, imagination, depressive states, and illnesses, especially mental and nervous disorders.

We should recall the teaching of psychology concerning the intimate relationship and mutual interaction between the soul and the body. Ideas, judgments, volitions can cause profound transformations in a person's somatic structure, for good or evil; the health or sickness of the body can in turn facilitate or obstruct the operations of the spiritual faculties. Moreover, the somatic structure, since it is organic, is so necessitated in its functions that it can react in only a limited number of ways. That is the basic reason why it is *so* difficult to determine whether a particular unusual phenomenon is supernatural or natural in origin (we might say, natural but paranormal). It is also the reason why the theologian, doctor, psychiatrist, or spiritual director must in each instance make a careful and exact examination of the constitutional factors of the individual.

The following *physiological* elements are of special importance in this examination:

1. *Temperament.* Of the four basic temperaments, the melancholic temperament is most prone to illusion in mystical matters. By nature such persons tend to extreme introversion and extravagances of the imagination. Their excessive detachment from their surroundings could easily lead to something similar to ecstasy, and their vivid imaginations could produce what would appear to be supernatural revelations and visions.

The choleric temperament, which is extremely impressionable, may give rise to the same illusions. A sudden and intense stimulation will sometimes cause a kind of hysteria in which the imagination runs riot, and the sense of judgment is completely unbalanced.

Since persons of sanguine temperament are inclined to sensate pleasure and bodily satisfactions, they will more readily be deceived regarding mystical phenomena of the affective order. It is not, difficult to see how such persons would be prone to imagine that they are experiencing mystical touches, divine caresses, or consoling visions and revelations when in a state of religious fervor.

But we must beware of exaggeration in the judgment of such individuals, for although the director will be cautious in dealing with these temperaments, he would be mistaken to conclude that no person of these temperaments could ever experience truly mystical phenomena.

2. *Sexual differences.* Women in general are more easily subject to illusion in mystical

matters because their psychological structure pre-disposes them to a greater interest in religion, the practice of piety, and ardent love. Their somatic structure makes them more passive than active and more sensitive to psychic love and tender feelings. They go to God more easily, but at the same time they can be inconstant, highly imaginative, and sentimental. St. Teresa of Avila has some sound advice on this point. (2)

On the other hand, it must be admitted that in the history of spirituality the women have far outnumbered the men in the reception of extraordinary mystical phenomena, and we would have to admit that the weaker sex is also the more devout sex, because women generally are vastly superior to men in their abnegation and generosity in the service of God.

The *imagination* is one of our most beneficial faculties, and it can also be one of the most harmful. It has the power of evoking past phantasms, of creating new images, of exerting a tremendous influence *on* the intellect and the will. If it escapes from the control of the will, it can be as capricious as the pages of a book that are left to the mercy of the wind.

It is evident that the imagination is often the source of many illusions in the spiritual life. It is not that the imagination as such is in error, for in performing its function of recalling or creating phantasms it does not of itself have the power to say whether the particular phantasms truly exist in the order of reality or are purely fictitious and artificial. The error comes from the judgment of the individual who takes as true that which is merely a phantasy.

In order that spiritual directors may have a handy guide for discernment, they would do well to bear in mind the following principles:

1. The imagination does not create images in the proper sense of the word. It is limited to the recall or arrangement of phantasms already received, and it can contain nothing that was not received from the exterior world of reality. Thus if we encounter a person who spontaneously speaks or reads or writes a language with which he has never had any contact whatever, this feat could not possibly be the result of imagination. We are in the presence of a phenomenon surpassing the natural powers of the imagination; the cause, therefore, must be either supernatural or preternatural.

2. The imagination cannot surpass the laws of nature. Instantaneous cures of organic lesions, fractures, and mutilations cannot in any way be attributed to the imagination. If the cure cannot possibly be explained by the laws of nature, there must be a superior cause at work.

The generic title, *depressive states*, covers a number of natural causes that may lead to illusion in the spiritual life. Sadness is one of the greatest enemies of the human spirit, both in the natural and the supernatural orders. It makes the individual excessively introspective, self-centered, and anxious. This may easily lead to all sorts of illusions, regarding either mystical phenomena or one's associations with others. Since we are concerned only with mystical phenomena, we shall enumerate the three chief causes of depressive states of spirit in this connection:

1. *Excessive intellectual labor* sometimes causes such a detachment from exterior things that a kind of alienation of spirit results. The remarkable detachment and absorption of scientists, artists, and professors are the result of their intense concentration on the matter



at hand. If the suspension of the external powers or the alienation from one's surroundings can be explained naturally, therefore, it may never be identified as a case of mystical alienation or rapture.

2. *Badly regulated mental prayer* may also produce certain effects similar to those experienced by the great contemplative mystics. If the mental prayer is intense and prolonged, the truths of meditation may become so vivid that one takes them for realities of the sensible order, celestial visions, diabolical manifestations. Likewise, intense and exclusive meditation on the Passion could cause sympathetic pains.

3. *Excessive austerities*, which lead to exhaustion of the body and a weakening of the sensitive faculties, may produce all kinds of illusions that are mistakenly attributed to a supernatural cause. Long periods of fasting or corporal penances carried to extremes will so sharpen the activity of the imagination and the memory that the individual readily reaches a point at which the world of dreams and illusions is taken for reality. Moderate fasting is a boon to the functioning of the imagination and memory and the activity of the intellect, but once the body and its organic powers have been weakened, the sense faculties of cognition escape from the control of reason and cast the individual into the world of dream images.

*Illnesses* of certain kinds are also predispositions to illusion in mystical matters, and it is often an area of dispute between doctors and theologians when what has been taken as a truly mystical phenomenon is declared to be the consequence of some bodily or mental illness. Both doctors and theologians should remember that, whereas the external manifestations of nervous and mental illnesses and those of true mystical phenomena may be identical, the causes are utterly distinct, although sometime there may be a strange and perplexing admixture of the two. Consequently, the most that can be relied upon as a rule of discernment in many cases is to judge by the fruits or effects.

Admittedly, it is no easy matter to say whether some of the saints at any time in their lives manifested the symptoms of some kind of illness. Neither is it derogatory of the sanctity of an individual to admit that some of the manifestations of neurosis, psychosis, or diabolism cannot be distinguished from extraordinary mystical phenomena. But the similarity of the external manifestations does not suffice as a basis for concluding that the manifestations in question proceed from the same cause, no more than the external act of virtue authorizes us to conclude that the person in question truly possesses the virtue.

The theologian, physician, and psychiatrist, therefore, will do well to proceed with all caution in these matters and to assist one another with information from their respective fields. It is just as unfounded for the theologian to think that his theological knowledge alone will enable him to discern spirits as it is for the physician or psychiatrist to deny the possibility of supernatural influence in human affairs.

#### *Diabolical Causes of Extraordinary Phenomena*

The study of the preternatural is so vast and complicated that a thorough treatment of the subject would take us far beyond the scope of the present work. We shall content ourselves with an enumeration of the main points of theological doctrine concerning diabolical influence.

1. It is *de fide* that devils exist, that is, a number of angels who were created good by God became evil through their own sin.
2. With God's permission the devils can exercise an evil influence over us, even to the extent of invading and tormenting us in a bodily manner.
3. In the midst of the assaults of the devil, the human will always remains free because the will can be moved only in two ways: by the individual or by God. The most that any other extrinsic power can do is to persuade, and this is what the devils do.
4. The angels and devils can act upon the imagination and other internal and external senses because these are all organic powers, and the devil has power to exercise his influence on anything material.
5. The devils cannot work true miracles because by definition a miracle surpasses the power of all created nature. But since the angelic powers far surpass human powers, the devils can perform prodigious feats that arouse our admiration.

By reason of some contradiction involved or because they surpass the power of an angelic being, the devils cannot do the following:

1. Produce any kind of truly supernatural phenomenon because the supernatural by definition exceeds all natural created powers.
2. Create a substance because creation requires an infinite power, and no creature of any kind can be used even as an instrument of creation.
3. Raise a dead person to life, although they could produce the illusion of doing so.
4. Instantaneously cure wounds, fractures, lesions, etc., because this is something only the Creator can do.
5. Make truly prophetic predictions, since the devil does not by his own powers of intelligence know future contingencies, although he knows so many things in their causes that it may appear to human beings that what was predicted was a true prophecy.
6. Know the secrets of a person's mind and heart, since the devil does not by his own power have access to the human intellect and will. Because of his superior intelligence, however, he can conjecture much more easily and can know the temperament and character of individuals as well as the numerous circumstances of their life.
7. Produce in human beings extraordinary phenomena of the purely intellectual or volitional type because he does not have free access to the human intellect and will.

These are the principal things the devils are unable to do, and they should be kept in mind when evaluating mystical phenomena involving the miraculous, or the activity of the human intellect and will. The following mystical phenomena, however, can be falsified by the devil.

With God's permission the devil can do any of the following:

1. Produce corporeal or imaginative visions (but not intellectual visions).

2. Falsify ecstasy.
3. Produce rays of light in the body and sensible heat. (There have been examples of "diabolical incandescence.")
4. Cause sensible consolations and tenderness.
5. Instantaneously cure sicknesses that have been caused by diabolical influence.
6. Produce the stigmata and all other kinds of bodily extraordinary phenomena, and any phenomena dealing with physical objects, such as crowns, rings, etc.
7. Simulate miracles and the phenomena of levitation, bilocation, and compenetration of bodies.
8. Cause persons or objects to disappear from sight by placing an obstacle in the line of vision or acting directly on the sense of sight; simulate locutions by means of sound waves or immediate action on the sense of hearing; cause a person to speak in tongues.
9. Produce bodily incombustibility by interposing some medium between the fire and the body of the individual.

To summarize: all phenomena resulting from the activity of any natural power or physical law, even if the human being is unable to produce them, can be produced by diabolical power, with God's permission. Whatever the activity of diabolical powers, however, it can never be essentially supernatural.

#### *God as the Cause of Extraordinary Phenomena*

Since the mystical state is essentially constituted by the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and since God is the primary mover in the operation of the gifts, it follows that all truly mystical phenomena must be attributed to God. But the identification of such extraordinary mystical phenomena becomes exceedingly difficult when we consider that the human organism may present identically the same external manifestations as a result of natural or diabolical causes. The reason for this, as we have already stated, is that the psychosomatic structure can react in only a set number of ways, and for that reason the phenomena themselves are not always sure indications of their origin. The most general principle that can be used is that any phenomenon that does not violate any moral law or involve a contradiction could possibly have God as its cause. It frequently happens, therefore, that the most that can be concluded about a given phenomenon is the mere possibility of a truly supernatural cause, and if one arrives only at a possibility, one cannot conclude with certainty that the phenomenon is to be attributed to God.

The phenomena of the spiritual life comprise (1) those internal and external manifestations of religious experience that proceed from an authentic mystical experience (concomitant phenomena) and (2) those extraordinary graces, usually graces gratis datae, that are not essentially related to the mystical state and Christian holiness (charismatic graces, epiphenomena, or simply extraordinary graces).

**Graces "Gratis Datae."** In his first letter to the Corinthians (12:4-6), St. Paul states that there are diverse gifts of God, but that God is one in himself. All that we have received in both the

natural and the supernatural order we have received from God, so that we could speak of all these things as graces *gratis datae*. But theologians reserve the term graces *gratis datae* for a special type of graces called charisms. Unlike the grace *gratum faciens* (habitual or actual graces) a grace *gratis data* has as its immediate purpose not the sanctification of the one who receives it, but the spiritual benefit of others. It is called *gratis data* not only because it is above the natural power of man but also because it is something outside the realm of personal merit. With this distinction in mind, we may list the following conclusions regarding the graces *gratis datae*:

1. The graces *gratis datae* do not form part of the supernatural organism of the Christian life as do sanctifying grace and the infused virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, nor can they be classified under actual grace.
  2. They are what we may call "epiphenomen" of the life of grace and may even be granted to one who lacks sanctifying grace.
  3. They are not and cannot be the object of merit, but are strictly gratuitous.
  4. Since they do not form part of the supernatural organism, they are not contained in the virtualities of sanctifying grace, and hence the normal development of the life of grace could never produce or demand them.
  5. The graces *gratis datae* require in each instance the direct intervention of God.
- <\blockquote>From these conclusions concerning the nature of the graces *gratis datae* we can formulate the following norms to serve as a guide for the spiritual director:

1. It would be temerarious in the normal course of events to desire or to ask God for graces *gratis datae* or charisms. They are not necessary for salvation nor for sanctification, and they require the direct intervention of God. Far more precious is an act of love than a charismatic gift.
2. In the event that God does grant a grace *gratis datae*, it is not a proof that a person is in the state of grace; much less can the gratuitous grace be taken as a sign that the individual is holy.
3. The graces *gratis datae* do not sanctify those who receive them. And if anyone in mortal sin were to receive one of these graces, he or she could possibly remain in a sinful state even after the gratuitous gift of charism had been received.
4. These graces are not given primarily for the benefit of the individual who receives them but for the good of others and for the edification of the Church.
5. Since the graces *gratis datae* are something independent of sanctity, it is not necessary that all the saints should have received them. St. Augustine gives the reason for this when he says that they were not given to all the saints lest weak souls should be deceived into thinking that such extraordinary gifts were more important than the good works that are meritorious of eternal life.[\(3\)](#)

But one should not exaggerate this doctrine. The graces *gratis datae* may indirectly or by

redundance be beneficial to the one who receives them; it depends upon the spirit with which such gifts are accepted. These graces do not necessarily require or prove the state of sanctifying grace in the person who receives them, but it seems that God would not normally bestow such graces on persons in mortal sin.

Most of the ancient theologians accepted the names and classification of the graces *gratis datae* as they were given by St. Paul, but modern theologians and exegetes generally maintain that St. Paul did not intend to give a complete and definitive list, but was referring especially to the charisms God bestows on those who are engaged in the apostolate and ministry of the Church. There are other charisms not enumerated by St. Paul.

**Concomitant Mystical Phenomena.** The concomitant phenomena vary with the degree of intensity of mystical activity and serve as an indication of the soul's progress in the mystical life, although each soul does not necessarily experience all the concomitant phenomena or even all the phenomena proper to a given stage, for mystical activity is the work of God, who can lead souls as he will. Moreover, mystical activity is possible in the life of a person who is not in the mystical state. Theologians commonly agree that mystical activity is essentially an experience of God, passively received and more or less intensely felt through the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And since the gifts of the Holy Spirit pertain to the supernatural organism of the spiritual life, whatever proceeds from the activity of the gifts should be classified as concomitant, ordinary mystical phenomena.

The division of concomitant mystical phenomena given by St. Teresa of Avila (4) has been adopted by most theologians since her time. She lists the mystical phenomena in connection with the various grades of mystical prayer, and the same approach is used by St. John of the Cross (5) and St. Francis de Sales.(6) We described these phenomena when treating the grades of mystical prayer in Chapter 12.

The following are the principal and concomitant mystical phenomena, from the beginning to the end of the mystical state:

1. An intuition of God or divine things, as distinct from discursive knowledge, with a profound penetration of divine mysteries.
2. An experimental knowledge of God or divine things, usually accompanied by spiritual joy, interior absorption in God, disdain for worldly pleasures, and a desire for greater perfection.
3. Passive purification of the senses, which presupposes the active purgations of senses and spirit.
4. Continued awareness of the presence of God, accompanied -by "sleep" or suspension of the faculties, filial fear of God, love of suffering, divine touches, spiritual sensations, flights of the spirit leading to ecstasy, wounds of love, and interior communications.
5. Passive purgation of the spirit.

6. Total death to self, heroism in the practice of virtue, joy in persecution, zeal for the salvation of souls, and relative confirmation in grace.

### **Extraordinary Mystical Phenomena**

This term refers to those extraordinary psychosomatic manifestations that sometimes occur in authentic mystics but do not fall within the normal manifestations of the mystical state. They proceed from a supernatural cause distinct from sanctifying grace, the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore they are classified as, epiphenomena or paranormal manifestations. Like the graces *gratis datae*, they could be given for the good of others or they could be interpreted as a divine witness to the sanctity of the individual for the edification of the Church.

The following are the principal extraordinary phenomena observed in the lives of saints and mystics.[\(7\)](#)

#### *Visions*

A vision is the supernatural perception of an object naturally invisible to man. We say "supernatural" to distinguish true visions from the illusions or hallucinations that proceed from natural causes or the fraudulent visions produced by diabolical power. St. Augustine is the author of the classical division of visions into corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual.

1. A *corporeal* vision is one in which the bodily eyes perceive an object normally invisible. It is also called an apparition. The object of a corporeal vision need not be a concrete object or a true human body; it suffices that it be perceived by the sense of sight. Thus a corporeal vision of the Blessed Virgin does not necessarily mean that Mary herself has appeared in her own body, but it could be a representation of Mary by means of light rays or some vaporous substance.

The apparition may be caused in two ways: (a) by an image impressed on the retina of the eye, thus causing the sensation of vision; (b) by an external object actually present to the perceiver.

2. The *imaginative vision* is the representation of an image supernaturally produced in the imagination. It can be produced in three ways: (a) by the recall of sense impressions already received through the external sense; (b) by a new arrangement of phantasms already acquired and conserved in the imagination; (c) by entirely new phantasms impressed upon the imagination by a supernatural power. This type of vision is usually accompanied by an alienation of the external senses so that the visionary does not confuse the vision with that which is perceived through the external senses.

3. The *intellectual vision* is a simple intuitive knowledge super, naturally effected without the aid of any sensible image or impressed species in the internal or external senses. As a rule, the object of the intellectual vision is something that

surpasses the natural powers of the intellect, although this is not necessarily the case. The impression may last for hours or days or even months, whereas the lower types of vision are usually of short duration. It produces marvelous effects in the soul, such as great light, peace, a desire for heavenly things. It may occur during sleep, during ecstasy or when a person is awake, but only God can cause it. One of the outstanding characteristics of the intellectual vision is the certitude it imparts to be visionary.

The object of a supernatural vision may be anything at all that exists: God, Christ, Mary, the blessed, angels, devils, the souls in purgatory -- any living being, or even an inanimate object. According to the teaching of St. Thomas and of theologians generally, the apparitions of Christ and Mary are not produced by their bodily presence but are merely representative visions. The apparitions representing the divinity should usually be considered to be, as St. Teresa states, "some kind of representation."<sup>(8)</sup> They are not to be presumed, therefore, to be intuitive visions of the divine essence, for this is reserved for the state of glory.

There is no great difficulty in explaining the apparitions of angels or demons. These are pure spirits, and a spirit is where it acts.. Moreover, a spirit has the power, with God's permission, of assuming some material substance with which to represent itself even to the bodily eye, whether that substance is a body or light rays or some kind of cloud or vapor. If the souls of the dead (whether blessed, in purgatory, or in hell) were to appear in bodily form, the explanation would be the same as that given for angelic apparitions, since the separated souls are pure spirits, and the bodies they once possessed are now reduced to dust. As to the apparition of persons still living on earth or of inanimate objects, we are faced with an apparent bilocation, and therefore we shall treat of the matter under that heading. But a living person could also be represented by means of an angelic or diabolical power.

As for the discernment of judgment of visions, the intellectual vision is the easiest to detect, although the spiritual director has nothing more for a basis of judgment than the certitude and conviction experienced by the visionary that the vision was from God. Since the intellect cannot be acted upon immediately by the devil, an intellectual vision could never be caused by diabolical power. The greatest difficulty lies in the discernment and verification of the imaginative and corporeal visions. Here there is always the possibility of diabolical influence or one's own imagination, and sometimes the only criterion is to judge by the fruits or effects caused by the visions in the visionary. At first the visions that come from God cause fear in the soul, and this later gives place to love, humility, and peace. The soul's energies are increased, and it gives itself more generously to the practices of virtue. Visions that are diabolical in origin begin with sweetness and peace but soon fill the soul with turbulence, presumption, and pride, Visions caused by one's own imagination lead to vanity, curiosity, superficial virtue, and contradiction in the descriptive account of the experience.

### *Locutions*

Although it frequently happens that visions are accompanied by locutions, it is possible for either to occur without the other. A locution is an affirmation or statement

supernaturally effected. Like visions, it admits of three types: auricular, imaginative, and intellectual.

1. *Auricular* locutions are words perceived by the bodily sense of hearing by reason of acoustical vibrations. In themselves they may be produced by God, by angels, or by demons. They may also be produced by natural causes, whether physical or psychic. They sometimes seem to proceed from a bodily vision, the Blessed Sacrament, a religious image such as a crucifix, or some other article that is used as an instrument.

2. *Imaginative* locutions are words perceived in the imagination and may occur either during sleep or in waking hours. They may proceed from God, the devil, or natural causes. The best rule of discernment is the effects produced in the soul. If they are from God, they cause humility, fervor, desire for self-immolation, obedience, desire to perform perfectly one's duties of state. If they proceed from the devil, they cause dryness, inquietude, insubordination, etc. The ones that proceed from the individual do not usually produce any noteworthy effects.

3. *Intellectual* locutions are words perceived directly by the intellect, and the activity is similar to that by which angels would communicate ideas to each other. Two elements concur in this type of locution: the preexisting or infused intelligible species and the supernatural light that illumines and clarifies them. It is beyond the power of the devil to produce a truly intellectual locution, for he cannot operate on the human intellect directly. St. John of the Cross divides the intellectual locutions into three types: successive, formal, and substantial.<sup>(9)</sup>

(a) At first glance the successive locutions would seem to be a human dialogue because, as St. John of the Cross points out, the individual seems to be formulating ideas and reasoning things out. But in reality they come from the Holy Spirit who aids the soul to produce and form its concepts; thus it is an activity in which both the soul and the Holy Spirit play a part. These locutions are called successive because they are not the result of an instantaneous and intuitive enlightenment. On the contrary, God instructs the soul through successive reasonings. Because it is an intellectual locution, there cannot be any error in substance or principle; if there is error, it is the result of the operation of the human intellect. There may be, however, certain illusions or deceptions as a result of the activity of the imagination.

(b) The *formal* locutions are perceived by the intellect as evidently coming from another. The human intellect contributes nothing of itself; therefore, they may come upon the soul whether it is recollected or distracted or engaged in some other occupation. The soul cannot help receiving these locutions, and it always understands them clearly. If the locutions pertain to future events, they are always fulfilled, although the individual should be cautious and fearful of deception by the devil. The devil cannot act directly on the human intellect, but he may act on the imagination and thereby attempt to deceive or mislead the soul.



(c) The *substantial* locutions are basically the same as the formal locutions but with this difference: that which is stated in the locution is effected immediately. For example, if God says to the soul, "Be humble," it at once feels the inclination to prostrate itself before his Divine Majesty; if he says, "Peace be with you," the soul is immediately calm and tranquil. There is no room for error or deception in the substantial locutions because they are similar to the creative words of God, such as "Let there be light." The effects so far surpass human and diabolical power that there can be no doubt as to their supernatural origin. The soul at this point needs only to leave itself in the hands of God, whose words are works, as St. Teresa says.

### *Revelations*

Revelation is the supernatural manifestation of a hidden truth or divine secret for the general good of the Church or the benefit of some individual. The veil that hides the secret of hidden truth may be removed supernaturally by means of a vision, a locution, or a prophetic instinct. All divine revelation presupposes the gift of prophecy, and its interpretation requires the discernment of spirits.

It is commonly taught in theology that public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle. All revelations made since that time are classed as private revelations, even if they pertain to matters that are spiritually beneficial to the Church in general.

Authors of spiritual theology usually divide private revelations into *absolute*, *conditioned*, and *denunciatory* revelations, depending upon whether the revelation is a simple statement of a truth or mystery, a conditioned statement, or a threat of punishment. The denunciatory revelation may also be conditioned, as in the case of the prophecy of Jonas concerning the destruction of Nineveh. If revelations refer to the future they are ordinarily called *prophecy*, although prophecy as such abstracts from time and place.

There have always been persons gifted with prophecy, as is testified by Scripture and the processes of canonization of the servants of God. Nevertheless, private revelations do not pertain to the deposit of faith, which consists of the truths contained in Scripture and Tradition under the vigilance of the Church. Yet if, after a prudent judgment, it is determined that a given revelation is authentic, the one who has received the revelation should accept it in the spirit of faith. It is disputed among the theologians whether this act of faith is an act of divine faith; it seems to us that it is.

Moreover, if a private revelation contains a message for others and it has been accepted as an authentic revelation, those persons also have an obligation to accept the truth of the revelation and act upon it. For all others, however, nothing more is required than a pious belief, even when the Church has given her negative approval to a revelation by stating that there is nothing contained in it that is contrary to faith and morals. In approving a private revelation the Church does not intend to guarantee the authenticity of the revelation; she simply examines the content of the revelation and states whether or not the faithful may accept it without danger to faith or morals. It would be reprehensible,

nevertheless, if one were to contradict or ridicule a private revelation after the Church had given this negative approbation.

It sometimes happens that an individual who has received an authentic revelation does not report the revelation accurately, and this may be due to several reasons. If the revelation is extended to other matters closely related but not actually revealed, the revelation has been falsified. It may also happen that, if an individual has been preoccupied with some theological question or already has an extensive knowledge of the matter in the revelation, he or she may unwittingly add to or alter the revelation. When there is a mixture of the human and the divine, it becomes extremely difficult to discern one from the other. At other times the alteration of the revelation may be due to scribes, editors, translators. Another difficulty lies in the interpretation of private revelations, even when they have been transmitted accurately. Moreover, when it falls to others to interpret revelations and they themselves are not the recipients, God does not necessarily give the required light to these persons, or he may deliberately let them fall into error as a punishment.

The following norms are offered as guides for the spiritual director in the discernment of spirits so far as they pertain to revelations and prophecies:

1. Any revelation contrary to dogma or morals must be rejected as false. God does not contradict himself.
2. Any revelation contrary to the common teaching of theologians or purporting to settle an argument among the schools of theology is gravely suspect.
3. If some detail or other in a revelation is false, it is not necessary to reject the entire revelation; the remainder may be authentic.
4. The fact that a prophecy is fulfilled is not of itself a conclusive proof that the revelation was from God; it could have been the mere unfolding of natural causes or the result of a superior natural knowledge on the part of the seer.
5. Revelations concerning merely curious or useless matters should be rejected as not divine. The same is to be said of those that are detailed, lengthy, and filled with a superfluity of proofs and reasons. Divine revelations are generally brief, clear, and precise.
6. The person who receives the revelation should be examined carefully, especially as to temperament and character. If the person is humble, well balanced, discreet, evidently advanced in virtue, and enjoys good mental and physical health, there is good reason to proceed further and to examine the revelation itself. But if the individual is exhausted with excessive mortifications, suffers nervous affliction, is subject to periods of great exhaustion or great depression, or is eager to divulge the revelation, there is cause for serious doubt.

### *Reading of Hearts*

This phenomenon consists in a knowledge of the secrets of hearts, supernaturally

communicated by God. The grace is given not only for the good of others but also sometimes for the spiritual benefit of the recipient. It has nothing to do with the natural dispositions of the individual nor the grade of holiness attained by the individual.

The certain and infallible knowledge of the secrets of hearts is completely supernatural and cannot in any way be attained by human nature or the devil. The reason for this is that the human intellect and will are not accessible to any other human being or any angelic power; God and the individual alone have free access to the secrets of one's own heart. It is not at all impossible, however, to possess a conjectural knowledge concerning the secrets of hearts, but this would not surpass the powers of created nature. Thus certain gifted persons of experience are able to observe and rightly interpret the facial expressions, gestures, and attitudes of others to such an extent that they seem to possess a clear and certain knowledge of matters that would normally be beyond the power of the average human being.

If this sort of insight is possible to humans, with all the more reason would it be possible to devils or angels, whose intellects are far superior to our own. But this type of knowledge, however astounding, is not to be considered as a true reading of hearts.

#### *Hierognosis*

This phenomenon refers to the ability to recognize immediately any person, place, or thing that is holy, blessed or consecrated, and to distinguish it from those things that are not.

Hierognosis transcends the powers of nature and cannot be explained naturally or preternaturally. There is no way in which one could distinguish a blessed or consecrated article from those that are not holy objects. But it should be noted that, whereas many mystics have manifested an almost magnetic attraction for holy objects, the devil or those under his power have manifested the greatest revulsion or horror when any blessed article is brought near them.

#### *Flames of Love*

This phenomenon is usually regarded as a manifestation of the mystic's intense love of God. It consists of a burning sensation in the body or even the scorching of the clothing, especially in the vicinity of the heart. It admits of three grades or degrees: (1) *simple interior heat* -- an extraordinary heat perceived in the area of the heart and sometimes spreading throughout the entire body; (2) *intense ardor* the heat reaches such an intensity that cold applications must be used to assuage the burning sensation; (3) *material burning* -- the heat reaches such a point of intensity that, the mystic's clothing is scorched.

There is no doubt that the explanation of this phenomenon offers difficulties, and yet it should be understood that the first and second degree could result from natural causes, and that all three degrees, with God's permission, could be caused by diabolical power.

#### *Stigmata*

The stigmata is the spontaneous appearance in the body of wounds resembling the

wounds of Christ crucified. They usually appear in the hands, feet, and side, though sometimes there are also wounds in the head, as from a crown of thorns, and wounds over the entire surface of the body, resembling the wounds of the scourging. The wounds may be visible or invisible, permanent or periodic, and transitory, simultaneous, or successive. It almost always occurs in ecstasies and is often preceded by physical and moral suffering. Tanquerey states that the absence of such suffering would be an unfavorable symptom because in a true mystic the stigmata is a sign of union with the crucified Christ and a participation in his sufferings.<sup>(10)</sup> The first ecstatic to be recognized as such in the history of spirituality is St. Francis of Assisi, who received the stigmata on Mount Alverno on September 17, 1224. It is possible that there were other stigmatics before the time of St. Francis, and it is certain that there have been many since his time.

The question arises as to whether or not St. Paul suffered the stigmata, because of his statement in his Epistle to the Galatians (6:17) that he bore the stigmata of Christ. According to Père Lagrange, the word stigmata, as used by St. Paul, signifies that he bore the marks of the sufferings that he had endured for the sake of Christ. Hence all the authors begin the list of stigmatics with the name of St. Francis and omit St. Paul entirely.<sup>(11)</sup>

Two extremes must be avoided in attempting to evaluate the stigmata: to assign too readily a supernatural cause for every such visible manifestation, and to see every such phenomenon as a purely psychosomatic disorder. The Church has accepted relatively few cases of stigmatization as authentic and has always demanded more proof than the mere appearance of visible signs in the body. There is historical evidence that certain Muslims, yogis, and Brahmanists have produced marks on the body by autosuggestion. There is also clinical proof that a German by the name of Arthur Otto Mook, a non-practicing Protestant, bore all the wounds of the stigmata. His condition was kept secret for several years but was finally made public in 1949.

Modern psychiatrists would surely admit that the human imagination is powerful enough to produce pains and wounds in the body. After World War II there were many examples of men who suffered from physical wounds that were not inflicted in battle but were the result of their own imagination and powers of concentration; men who willed not to be cured' so that they would not have to return to battle; men who suffered the sympathetic pains of wounds they had witnessed in their comrades. It would seem, therefore, that, if a person willed to suffer the passion of Christ and had a vivid imagination and strong powers of concentration, he or she could produce bodily wounds by autosuggestion or self-hypnosis.

But we find in the history of authentic stigmatics that they were often taken by surprise by the stigmata, that they sought to conceal it, and they asked God to remove the visible signs. The true stigmatization in a mystic must proceed from a supernatural cause.

Granted the difficulty in discerning the true cause of a stigmata, the following norms may serve as a guide for distinguishing between true and apparent mystical stigmatization:

1. The marks of the true stigmata are usually located in the places in which tradition places the five wounds suffered by Christ; pathological wounds are not

uniformly localized.

2. Usually the wounds of the true stigmata bleed on the days or at times when the passion of Christ is commemorated; not so with the pathological.
3. The true stigmata never suppurates, and the blood is always clean and pure; nor can the wounds be healed by natural medication.
4. The flow of blood is so great at times that it cannot be explained naturally.
5. The stigmata is usually found in persons who practice the virtues to a heroic degree and have a tender love of Christ in his passion, and it usually occurs during periods of ecstasy or prayer.
6. The appearance of the true stigmata is usually instantaneous, whereas in pathological cases it often appears gradually.

But is it not possible that the stigmata could be caused by the devil? The devil, with God's permission, could produce the marks of the stigmata, for he can act upon man's body and external senses. He could also be responsible for the stigmata produced by the imagination, for he can have access to that faculty if God allows. He could also prompt an individual to simulate the stigmata. Here, as in all the phenomena, we repeat again the basic norm for spiritual directors: if a person claims to have received the stigmata from God and even shows the signs of the wounds in hands and feet and side, and if at the same time that person does not give evidence of a high degree of virtue in the performance of the duties of state in life, then that person is to be judged a fraud or the victim of illusion.

#### *Tears of Blood and Bloody Sweat*

As the names imply, these two phenomena consist in an effusion of blood from the pores of the skin, especially on the face and forehead, or a bloody effusion from the eyes after the manner of tears.

There are cases in medical history of the bloody sweat, called in medicine hematidrosis. Many theories have been proposed in the attempt to give a medical explanation, ranging from hemophilia to the imagination and the organic effects of fear and courage. Whatever the medical explanation, it must be admitted that the bloody sweat can be caused by natural or diabolical powers. It would seem prudent to work on the presumption that these phenomena of the blood have a natural explanation in a particular case.

#### *Exchange of Hearts*

From all appearances this phenomenon consists in the extraction of the heart of the mystic and the substitution of another, presumably the heart of Christ. After the phenomenon occurs, the mystic often bears a wound and then a scar over the place in which the substitution of hearts was made.

How can this phenomenon be explained? It can hardly be doubted to have occurred, granted the testimony that is given in the lives of so many of the saints. The only

plausible explanation is that it is strictly miraculous. The difficulty revolves around the apparent substitution of the heart of Christ for the heart of a human being. Pope Benedict XIV gave the most plausible theological explanation when he stated in his eulogy on St. Michael de los Santos that the exchange of hearts was a mystical and spiritual exchange.

### *Inedia*

This phenomenon consists in the total abstinence from nourishment for a length of time beyond the natural powers. It is medically certain that the human body cannot exist beyond a certain period without nourishment. Although there are some cases in medical history in which individuals have existed for almost eighty days without any solid food, but only liquids, the point would be reached at which no human being could survive. How, then, can one explain the phenomenon in the lives of some saints who lived for months or entire years without food? Not only did they not lose weight, but they also manifested great energy, mental balance, and astounding activity.

It should be noted that the Church has never used inedia as a sole rule for the canonization of a saint. There is always the possibility here of diabolical intervention or the action of some unknown power and law of nature. But if it can ever be sufficiently verified that the inedia is of supernatural origin, it must be considered a suspension of the natural law and a presage, as it were, of the glorified body.

### *Prolonged Absence of Sleep*

It is recorded of some saints that they had no sleep for long periods of time, or that they lived on scarcely any sleep at all. This phenomenon surpasses the natural order, for sleep is one of the body needs without which the individual cannot survive. The organism must repair its strength if life is to be preserved. One may reduce oneself to an absolute minimum in this regard, but one cannot exclude rest entirely. The rest may be obtained by actual sleep, or by relaxation and inactivity of the body, or even during a mystical ecstasy in which all the faculties are suspended.

Hence while it may be admitted that in some cases of absence of sleep there may have been a miracle involved, it is also possible that sufficient rest was gained in certain periods so that the body was able to survive. We do not intend to assume a purely rationalistic attitude in this matter, but merely to avoid multiplying miracles without sufficient reason.

### *Agility*

This phenomenon consists in the apparently instantaneous transfer or movement of a material body without seeming to pass through the intervening space. Many instances are recorded in the lives of the saints. So far as is known at the present time, the phenomenon surpasses the powers of nature and would have to be attributed to a supernatural or preternatural cause. If it were caused by the devil, it would be only apparently instantaneous, for although he has the agility of a spirit, if he were to transport a physical body, it would have to pass through the intervening space, even if the speed of the movement were faster than the human eye could detect.

If the agility were the result of a supernatural power, it would either be through the instrumentality of an angel (and then the same explanation would prevail as in the case of a diabolical power), or else God could give to the individual person the power to move with the rapidity of light or electricity. In the latter case the phenomenon would be something of an anticipated agility of the glorified body. As such it would be strictly miraculous.

### *Bilocation*

This is one of the most stupendous of all the extraordinary mystical phenomena, and one of the most difficult to explain. It consists in the apparently simultaneous presence of a physical body in two distinct places at the same time. It is philosophically repugnant that a material body should be in two distinct places at the same time by a circumscriptive presence. Although this statement is denied by some philosophers and theologians, we maintain that the circumscriptive presence of a material body in two distinct places is a contradiction in terms. Hence it could not even be effected by a miracle.

If, therefore, it appears that a body is in two distinct places at the same time, the true and physical body is present in one of the places, and in the other place it is only apparently present by means of a representation of some kind. Such a representation could be produced supernaturally, preternaturally, or naturally.

In case of a bilocation supernaturally caused, the person is physically present in one place and miraculously represented by a sensible representation in the other term of the bilocation. The representation could be effected in any of the ways in which a vision or an apparition could be effected, e.g., a true physical body in the likeness of St. Martin assumed by an angel, or a spiritual apparition after the manner of an intellectual, imaginative, or corporeal vision. In the latter case the phenomenon of bilocation would be reduced to the phenomenon of a vision.

If the phenomenon of apparent bilocation is effected through diabolical power, with God's permission, it is merely a case of the devil using light rays, vapor, or a material substance to simulate the physical body of the person involved. There is no difficulty in affirming this, since the devil has power to make use of material substances.

Is it at all possible that by some natural power as yet unknown a given person could project, as it were, a phantasm or representation of himself to another place? Or is it possible that through some type of telepathy certain persons could see an individual in a distant place while the person remains in another location? We must confess that as yet there is nothing scientifically certain, but we should not close the door on a possible natural explanation, especially in view of the great strides that have been made in recent years in parapsychology.

### *Levitation*

As its name indicates, this phenomenon refers to the suspension of a material body in the air without any visible support, in opposition to the law of gravity. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon in the lives of the saints. Generally the levitation occurs during ecstasy, which admits of various types: if the elevation is slight, ascensional

ecstasy; if the elevation is great, ecstatic flight; if there is a rapid movement or gliding above the earth, ecstatic march. In the case of Venerable Mary of Agreda, her body seemed to lose all weight during levitation, so that if one breathed on it, it moved like a feather in the breeze.

When truly supernatural, levitation is a kind of anticipated participation in the agility of a glorified body. Nevertheless, this phenomenon can easily be falsified, as we suspect has often occurred in spiritualistic seances. There are also authentic case histories in pathology in which there has been an apparent levitation, as in certain instances of hysterical seizures. Although the devil cannot work a true miracle, it is possible for him, with God's permission, to make use of invisible powers in order to suspend a material body in the air or to cause it to levitate and move above the earth. Lastly, there are those who claim they have been able to levitate by their own power.

### *Penetration of Bodies*

The phenomenon whereby one material body apparently passes through another material body is recorded of Christ after his Resurrection (John 19:20-26) and of some saints.

Theologians commonly state that compenetration of bodies is effected miraculously by God as an anticipated participation in the subtlety of a glorified body. And since this phenomenon involves a miracle, it could never be produced naturally or preternaturally. As in the case of bilocation, however, it would be more prudent to suspend judgment in the light of modern scientific investigations concerning the nature and properties of the quantity and dimensions of physical bodies.

### *Mystical Aureoles*

This phenomenon consists in the resplendent light that irradiates at times from the bodies of mystics, especially during contemplation or ecstasy. There are countless cases recorded. It is considered by some authors to be an anticipation of the radiant splendor of the glorified body.

Illumination and phosphorescence have been witnessed in certain plants, and insects and minerals as well as in the bodies of persons during spiritualistic seances. One of the noteworthy differences between the truly mystical aureole and the luminosity of the spiritualists is that the former seems to radiate from the body of the mystic, whereas the latter appears above or around the body. It is also possible for the devil to produce such rays of light, since it is something that is basically material.

### *Sweet Odor*

This is a phenomenon in which the body or tomb of a saint emits a sweet odor. Frequently it is an odor that cannot be compared to any known perfume.

Pope Benedict XIV declared that, whereas it may happen that a given body may not smell bad, it is not likely that a human body will smell sweet, and especially when it is dead, whether corrupt or not. Hence any sweet perfume that proceeds from it would have to be produced by supernatural powers and be classified as miraculous. But it could be caused



by diabolical power, since the devil has power to act upon the external senses.

### *Incombustibility*

It has been recorded of numerous saints that their bodies or some material object connected with them would not burn when placed in or over the flames of a fire. In general, the incombustibility of bodies may be truly supernatural, preternatural, or due perhaps to some unknown power of nature possessed by certain individuals. Cases of spiritualism abound in which persons were able to hold in their hands red-hot coals and even put them on the top of their heads or on those of others without being burned or the hair being singed. While it is true that many of the incidents in the lives of holy persons are obviously miraculous and must therefore be attributed to the direct intervention of God, the question in general must remain open.

### *Bodily Elongation*

This phenomenon has been witnessed not only in the lives of a few saints but also in certain spiritualists. Although in the latter case one must suspect trickery or diabolical intervention, if it occurs in the life of a mystic there is always a question as to its purpose. The fact remains that in these cases the body or limb of the individual has visibly elongated to proportions far beyond the normal. It is another strange phenomenon we prefer to leave as an open question until more detailed studies have been made.

### *Other Phenomena*

Other phenomena are well attested in the history of the saints. Incorruptibility of the body is a relatively common phenomenon in hagiography. The bodies of these persons were found to be either temporarily or permanently incorrupt.

The absence of rigor mortis has been verified in some instances. Medical authorities have stated that rigor mortis is absolutely certain to set in sooner or later, although there may be a variation of a few hours one way or the other. In view of this, the phenomenon of the complete absence of any rigidity in the bodies of the deceased saints offers a curious problem. It could be from a supernatural or a preternatural cause, and perhaps in some instances there may possibly be a natural explanation. But the phenomenon itself is not sufficient as proof of sanctity.

Many of the accounts of corpses shedding blood are of ancient origin. The blood prodigy of St. Januarius is a special case and is known to all.

What is to be said about these various prodigies relating to corpses? The truth of the matter is that very little can be said definitively.

Granted that any one of them could possibly be supernatural in origin because of a divine intervention, or that any of them could, with God's permission, be the work of the devil, it is much more scientific and prudent to withhold judgment in most instances. Possibly in some future day scientists will be able to give a natural explanation for many of these strange occurrences, which in many cases seem to have no purpose from a spiritual point of view.

In discussing the extraordinary phenomena in particular, we have tried to avoid any premature judgments but have attempted to hold fast to the principle that no phenomenon should be attributed to a superior cause if it can be explained by an inferior one. We have not listed each and every phenomenon; for that we refer the reader to the more detailed studies in books that treat specifically of occult phenomena. Neither have we given a definitive judgment in each instance, for we believe it much wiser to leave a question open when there is still room for doubt or hope of a natural explanation at some future date. Nevertheless, there are more than sufficient extraordinary and truly miraculous phenomena on record to show us that God is truly glorified in his saints.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Cf. St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Stanza 3.

*The Book of Foundations*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), Chap. 8.

Cf. St. Augustine, *De divers. quaest.*, 83, q. 79.

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Mansions 4 to 7.

Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chaps. 10-31.

See *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. B. Mackey (New York: Doubleday, 1942), Chaps. 6-7.

For further study, see Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (New York: Hawthorn, 1952); Zolt Aradi, *The Book of Miracles* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian, 1960); Alois Wiesinger, *Occult Phenomena* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957); J. Maréchal, *Studies in the Psychology of Mysticism* (New York: Benziger, 1928); A. Farges, *Mystical Phenomena Compared with their Human and Diabolical Counterparts* (London: Bums, Oates & Washbourne, 1926).

Cf. *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 1.

Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chaps. 28-31.

Cf. A. Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, trans. H. Brandeis (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1948), p. 714.

Cf. M. J. Lagrange, *Epître aux Galates*, c. 6, v. 17.