

Chapter I

HOW TO SELECT THAT WHICH WE SHOULD
CHIEFLY PRACTICE

The queen bee never takes wing without being surrounded by all her subjects; even so Love never enters the heart, but it is sure to bring all other virtues in its train; marshaling and employing them as a captain his soldiers; yet, nevertheless, Love does not set them all to work suddenly, or equally at all times and everywhere. The righteous man is "like a tree planted by the water side, that will bring forth his fruit in due season";¹ inasmuch as Love, watering and refreshing the soul, causes it to bring forth good works, each in season as required. There is an old proverb to the effect that the sweetest music is unwelcome at a time of mourning; and certain persons have made a great mistake when, seeking to cultivate some special virtue, they attempt to obtrude it on all occasions, like the ancient philosophers we read of, who were always laughing or weeping. Worse still if they take upon themselves to censure those who do not make a continual study of this their pet virtue. St. Paul tells us to "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep";² and Charity is patient, kind, liberal, prudent, indulgent.

At the same time, there are virtues of universal account, which must not only be called into occasional action, but ought to spread their influence over everything. We do not very often come across opportunities for exercising strength, magnanimity, or magnificence; but gentleness, temperance, modesty, and humility are graces which ought to color everything we do. There may be virtues of a more exalted mold, but at all events these are the most continually called for in daily life. Sugar is better than salt, but we use salt more generally and oftener. Consequently, it is well to

¹Ps. 1:3.

²Rom 12:15.

have a good and ready stock in hand of those general virtues of which we stand in so perpetual a need.

In practicing any virtue, it is well to choose that which is most according to our duty, rather than most according to our taste. It was St. Paula's liking to practice bodily mortifications with a view to the keener enjoyment of spiritual sweetness, but obedience to her superiors was a higher duty; and therefore St. Jerome acknowledges that she was wrong in practicing excessive abstinence contrary to the advice of her Bishop. And the Apostles, whose mission it was to preach the Gospel, and feed souls with the Bread of Life, judged well that it was not right for them to hinder this holy work in order to minister to the material wants of the poor, weighty as that work was also.³ Every calling stands in special need of some special virtue; those required of a Prelate, a Prince, or a soldier are quite different; so are those beseeing a wife or a widow, and although all should possess every virtue, yet all are not called upon to exercise them equally, but each should cultivate chiefly those which are important to the manner of life to which he is called.

Among such virtues as have no special adaptation to our own calling, choose the most excellent, not the most showy. A comet generally looks larger than the stars, and fills the eye more; but all the while comets are not nearly so important as the stars, and only seem so large to us because they are nearer to us than stars, and are of a grosser kind. So there are certain virtues which touch us very sensibly and are very material, so to say, and therefore ordinary people give them the preference. Thus the common run of men ordinarily value temporal almsgiving more than spiritual; and think more of fasting, exterior discipline, and bodily mortification than of meekness, cheerfulness, modesty, and other interior mortifications, which nevertheless are far better. Do you then, my daughter, choose the best virtues, not those which are most highly esteemed; the most excellent, not the most visible; the truest, not the most conspicuous.

It is well for everybody to select some special virtue at which to aim, not as neglecting any others, but as an object and pursuit to

³Acts 6:2.

the mind. St. John, Bishop of Alexandria, saw a vision of a lovely maiden, brighter than the sun, in shining garments, and wearing an olive crown, who said to him, "I am the King's eldest daughter, and if thou wilt have me for thy friend, I will bring thee to see His Face." Then he knew that it was pity for the poor which God thus commended to him, and from that time he gave himself so heartily to practice it, that he is universally known as St. John the Almoner.

Eulogius Alexandrinus desired to devote himself wholly to God, but he had not courage either to adopt the solitary life, or to put himself under obedience, and therefore he took a miserable beggar, seething in dirt and leprosy, to live with him; and to do this more thoroughly, he vowed to honor and serve him as a servant does his lord and master. After a while, both feeling greatly tempted to part company, they referred to the great St. Anthony, who said, "Beware of separating, my sons, for you are both near your end, and if the Angel find you not together, you will be in danger of losing your crowns."

St. Louis counted it a privilege to visit the hospitals, where he used to tend the sick with his own royal hands. St. Francis loved poverty above all things, and called her his ladylove. St. Dominic gave himself up to preaching, whence his Order takes its name.⁴ St. Gregory the Great specially delighted to receive pilgrims after the manner of faithful Abraham, and like him entertained the King of Glory under a pilgrim's garb. Tobit devoted himself to the charitable work of burying the dead. St. Elizabeth, albeit a mighty princess, loved above all things to humble herself. When St. Catherine of Genoa became a widow, she gave herself up to work in a hospital.

Cassian relates how a certain devout maiden once besought St. Athanasius to help her in cultivating the grace of patience; and he gave her a poor widow as companion, who was cross, irritable, and altogether intolerable, and whose perpetual fretfulness gave the pious lady abundant opportunity of practicing gentleness and patience. And so some of God's servants devote themselves to nursing the sick, helping the poor, teaching little children in the

⁴The Preaching Friars.

faith, reclaiming the fallen, building churches, and adorning the altar, making peace among men. Therein they resemble embroidresses who work all manner of silks, golds, and silver on various grounds, so producing beautiful flowers. Just so the pious souls who undertake some special devout practice use it as the ground of their spiritual embroidery, and frame all manner of other graces upon it, ordering their actions and affections better by means of this their chief thread which runs through all.

"Upon Thy Right Hand did stand the Queen in a vesture of gold wrought about with divers colors."⁵

When we are beset by any particular vice, it is well as far as possible to make the opposite virtue our special aim, and turn everything to that account; so doing, we shall overcome our Enemy, and meanwhile make progress in all virtue. Thus, if I am beset with pride or anger, I must above all else strive to cultivate humility and gentleness, and I must turn all my religious exercises—prayer, sacraments, prudence, constancy, moderation—to the same object. The wild boar sharpens its tusks by grinding them against its other teeth, which by the same process are sharpened and pointed; and so when a good man endeavors to perfect himself in some virtue which he is conscious of specially needing, he ought to give it edge and point by the aid of other virtues, which will themselves be confirmed and strengthened as he uses them with that object. It was so with Job, who, while specially exercising the virtue of patience amid the numberless temptations which beset him, was confirmed in all manner of holiness and godly virtues. And St. Gregory Nazianzen says that sometimes a person has attained the height of goodness by one single act of virtue, performed with the greatest perfection; instancing Rahab as an example, who, having practiced the virtue of hospitality very excellently, reached a high point of glory.⁶ Of course, any such action must needs be performed with a very exceeding degree of fervor and charity.

⁵Ps. 44:10, 14, 15. "*En Son beau vestement de drap d'or récamé, Et d'ouvrages divers à l'aiguille semé.*"

⁶St. Francis evidently alludes here to the mention made of Rahab by St. Paul (Heb. 11:31).

Chapter II

THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED

St. Augustine says very admirably that beginners in devotion are wont to commit certain faults which, while they are blameworthy according to the strict laws of perfection, are yet praiseworthy by reason of the promise they hold forth of a future excellent goodness, to which they actually tend. For instance, that common shrinking fear which gives rise to an excessive scrupulosity in the souls of some who are but just set free from a course of sin, is commendable at that early stage, and is the almost certain forerunner of future purity of conscience. But this same fear would be blameworthy in those who are further advanced, because love should reign in their hearts, and love is sure to drive away all such servile fear by degrees.

In his early days, St. Bernard was very severe and harsh toward those whom he directed, telling them, to begin with, that they must put aside the body, and come to him with their minds only. In Confession, he treated all faults, however small, with extreme severity, and his poor apprentices in the study of perfection were so urged onwards, that by dint of pressing he kept them back, for they lost heart and breath when they found themselves thus driven up so steep and high an ascent. Therein, my daughter, you can see that, although it was his ardent zeal for the most perfect purity which led that great Saint so to act, and although such zeal is a great virtue, still it was a virtue which required checking. And so God Himself checked it in a vision, by which He filled St. Bernard with so gentle, tender, and loving a spirit that he was altogether changed, blaming himself heavily for having been so strict and so severe, and becoming so kindly and indulgent, that he made himself all things to all men in order to win all.

St. Jerome tells us that his beloved daughter, St. Paula, was not only extreme, but obstinate in practicing bodily mortifications, and refusing to yield to the advice given her upon that head by her Bishop, St. Epiphanius; and furthermore, she gave way so excessively to her grief at the death of those she loved as to peril her own life. Whereupon St. Jerome says: "It will be said that I

am accusing this saintly woman rather than praising her, but I affirm before Jesus, Whom she served, and Whom I seek to serve, that I am not saying what is untrue on one side or the other, but simply describing her as one Christian another; that is to say, I am writing her history, not her panegyric, and her faults are the virtues of others." He means to say that the defects and faults of St. Paula would have been looked upon as virtues in a less perfect soul; and indeed there are actions which we must count as imperfections in the perfect, which yet would be highly esteemed in the imperfect. When at the end of a sickness the invalid's legs swell, it is a good sign, indicating that natural strength is returning, and throwing off foul humors; but it would be a bad sign in one not avowedly sick, as showing that nature was too feeble to disperse or absorb those humors.

So, my child, we must think well of those whom we see practicing virtues, although imperfectly, since the Saints have done the like; but as to ourselves we must give heed to practice them, not only diligently, but discreetly, and to this end we shall do well strictly to follow the Wise Man's counsel,⁷ and not trust in our own wisdom, but lean on those whom God has given as our guides. And here I must say a few words concerning certain things which some reckon as virtues, although they are nothing of the sort—I mean ecstasies, trances, rhapsodies, extraordinary transformations, and the like, which are dwelt on in some books, and which promise to raise the soul to a purely intellectual contemplation, an altogether supernatural mental altitude, and a life of preeminent excellence. But I would have you see, my child, that these perfections are not virtues, they are rather rewards which God gives to virtues, or perhaps, more correctly speaking, tokens of the joys of everlasting life, occasionally granted to men in order to kindle in them a desire for the fullness of joy which is only to be found in Paradise. But we must not aspire to such graces, which are in nowise necessary to us in order to love and serve God, our only lawful ambition. Indeed, for the most part, these graces are not to be acquired by labor or industry, and that because they are rather passions than actions, which we may receive, but cannot create.

⁷Eccles. 6:2, 32, 36.

Moreover, our business only is to become good, devout people, pious men and women; and all our efforts must be to that end.

If it should please God further to endow us with angelic perfection, we should then be prepared to become good Angels; but meanwhile let us practice, in all simplicity, humility, and devotion, those lowly virtues to the attainment of which our Lord has bidden us labor—I mean patience, cheerfulness, self-mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, kindness to our neighbor, forbearance toward his failings, diligence, and a holy fervor. Let us willingly resign the higher eminences to lofty souls. We are not worthy to take so high a rank in God's Service; let us be content to be as scullions, porters, insignificant attendants in His household, leaving it to Him if He should hereafter see fit to call us to His own council chamber. Of a truth, my child, the King of Glory does not reward His servants according to the dignity of their office, but according to the humility and love with which they have exercised it. While Saul was seeking his father's asses, he found the kingdom of Israel:⁸ Rebecca, watering Abraham's camels, became his son's wife:⁹ Ruth gleaning after Boaz's reapers, and lying down at his feet, was raised up to become his bride.¹⁰

Those who pretend to such great and extraordinary graces are very liable to delusions and mistakes, so that sometimes it turns out that people who aspire to be angels are not ordinarily good men, and that their goodness lies more in high-flown words than in heart and deed. But we must beware of despising or presumptuously condemning anything. Only, while thanking God for the preeminence of others, let us abide contentedly in our own lower but safer path, a path of less distinction, but more suitable to our lowliness, resting satisfied that if we walk steadily and faithfully therein, God will lift us up to greater things.

⁸1 Sam. 9.

⁹Gen. 24.

¹⁰Ruth 2, 3.