

Chapter I

WHAT TRUE DEVOTION IS

You aim at a devout life, dear child, because as a Christian you know that such devotion is most acceptable to God's Divine Majesty. But seeing that the small errors people are wont to commit in the beginning of any undertaking are apt to wax greater as they advance, and to become irreparable at last, it is most important that you should thoroughly understand wherein lies the grace of true devotion; and that because while there undoubtedly is such a true devotion, there are also many spurious and idle semblances thereof; and unless you know which is real, you may mistake, and waste your energy in pursuing an empty, profitless shadow. Arelius was wont to paint all his pictures with the features and expression of the women he loved, and even so we all color devotion according to our own likings and dispositions.

One man sets great value on fasting, and believes himself to be leading a very devout life, so long as he fasts rigorously, although the while his heart is full of bitterness; and while he will not moisten his lips with wine, perhaps not even with water, in his great abstinence, he does not scruple to steep them in his neighbor's blood, through slander and detraction. Another man reckons himself as devout because he repeats many prayers daily, although at the same time he does not refrain from all manner of angry, irritating, conceited, or insulting speeches among his family and neighbors. This man freely opens his purse in almsgiving, but closes his heart to all gentle and forgiving feelings toward those who are opposed to him; while that one is ready enough to forgive his enemies, but will never pay his rightful debts save under pressure. Meanwhile all these people are conventionally called religious, but nevertheless they are in no true sense really devout. When Saul's servants sought to take David, Michal induced them to suppose that the lifeless figure lying in his bed, and covered with his garments, was the man they sought; and in like manner many people dress up an exterior with the visible acts expressive of earnest devotion, and the world supposes them to be

really devout and spiritual-minded, while all the time they are mere lay figures, mere phantasms of devotion.

But, in fact, all true and living devotion presupposes the Love of God; and indeed it is neither more nor less than a very real Love of God, though not always of the same kind; for that Love, while shining on the soul we call grace, which makes us acceptable to His Divine Majesty; when it strengthens us to do well, it is called Charity; but when it attains its fullest perfection, in which it not only leads us to do well, but to act carefully, diligently, and promptly, then it is called Devotion. The ostrich never flies, the hen rises with difficulty, and achieves but a brief and rare flight, but the eagle, the dove, and the swallow are continually on the wing, and soar high. Even so sinners do not rise toward God, for all their movements are earthly and earthbound. Well-meaning people, who have not as yet attained a true devotion, attempt a manner of flight by means of their good actions, but rarely, slowly, and heavily; while really devout men rise up to God frequently, and with a swift and soaring wing.

In short, devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us, and causes us to work briskly and lovingly; and just as charity leads us to a general practice of all God's Commandments, so devotion leads us to practice them readily and diligently. And therefore we cannot call him who neglects to observe all God's Commandments either good or devout, because in order to be good, a man must be filled with love, and to be devout, he must further be very ready and apt to perform the deeds of love. And forasmuch as devotion consists in a high degree of real love, it not only makes us ready, active, and diligent in following all God's Commands, but it also excites us to be ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible, even such as are not enjoined upon us, but are only matters of counsel or inspiration.

Even as a man just recovering from illness walks only so far as he is obliged to go, with a slow and weary step, so the converted sinner journeys along as far as God commands him but slowly and wearily, until he attains a true spirit of devotion, and then, like a sound man, he not only gets along, but he runs and leaps in the way of God's Commands, and hastens gladly along the paths of heavenly counsels and inspirations. The difference between

love and devotion is just that which exists between fire and flame—love being a spiritual fire which becomes devotion when it is fanned into a flame—and what devotion adds to the fire of love is that flame which makes it eager, energetic, and diligent, not merely in obeying God's Commandments, but in fulfilling His Divine Counsels and inspirations.

Chapter II

THE NATURE AND EXCELLENCE OF DEVOTION

Those who sought to discourage the Israelites from going up to the Promised Land, told them that it was "a land which eateth up the inhabitants thereof,"¹ that is, that the climate was so unhealthy that the inhabitants could not live long, and that the people thereof were "men of a great stature," who looked upon the newcomers as mere locusts to be devoured. It is just so, my daughter, that the world runs down true devotion, painting devout people with gloomy, melancholy aspect, and affirming that religion makes them dismal and unpleasant. But even as Joshua and Caleb protested that not only was the Promised Land a fair and pleasant country, but that the Israelites would take an easy and peaceful possession thereof, so the Holy Spirit tells us through His Saints, and our Lord has told us with His Own Lips, that a devout life is very sweet, very happy, and very lovable.

The world, looking on, sees that devout persons fast, watch, and pray, endure injury patiently, minister to the sick and poor, restrain their temper, check and subdue their passions, deny themselves in all sensual indulgence, and do many other things which in themselves are hard and difficult. But the world sees nothing of that inward, heartfelt devotion which makes all these actions pleasant and easy. Watch a bee hovering over the mountain thyme; the juices it gathers are bitter, but the bee turns them all to honey—and so tells the worldling that though the devout soul

¹Num. 13:32.

finds bitter herbs along its path of devotion, they are all turned to sweetness and pleasantness as it treads; and the Martyrs have counted fire, sword, and rack but as perfumed flowers by reason of their devotion. And if devotion can sweeten such cruel torments, and even death itself, how much more will it give a charm to ordinary good deeds? We sweeten unripe fruit with sugar, and it is useful in correcting the crudity even of that which is good. So devotion is the real spiritual sweetness which takes away all bitterness from mortifications; and prevents consolations from disagreeing with the soul: it cures the poor of sadness, and the rich of presumption; it keeps the oppressed from feeling desolate, and the prosperous from insolence; it averts sadness from the lonely, and dissipation from social life; it is as warmth in winter and refreshing dew in summer; it knows how to abound and how to suffer want; how to profit alike by honor and contempt; it accepts gladness and sadness with an even mind, and fills men's hearts with a wondrous sweetness.

Ponder Jacob's ladder: it is a true picture of the devout life; the two poles which support the steps are types of prayer which seeks the Love of God, and the Sacraments which confer that love; while the steps themselves are simply the degrees of love by which we go on from virtue to virtue, either descending by good deeds on behalf of our neighbor or ascending by contemplation to a loving union with God. Consider, too, who they are who trod this ladder; men with Angels' hearts, or Angels with human forms. They are not youthful, but they seem to be so by reason of their vigor and spiritual activity. They have wings wherewith to fly, and attain to God in holy prayer, but they have likewise feet wherewith to tread in human paths by a holy gracious intercourse with men; their faces are bright and beautiful, inasmuch as they accept all things gently and sweetly; their heads and limbs are uncovered, because their thoughts, affections, and actions have no motive or object save that of pleasing God; the rest of their bodies is covered with a light shining garment, because while they use the world and the things of this life, they use all such purely and honestly, and no further than is needful for their condition—such are the truly devout.

Believe me, dear child, devotion is the sweetest of sweets, the queen of virtues, the perfection of love. If love is the milk of life,

devotion is the cream thereof; if it is a fruitful plant, devotion is the blossom; if it is a precious stone, devotion is its brightness; if it is a precious balm, devotion is its perfume, even that sweet odor which delights men and causes the Angels to rejoice.

Chapter III

DEVOTION IS SUITABLE TO EVERY VOCATION AND PROFESSION

When God created the world He commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind;² and even so He bids Christians—the living trees of His Church—to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation. A different exercise of devotion is required of each—the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden, and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. I ask you, my child, would it be fitting that a Bishop should seek to lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? And if the father of a family were as regardless in making provision for the future as a Capuchin, if the artisan spent the day in church like a Religious, if the Religious involved himself in all manner of business on his neighbor's behalf as a Bishop is called upon to do, would not such a devotion be ridiculous, ill-regulated, and intolerable? Nevertheless such a mistake is often made, and the world, which cannot or will not discriminate between real devotion and the indiscretion of those who fancy themselves devout, grumbles and finds fault with devotion, which is really nowise concerned in these errors.

No indeed, my child, the devotion which is true hinders nothing, but on the contrary it perfects everything; and that which runs counter to the rightful vocation of any one is, you may be sure, a spurious devotion. Aristotle says that the bee sucks honey

²Gen. 1:12.

from flowers without damaging them, leaving them as whole and fresh as it found them; but true devotion does better still, for it not only hinders no manner of vocation or duty, but, contrariwise, it adorns and beautifies all. Throw precious stones into honey, and each will grow more brilliant according to its several colors—and in like manner everybody fulfills his special calling better when subject to the influence of devotion: family duties are lighter, married love truer, service to our King more faithful, every kind of occupation more acceptable and better performed where that is the guide.

It is an error, nay more, a very heresy, to seek to banish the devout life from the soldier's guardroom, the mechanic's workshop, the prince's court, or the domestic hearth. Of course a purely contemplative devotion, such as is specially proper to the religious and monastic life, cannot be practiced in these outer vocations, but there are various other kinds of devotion well suited to lead those whose calling is secular along the paths of perfection. The Old Testament furnishes us examples in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, Job, Tobias, Sarah, Rebecca, and Judith; and in the New Testament we read of St. Joseph, Lydia, and Crispus, who led a perfectly devout life in their trades; we have St. Anne, Martha, St. Monica, Aquila, and Priscilla as examples of household devotion; Cornelius, St. Sebastian, and St. Maurice among soldiers; Constantine, St. Helena, St. Louis, the Blessed Amadaeus,³ and St. Edward on the throne. And we even find instances of some who fell away in solitude—usually so helpful to perfection—some who had led a higher life in the world, which seems so antagonistic to it. St. Gregory dwells on how Lot, who had kept himself pure in the city, fell in his mountain solitude. Be sure that wherever our lot is cast we may and must aim at the perfect life.

³It is probable that St. Francis here means to indicate Amadeo IX, Duke of Savoy, who died in 1472.

Chapter IV

THE NEED OF A GUIDE FOR THOSE WHO WOULD ENTER UPON AND ADVANCE IN THE DEVOUT LIFE

When Tobias was bidden to go to Rages, he was willing to obey his father, but he objected that he knew not the way. To which Tobit answered, "Seek thee a man which may go with thee."⁴ And even so, daughter, I say to you, If you would really tread the paths of the devout life, seek some holy man to guide and conduct you. This is the precept of precepts, says the devout Avila—seek as you will, you can never so surely discover God's Will as through the channel of humble obedience so universally taught and practiced by all the Saints of olden time. When the blessed Teresa read of the great penances performed by Catherine of Cordova, she desired exceedingly to imitate them, contrary to the mind of her Confessor, who forbade her to do the like, and she was tempted to disobey him therein. Then God spoke to Teresa, saying, "My child, thou art on a good and safe road; true, thou seest all this penance, but verily I esteem thy obedience as a yet greater virtue"—and thenceforth St. Teresa so greatly loved the virtue of obedience, that in addition to that due to her superiors, she took a vow of special obedience to a pious ecclesiastic, pledging herself to follow his direction and guidance, which proved an inexpressible help to her. And even so before and after her many pious souls have subjected their will to God's Ministers in order the better to submit themselves to Him, a practice commended by St. Catherine of Siena in her *Dialogues*. The devout Princess St. Elizabeth gave an unlimited obedience to the venerable Conrad; and one of the parting counsels given by St. Louis to his son ere he died was "Confess thyself often, choose a single-minded, worthy Confessor, who is able wisely to teach thee how to do that which is needful for thee."⁵

⁴Tob. 5:3.

⁵*Confesse-toi souvent, eslis un confesseur idoine, qui soit prudhomme, et qui te puisse seurement enseigner à faire les choses qui te seront nécessaires.*

"A faithful friend," we are told in Holy Scripture, "is a strong defense, and he that hath found such an one hath found a treasure;"⁶ and again: "A faithful friend is the medicine of life; and they that fear the Lord shall find him."⁷ These sacred words have chiefly reference, as you see, to the immortal life, with a view to which we specially need a faithful friend, who will guide us by his counsel and advice, thereby guarding us against the deceits and snares of the Evil One: he will be as a storehouse of wisdom to us in our sorrows, trials, and falls; he will be as a healing balm to stay and soothe our heart in the time of spiritual sickness; he will shield us from evil, and confirm that which is good in us, and when we fall through infirmity, he will avert the deadly nature of the evil, and raise us up again.

But who can find such a friend? The Wise Man answers: "He that feareth the Lord":⁸ that is to say, the truly humble soul which earnestly desires to advance in the spiritual life. So, daughter, inasmuch as it concerns you so closely to set forth on this devout journey under good guidance, do you pray most earnestly to God to supply you with a guide after His Own Heart, and never doubt but that He will grant you one who is wise and faithful, even should He send you an Angel from Heaven, as He sent to Tobias.

In truth, your spiritual guide should always be as a heaven-sent Angel to you—by which I mean that when you have found him, you are not to look upon him, or trust in him or his wisdom as an ordinary man; but you must look to God, Who will help you and speak to you through this man, putting into his heart and mouth that which is needful to you; so that you ought to hearken as though he were an Angel come down from Heaven to lead you thither. Deal with him in all sincerity and faithfulness, and with open heart; manifesting alike your good and your evil, without pretense or dissimulation. Thus your good will be examined and confirmed, and your evil corrected and remedied; you will be soothed and strengthened in trouble, moderated and regulated in prosperity. Give your guide a hearty confidence mingled with sacred reverence, so that reverence in no way shall hinder your

⁶Eccles. 6:14.

⁷Eccles. 5:16.

⁸Eccles. 6:17.

confidence, and confidence nowise lessen your reverence: trust him with the respect of a daughter for her father; respect him with the confidence of a son in his mother. In a word, such a friendship should be strong and sweet; altogether holy, sacred, divine, and spiritual. And with such an aim, choose one among a thousand, Avila says; and I say among ten thousand, for there are fewer than one would think capable of this office. He must needs be full of love, of wisdom, and of discretion; for if either of these three be wanting there is danger. But once more I say, ask such help of God, and when you have found it, bless His Holy Name; be steadfast, seek no more, but go on simply, humbly, and trustfully, for you are safe to make a prosperous journey.

Chapter V

THE FIRST STEP MUST BE PURIFYING THE SOUL

"The flowers appear on the earth,"⁹ says the Heavenly Bridegroom, and the time for pruning and cutting is come. And what, my child, are our hearts' flowers save our good desires? Now, so soon as these begin to appear, we need the pruning hook to cut off all dead and superfluous works from our conscience. When the daughter of a strange land was about to espouse an Israelite, the law commanded her to put off the garment of her captivity, to pare her nails, and to shave her head.¹⁰ Even so the soul which aims at the dignity of becoming the spouse of Christ, must put off the old man, and put on the new man, forsaking sin; moreover, it must pare and shave away every impediment which can hinder the Love of God. The very first step toward spiritual health is to be purged from our sinful humors. St. Paul received perfect purification instantaneously, and the like grace was conferred on St. Magdalene, St. Catherine of Genoa, St. Pelagia, and some oth-

⁹Cant. 2:12.

¹⁰Deut. 21:12.

ers, but this kind of purgation is as miraculous and extraordinary in grace as the resurrection of the dead in nature, nor dare we venture to aspire to it. The ordinary purification, whether of body or soul, is only accomplished by slow degrees, step by step, gradually and painfully.

The Angels on Jacob's ladder had wings, yet nevertheless they did not fly, but went in due order up and down the steps of the ladder. The soul which rises from out of sin to a devout life has been compared to the dawn, which does not banish darkness suddenly, but by degrees. That cure which is gradually effected is always the surest; and spiritual maladies, like those of the body, are wont to come on horseback and express, while they depart slowly and on foot. So that we must needs be brave and patient, my daughter, in this undertaking. It is a woeful thing to see souls beginning to chafe and grow disheartened because they find themselves still subject to imperfection after having made some attempt at leading a devout life, and well-nigh yielding to the temptation to give up in despair and fall back; but, on the other hand, there is an extreme danger surrounding those souls who, through the opposite temptation, are disposed to imagine themselves purified from all imperfection at the very outset of their purgation; who count themselves as full-grown almost before they are born, and seek to fly before they have wings. Be sure, daughter, that these are in great danger of a relapse through having left their physician too soon. "It is but lost labor to rise up early and late take rest," unless the Lord prosper all we do.

The work of the soul's purification neither may nor can end save with life itself; do not then let us be disheartened by our imperfections. Our very perfection lies in diligently contending against them, and it is impossible so to contend without seeing them, or to overcome without meeting them face-to-face. Our victory does not consist in being insensible to them, but in not consenting to them. Now to be afflicted by our imperfections is certainly not to consent thereto, and for the furtherance of humility it is needful that we sometimes find ourselves worsted in this spiritual battle, wherein, however, we shall never be conquered until we lose either life or courage. Moreover, imperfections and venial sins cannot destroy our spiritual life, which is only to be lost through mortal sin; consequently we have only need to watch

well that they do not imperil our courage. David continually asks the Lord to strengthen his heart against cowardice and discouragement; and it is our privilege in this war that we are certain to vanquish so long as we are willing to fight.

Chapter VI

THE FIRST PURIFICATION, NAMELY, FROM MORTAL SIN

The first purification to be made is from sin; the means whereby to make it, the Sacrament of Penance. Seek the best Confessor within your reach, use one of the many little books written in order to help the examination of conscience.¹¹ Read some such book carefully, examining point by point wherein you have sinned, from the first use of your reason to the present time. And if you mistrust your memory, write down the result of your examination.

Having thus sought out the evil spots in your conscience, strive to detest them, and to reject them with the greatest abhorrence and contrition of which your heart is capable, bearing in mind these four things: that by sin you have lost God's Grace, rejected your share in Paradise, accepted the pains of Hell, and renounced God's Eternal Love. You see, my child, that I am now speaking of a general confession of your whole life, which, while I grant it is not always necessary, I yet believe will be found most helpful in the beginning of your pursuit after holiness, and therefore I earnestly advise you to make it. Not infrequently the ordinary confessions of persons leading an everyday life are full of great

¹¹St. Francis suggests Grenada, Bruno, Arias, Augez, authors little known now, though we have the substance of their teaching in numerous valuable helps for those who are preparing for confession, such as "Pardon Through the Precious Blood," "Helps for Confirmation and First Communion" (Masters), "Manual for Confession," "Repentance" (Rev. T. T. Carter), "Hints to Penitents" (Palmer), Brett's "Guide to Faith and Piety," Crake's "Bread of Life" (Mowbray), "Paradise of the Christian Soul," et cetera.

faults, and that because they make little or no preparation, and have not the needful contrition. Owing to this deficiency such people go to Confession with a tacit intention of returning to their old sins, inasmuch as they will not avoid the occasions of sin, or take the necessary measures for amendment of life, and in all such cases a general confession is required to steady and fix the soul. But, furthermore, a general confession forces us to a clearer self-knowledge, kindles a wholesome shame for our past life, and rouses gratitude for God's Mercy, which has so long waited patiently for us—it comforts the heart, refreshes the spirit, excites good resolutions, affords opportunity to our spiritual father for giving the most suitable advice, and opens our hearts so as to make future confessions more effectual. Therefore I cannot enter into the subject of a general change of life and entire turning to God, by means of a devout life, without urging upon you to begin with a general confession.

Chapter VII

THE SECOND PURIFICATION, FROM ALL SINFUL AFFECTIONS

All the children of Israel went forth from the land of Egypt, but not all went forth heartily, and so, when wandering in the desert, some of them sighed after the leeks and onions, the fleshpots of Egypt. Even so there are penitents who forsake sin, yet without forsaking their sinful affections; that is to say, they intend to sin no more, but it goes sorely against them to abstain from the pleasures of sin; they formally renounce and forsake sinful acts, but they turn back many a fond lingering look to what they have left, like Lot's wife as she fled from Sodom. They are like a sick man who abstains from eating melon when the doctor says it would kill him, but who all the while longs for it, talks about it, bargains when he may have it, would at least like just to sniff the perfume, and thinks those who are free to eat of it very fortunate. And so these weak cowardly penitents abstain awhile from sin, but reluc-

tantly; they would fain be able to sin without incurring damnation; they talk with a lingering taste of their sinful deeds, and envy those who are yet indulging in the like. Thus a man who has meditated some revenge gives it up in Confession, but soon after he is to be found talking about the quarrel, averring that but for the fear of God he would do this or that; complaining that it is hard to keep the Divine rule of forgiveness; would to God it were lawful to avenge one's self! Who can fail to see that even if this poor man is not actually committing sin, he is altogether bound with the affections thereof, and although he may have come out of Egypt, he yet hungers after it, and longs for the leeks and onions he was wont to feed upon there! It is the same with the woman who, though she has given up her life of sin, yet takes delight in being sought after and admired. Alas! of a truth, all such are in great peril.

Be sure, my daughter, that if you seek to lead a devout life, you must not merely forsake sin, but you must further cleanse your heart from all affections pertaining to sin; for, to say nothing of the danger of a relapse, these wretched affections will perpetually enfeeble your mind, and clog it, so that you will be unable to be diligent, ready, and frequent in good works, wherein nevertheless lies the very essence of all true devotion. Souls which, in spite of having forsaken sin, yet retain such likings and longings, remind us of those persons who, without being actually ill, are pale and sickly, languid in all they do, eating without appetite, sleeping without refreshment, laughing without mirth, dragging themselves about rather than walking briskly. Such souls as I have described lose all the grace of their good deeds, which are probably few and feeble, through their spiritual languor.

Chapter VIII

HOW TO EFFECT THIS SECOND PURIFICATION

The first inducement to attain this second purification is a keen and lively apprehension of the great evils resulting from sin, by means of which we acquire a deep, hearty contrition. For just as

contrition (so far as it is real), however slight, when joined to the virtue of the Sacraments, purges away sin, so, when it becomes strong and urgent, it purges away all the affections which cling around habits of sin. A moderate, slight hatred makes men dislike its object and avoid his society; but when a violent, mortal hatred exists, they not only abhor and shun the person who excites it, but they loathe him, they cannot endure the approach of his relations or connections, nor even his likeness or anything that concerns him. Just so when a penitent only hates sin through a weakly although real contrition, he will resolve to avoid overt acts of sin; but when his contrition is strong and hearty, he will not merely abhor sin, but every affection, every link and tendency to sin. Therefore, my daughter, it behooves us to kindle our contrition and repentance as much as we possibly can, so that it may reach even to the very smallest appearance of sin. Thus it was that the Magdalene, when converted, so entirely lost all taste for her past sin and its pleasures, that she never again cast back one thought upon them; and David declared that he hated not only sin itself, but every path and way which led thereto. This it is which is that "renewing of the soul" which the same Prophet compares to the eagle's strength.¹²

Now, in order to attain this fear and this contrition, you must use the following meditations carefully; for if you practice them steadfastly, they (by God's Grace) will root out both sin and its affections from your heart. It is to that end that I have prepared them: do you use them one after another, in the order in which they come, only taking one each day, and using that as early as possible, for the morning is the best time for all spiritual exercises—and then you will ponder and ruminate it through the day. If you have not as yet been taught how to meditate, you will find instructions to that purpose in the Second Part.

¹²Ps. 103:5.

Chapter IX

FIRST MEDITATION

OF CREATION

PREPARATION

1. Place yourself in the Presence of God.
2. Ask Him to inspire your heart.

CONSIDERATIONS

1. Consider that but a few years since you were not born into the world, and your soul was as yet nonexistent. Where wert thou then, O my soul? the world was already old, and yet of thee there was no sign.
2. God brought you out of this nothingness, in order to make you what you are, not because He had any need of you, but solely out of His Goodness.
3. Consider the being which God has given you; for it is the foremost being of this visible world, adapted to live eternally, and to be perfectly united to God's Divine Majesty.

AFFECTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

1. Humble yourself utterly before God, saying with the Psalmist, O Lord, I am nothing in respect of Thee—what am I, that Thou shouldst remember me? O my soul, thou wert yet lost in that abyss of nothingness, if God had not called thee forth, and what of thee in such a case?
2. Give God thanks. O Great and Good Creator, what do I not owe Thee, Who didst take me from out that nothingness, by Thy Mercy to make me what I am? How can I ever do enough worthily to praise Thy Holy Name, and render due thanks to Thy Goodness?