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BY
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THIS IS THE WILL OF GOD

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁽¹⁾ In these words G. K. Chesterton points out the difficulty and the challenge that confront Christians today. It is a commonplace among us that the contemporary world is in a process of change; that the old order is going, if not already gone; that there is forming in the womb of history a new world. Everyone wonders what this new world will be like, and books to describe it have been written—each to accord with the wishes of the writer. Already several systems have arisen, stating their claim to be the heirs of power for the future age; they are the various forms of collectivism. These systems, arising as if by law from the collapse of Industrial Capitalism, promise an abundance of this world's goods to the oppressed; they also bring slavery—a fact, however, which cannot be perceived by the mass of men who have been reduced to spiritual blindness by the irreligion of the order that is passing away.

Catholics, for their part, have consistently maintained that the life of a culture comes from its spiritual and religious roots; and that the salvation of the world lies, therefore, in an acceptance of Christianity. But our failure to date is sufficient proof that the Christianity which can save the world is not the bourgeois kind that has been practiced in the past; nor yet the kind that we are practicing

(1) *What's Wrong With the World?* Ch. 5, Part 1.

today, since this, deeply infected by paganism, scarcely marks an improvement.

We know that we have the truth because what we hold comes from Jesus Christ; and Christ is God's Son and alone able to satisfy the needs of a world which "groans and travails in pain until now." (Rom. 8, 22) Shall we continue forever—we, to whom truth has been entrusted—shall we continue forever to deny, or evade, or compromise this truth?

Chapter I

THE CHALLENGE

1. Standing on a hillside, a little above the multitude who were listening to Him, Jesus said to them: "*You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5, 48). Such words could have been spoken by one demented, or by one divine; but by no one else. For they tell us to do what, every day, we say cannot be done by men, or even expected of us; they tell us to be *perfect*. They prescribe this, moreover, without limitation or mitigation of any kind, and imperatively. They are spoken, as it appears, almost casually, with no special vehemence or any indication that Our Lord expected his hearers to be surprised at His extraordinary demand. And since we know that the speaker was not demented, but divine, we must conclude that His words are to be taken seriously—as seriously as when He said, "This is my Body; this is the Chalice of my Blood."

In a word, this command of Jesus fixes the life-goal of the Christian: perfection. Henceforth, the end of all human life and all human effort can be no other thing than *holiness*. For the perfect man is the complete man: the whole man: the holy man. From this moment, made unforgettable by the awful challenge of the God-man, those who claim to be His followers, that is, Christians, will be distinguished from all other men by this that, laying aside, or at least rigorously subordinating, all other ends whatsoever, they shall give themselves up to a unique quest for sanctity.

Let us notice that Jesus is here carrying out the decree of His eternal Father; He is but showing us how we are to do our part in fulfilling the divine plan of redemption. God from all eternity desires that we should be holy. He desires that we should live in love and union with Him; and to do this we *must* be holy: "And every one who has this hope in him (i.e., of entering into happiness with God) *makes himself holy, just as He also is holy*" (I Jo. 3, 3). It is to *sanctify* us that God sends His only-begotten Son into the world: "This is the will of God—*your sanctification*" (I Thess. 4, 4). And in establishing His Church, Jesus has made it "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5, 27), that it might continue the work of sanctification in souls. He will send the Holy Spirit, who will abide with men forever—to sanctify them. It could not be otherwise: God is holy, and we must likewise be holy. The sufficient reason for this enormous demand made upon us is given by God Himself, briefly and finally: "You shall be holy, *because I am holy*" (I Pet. 1, 16).

The words of Jesus tell us also what kind of holiness we are to seek. Every day we hear men say things like this: "You cannot be a saint and live in the world." Or, "God does not expect us to be saints." Or, "People in the world cannot live as priests, or monks, or nuns." Or, "Men cannot be like angels." But study the teaching of Our Lord. He does not, assuredly, say that He expects us to be as holy as *Carmelites*, or as *priests*, or as *monks*, or as *angels*. He tells us to be holy as *God is holy*. "Impossible!" you say. Yes, impossible to attain the infinite *degree* of God's holiness, but not impossible to possess the same *kind* of holiness; or better, not

impossible to *share* in the divine holiness. And this is what we are commanded, viz., to be holy *in the manner* that God is holy. The ideal placed before us is not the holiness of saints or angels; it is divine holiness.

There are certain things in God that we cannot imitate; for example, His omnipotence. There are other divine attributes which we can imitate and possess; for example, His mercy—and holiness. The holiness that we are to have is nothing of our own, but a sharing in God's; we are to be filled with this as a crystal, taken from the darkness of the earth, is filled and transformed by light.

Further: there is only one kind of holiness, and it is intended *for all*, that is, for laymen and religious alike; for housewives as well as for nuns, for the members of active religious communities quite as much as for contemplatives, for secular priests as well as for Trappists, for bus drivers and carpenters as well as for priests. Consider the multitudes of whom Jesus demanded perfection; farmers, shepherds, fishermen, housewives, publicans, children, hangers-on; the only group noticeable by their absence was, probably, the learned and professionally religious class, the Scribes and Pharisees and Doctors. Over the ages Christ's words are still addressed "to the multitudes." He makes no distinction, not even the broad distinction between layman and religious. Indeed, as St. John Chrysostom says, he knows nothing of this distinction between monks and seculars, but He would have all men live as monks. The only difference between laymen and religious, which this saint and doctor of the Church will allow, lies in the fact that the laymen are married and the religious are not; for all other things

they shall render an identical account. Indeed, if there will be any difference at all in God's attitude towards these two groups (we are still following Chrysostom), laymen will have to stand the harder judgment, for they have the advantage of human supports not enjoyed by religious, and, accordingly, their lapses, especially in the matter of purity, will be the less excusable. The saint illustrates this doctrine by making a list of the precepts given by Jesus, and he points out that the Divine Teacher, even in setting down His most exacting demands, like "Let your speech be, 'Yes, yes'; 'No, no'," does not in any case add, "But I mean this only for monks!"⁽²⁾

2. To some, this doctrine may sound strange; if so, this can only be because we have so far forgotten Christian fundamentals. After all, there is only *one* Christianity: "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all . . ." (Eph. 4, 6). Why should we then make distinctions among ourselves, as though some Christians might exempt themselves from the Gospel law without suffering spiritual harm? Or as though the sublime ideal of the Christian life was meant only for a certain spiritual *elite*, while all the rest of mankind are doomed to wallow forever in sensuality and spiritual mediocrity!

Why do laymen fancy that theirs is an inferior Christianity, and even boast of it? Would they boast of having an inferior make of clothing? Is their religion less important than clothing? Those who believe in Jesus, the Scriptures say, "are sons of God"; and there is no better way of describing the privilege of the Christian vocation than by this phrase. Now who is more "a son of God"—a Chris-

(2) *Apology for the Monastic Life*, Book III, Sect. 14.

tian layman or a priest? Who deserves this high title most—a diocesan priest, a Benedictine, a Jesuit, a Dominican, a Franciscan? Even the question is silly. We are *all* sons of God; we are *all* “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (I Pet. 2, 9). No doubt there are different degrees of grace, “according to the measure of Christ’s bestowal” (Eph. 4, 7); but the essential element—divine sonship and participation in the divine nature—is possessed by all; even the differences in grace depend on the mystery of God’s love rather than on our position in the world. Thomas More, a layman, was a greater saint than the Carthusians who suffered martyrdom with him.

It is important to realize, also, that it is *because we are Christians* that we are “called to be saints” (I. Cor. 1, 2). It is baptism, not ordination or religious profession, which in the first instance, implants in the soul the seed of holiness and imposes the obligation of cultivating this new life. True indeed that a Carmelite must strive after sanctity; not, in the first place, because she is a Carmelite, but rather because she is a Christian; and her sister in the world, who is perhaps raising a family in a large city, has a similar duty. It is true that a priest should be, or seek to be, a saint; again however, not in the first place because he is a priest, but rather because he is a Christian; and his relatives in the world, as also his parishioners, are also bound to seek for perfection.

A contemporary writer summarizes this doctrine by comparing the Church of Christ, considered as a spiritual society, to a Church building having two towers; the one is the tower of lay sanctity, the

other the tower of monastic sanctity.⁽³⁾ *Both towers are essential to the Church.* The latter is the taller and more beautiful, because the master builders of the ages, the great saints and religious founders, have given their talents to its construction, and they have been assisted by the innumerable men and women who have followed them by taking up the religious life. *But the other tower is the older of the two, having been founded by Christ Himself,* whereas the tower of monastic sanctity was established by men like Benedict, Augustine, Dominic, who, however great and holy, were still but *men*. Alas, the tower of lay sanctity has been greatly neglected; and yet, unless it is built up and cared for, the Church of Christ will never reach the full proportions or magnificence intended for it, never attain "to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4, 13).

3. The foregoing truths are of such fundamental importance that neglect or ignorance of them cannot but have the most mischievous results. Errors in this matter—and they are only too common—work such havoc in the Church that they must be put down as diabolically inspired. One of the most common errors comes from thinking that the duty of pursuing sanctity derives primarily from ordination or religious profession. It is entertained by both religious and laymen, causing the gravest spiritual injury to both groups and of course to the whole Church. For the layman at once concludes that he need not become holy; thinking that he does enough in fulfilling the minimum requirements of natural law, he is prone to neglect the counsels and commands of the Gospel.

(3) Ida Coudenhove, *The Cloister and the World*, p. 19. (Sheed & Ward)

Religious, on the other hand, seeing that laymen live careless and wordly lives, although still retaining the hope of supernatural life and happiness, are led to relax their own spiritual efforts, defending their conduct by the sophism that the pursuit of perfection, however commendable, is not absolutely necessary. Thus both religious and laymen fall into tepidity and, what is worse, expose themselves to very grave danger of damnation.

We have said that the great religious founders were but men. Accordingly, they had not the authority (nor the intention) of founding new religions or of imposing on others the obligation to become holy. Hence it is wrong for religious to trace their duty in this matter to their rule or their Founder. Only Jesus could bind men to perfection. St. Benedict and the other founders established their orders to enable groups of men to live in the manner ordained by Jesus and thus attain the goal fixed by Him; but they did not dream of setting up a new goal or of inventing a new manner of life.

For this reason we must be careful when we use such phrases as "Benedictine Spirituality"—or Dominican, or Jesuit, or Franciscan, or Carmelite spirituality. There is, after all, only one spirituality: Christ's. No one has any right to establish any "school" of spiritual thought that departs from His teaching. Laity, clergy and the several religious orders are the members, or organs, within the body of Christ, which is the Church, and they must work in unity for the good of the whole Church; so that the "whole body (being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system according to the functioning in due measure of each single

part) derives its increase to the building up of itself *in love*" (Eph. 4. 16).

But alas, the loyalties of men still imperfect become easily particularised and hardened. When this happens and the differences between layman and religious, between clergy and laity, or clergy and religious, or among various religious orders, become, not mere functional differences, but "intervening walls of partition" that divide certain groups of Christians *against* others, then we are setting up merely human divisions and distinctions to rend and wound the body of Christ. The various families and groups within the Church are all bound by the same basic truths and by the same basic obligations; we all "have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2, 18).

It is pure nonsense (if one can forget the tragic results!) to imagine that there is a spirituality for religious that differs from that of layfolk, or that there are exclusive systems of spirituality belonging to the sundry religious families. To see how wrong such oppositions are among us, let us consider words of Saint Paul, applying his strictures against divisions in Corinth to those we have been speaking about among ourselves: "For I have been informed about you, my brethren . . . that there are strifes among you. Now this is what I mean: each of you says, I am of Paul, or I am of Apollo, or I am of Cephas, or I am of Christ. Has Christ been divided up? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (I Cor. 1, 11-13) In your mind, substitute for the names given by Paul in this text the names of the great religious founders or of the saints that may be said to stand for clergy, laity, or religious communities,

Of course (to make a necessary modification) there is a difference between the lay and religious states. We are not concerned to deny or belittle that difference, but only to point out that it does not touch the essence or the characteristic end of the Christian life. What this difference is exactly will be seen from the following example. Suppose that for a long time I fail to pay a debt that I have contracted; then, upon my creditor's making an insistent demand for what is due him, I take an oath to pay off the debt. Since I owe the money already, why take the oath? To reinforce my obligation; also to add a second obligation, from religion, to the one which I already have in justice. Still, even were I not to take the oath, justice would demand that I pay my debt.

Similarly, all Christians are bound, *by the very fact that they are Christians*, to seek after perfection. When one takes religious vows therefore, he does not *then* contract the obligation of becoming holy; he does but acknowledge an obligation that exists already, reinforces it, and adds a second obligation. Now he is doubly bound to seek perfection: in the first place because he is a Christian; and, in the second, because he has entered a particular state of life which holds him permanently to the use of special means for obtaining this end. What is not to be forgotten, however, is that the primary and essential obligation comes from baptism. Because of the particular means that the religious adopts, he binds himself to strive for the goal of Christian life in a more perfect way, the way of the counsels. He is like a daredevil who, accepting a challenge to perform some difficult feat, says: "Not only will I do

it, but I will do it in the most dangerous and difficult manner."

4. What is true of religious is true also of priests. They, too, have a double obligation to seek perfection: first because they are Christians, secondly because they are priests. This holds for secular or diocesan priests as well as priests in religious communities (although, of course, in the case of the latter, religious profession adds a third obligation).

In saying this we come upon what is certainly the worst of all the harmful errors that are current in this important matter. For secular priests are commonly exempted by erroneous popular opinion, in which they themselves sometimes share, from the obligation of perfection. It is said that a secular priest is to live in the world and therefore cannot be governed by the same standards that rule the life of a monk. This is of course true within certain limits, since all are bound to strive after holiness in accordance with the duties of their peculiar state in life. But half-truths are dangerous when the other half is neglected; and the allowance that must be made for different duties of state does not free diocesan priests from what we have seen is the common duty of all Christians or from the urgent, additional need for sanctity that comes from ordination.

In the great Encyclicals written by Pope Pius X and Pope Pius XI on the Catholic priesthood there is no difference made between secular and religious priests in the matter of holiness. All are urged to make the highest sanctity the primary object of their lives; and this is a duty which is represented as coming from the priesthood itself. Moreover, if the duty to seek holiness which comes from ordina-

tion is secondary and supplementary to the one which comes from baptism, it is not for that reason unimportant. If secular priests are not holy, then the whole Church suffers. For the particular function of the secular priesthood in the mystical body is to extend the kingdom of God; its work, as Dom Chautard observes, is in the front lines of the apostolate. So that if secular priests do not teach men to become holy, and also show them the way, then Catholics everywhere fall into tepidity and paganism.

When we examine the writings of the saints and the doctors of the Church, we find there a doctrine that is diametrically opposed to the erroneous opinions frequently entertained on this subject. For example, St. Thomas says that a priest is more strictly bound by his orders to possess holiness than is a religious who is not a priest. In other words, the priesthood itself puts upon him who is ordained a graver need and obligation of acquiring interior holiness than does religious profession in the most austere and penitential orders. A secular priest, living in the midst of the world has a graver need and duty of becoming a saint than does a Carmelite or Trappistine nun who gives herself to prayer and penance in the silence of the cloister; and if the secular priest's Trappist brother is as urgently bound as he, this is rather because he is a priest than because he is a Trappist (always remembering that in the case of a religious priest, his profession adds another, if lesser, obligation).

This truth, again, should not be surprising, although the devil has done much to obscure it. A religious is said, in the technical language of theology, to be in a state of perfection; that is, he enters

a particular state in life, characterized by its concentration upon holiness, in which he binds himself permanently to the use of certain means for achieving this goal. He is not expected to be already perfect; but he is expected to be earnestly seeking that end.

With a priest it is different. First of all, as we have already said, the priest is "ordained for the highest ministrations, by which he serves Christ Himself in the sacrament of the altar; and for this is required a greater interior sanctity than that necessary even for the religious state."⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, a priest who is actively engaged in the ministry shares his bishop's care of souls; and this creates another need and reason for his personal sanctification. The responsibility which the bishop has for the care of souls (quite aside from his priesthood) binds him (i. e., a bishop) to a greater perfection than that to which religious are bound. The reason is obvious. He must feed Christ's sheep; that is, He must preach the word of God, which means that he must preach perfection to others. Thus St. Francis de Sales writes, "But I tell thee, dear reader, with the great St. Denys, that it belongs principally to bishops to conduct souls to perfection, since their order is as supreme among men as that of the seraphim is among the angels."⁽⁵⁾ However, *nemo dat quod non habet*, no one can give to others what he does not have himself; those who would lead others to perfection must travel the same road themselves, as St. Francis de Sales is said to have attained sanctity by dint of leading St. Jane Frances de Chantal to that summit. St. Charles Borromeo was wont to

(4) St. Thomas II II, 184, 8, c.

(5) Introduction to the Devout Life, Preface

say that a bishop should be perfect—a truth which he meant to be understood quite literally and which he used as a guiding principle in dealing with the bishops of his province.

What is true of bishops is true also, in due measure, of all to whom they delegate the care of souls and the ministry of the gospel. If priests, unlike bishops, are not in a special state of life which of itself binds them to sanctity, they are nevertheless bound to the extent that they share in the work of feeding Christ's sheep with sacred doctrine.⁽⁶⁾ The spiritual training in seminaries for secular priests (not less than in the novitiates of religious houses) must have as its end to lead seminarians to the summits of perfection; so that afterwards, as priests, they may fittingly discharge themselves of the awful responsibility of preaching holiness to others. St. Gregory, speaking of the office of preaching, says that "no one who is not purged should dare to approach the sacred ministry." He adds words to the effect that, unless God should designate the alternative course, one should rather enter the religious life to seek after perfection, than the active ministry where its possession is already in some measure presupposed: "Seeing, then that it is difficult for any man to know whether he is purged, *the office of preaching is more safely declined*; and yet it ought not stubbornly to be declined, when the divine will is discerned that it should be undertaken."⁽⁷⁾ But what high duties and austere demands there are for those who accept the office! And so practical is this matter, that it is a truism among spiritual writers that the utility of any apos-

(6) II II, 184, 6, ad 3.

(7) From Abbot Cuthbert Butler's, *Western Mysticism* p. 226—(1st. ed.)

tle to the Church is in proportion to the progress that he has made along the road to perfection; thus Father Lallemand, a famous director of souls, goes so far as to say that no apostle can render an appreciable service to God without having attained the higher reaches of the spiritual life.⁽⁸⁾ Not less than his Master, the apostle must say: "And for them I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth" (Jo. 17, 19).

Such is the goal and the responsibility of Christians. Shall we say that Christianity has failed? Or that it has been "found difficult and left untried?" In the face of the world's great spiritual need, will Christians continue to leave it untried?

(8) Cfr. Saudreau, *The Degrees of the Spiritual Life*, Vol. II, p. 72—
Also, Dom Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, esp. Part II, sect.
3 & 4.

Chapter II

YOU ARE GODS

1. When a man goes hunting, he does not take a kind of general aim at anything or everything; he picks a definite target and shoots at it. When traveling, one does not just travel "in general," i.e., without intending to go anywhere; one first chooses a destination. Similarly, in leading a Christian life, we must *first* determine our end; those who aim at nothing are too sure of hitting their mark. Nor may we seek in a merely general way to be a Christian, or "to be good," or "to be better," or even to be perfect. Our aim must be definite; we must know exactly what is meant by the perfection of Christian life and where it is to be found.

Can we know what perfection is? Can it be defined in the same precise way that "sin," or "grace," or "sacrament," is defined? Most attempts to explain the Scriptures, Chesterton said, seek in reality to explain them away; and a favorite method of evading the curt command of Jesus to be perfect is to say that He is telling us only "to do the best we can," or that He wishes us simply to "aim high," or to "hitch our wagon to a star."; if His words were to be taken literally, it is alleged, most men would be driven to despair.

As a matter of fact, the word "perfection" is a technical term in theology; it does not point vaguely to a dim and dreamy ideal, but has a meaning that is perfectly precise and clear. Moreover, since perfection is the divinely decreed goal of human life, there is a most urgent practical necessity that all of

us become acquainted with its meaning. Let us consider the manner in which St. Thomas of Aquin defines it; in so serious a matter we need a completely reliable guide, and there is none better qualified than this Saint and Doctor of the Church to help us understand and apply the teaching of Jesus.

A thing is perfect (says this holy Doctor) *when it achieves the end for which it was made.* ⁽⁹⁾ For example, a knife is perfect when it cuts cleanly; a gun is perfect when it shoots accurately. Now man's end is to be united to God; accordingly, man will be made perfect by that which unites him to God. We will know what it is that perfects man, therefore, when we realize what unites him to God as to his last end. What can this be except charity? It is charity, or love, that joins man to God, according to the words of the apostle, "He who abides in love, abides in God, and God in him." (I Jo. 4, 16) Therefore, Christian perfection consists essentially in charity, primarily in the love of God, secondarily in the love of neighbor. ⁽¹⁰⁾

What a wonderful truth this is! What brilliant light it throws over the whole plan of God and the entire range of duties in the Christian life! Perfection is no other thing than love! The apparently high and remote ideal given us by Jesus is in reality no farther away than that which is nearest our hearts! Holiness, too, since it is the same as perfection, far from being a cold and cheerless prospect, is likewise that sweet and familiar thing—love.

The same is true of sanctity, that awful height whose very name would cause the stoutest heart to

(9) II II, 184, 1, c.

(10) II II, 184, 3, c.

falter and fail were it not for this knowledge that it, too, is identical with love; and righteousness as well—a concept which, in the Gospel, thus loses the hardness and severity that had marked it in the Old Testament, becoming now as winning and gracious as Jesus Himself, in Whom, indeed, it comes to life. Perfection, holiness, sanctity, righteousness, justice: all these are synonymous with love. Not a mere sensual love, of course, but a love that is the more absorbing and beautiful and satisfying because it is spiritual and supernatural; as the love among the Three Divine Persons is all the more perfect for being divine.

No doubt the other virtues—prudence, humility, meekness, patience, and the rest—also belong to the character of the perfect Christian. But as arms and legs belong to a man's *integrity*, but not to his *essence*, since he would still be a man though he should lack both arms and legs, so in a parallel way the moral virtues belong to the integrity or completeness of perfection, but not to its essence. Charity alone is the essence of Christian holiness, and the other virtues are its satellites, serving it and reflecting its glory.

To advance in perfection means above all else to advance in love; day by day, if we go forward in the love of God, we also make progress in perfection. And the day that we shall be able to say truly (what many of us now say falsely or unthinkingly), that we love God *with our whole hearts*—on that day we shall be perfect.

Charity "is the bond of perfection," says St. Paul. (Col. 3, 14) We can now see why. It is a *bond* because it unites us to our Creator; it is a *bond of perfection* because it satisfies our burning thirst

for happiness, fulfills our deepest aspirations, unites us to our true last end, and thereby completes and perfects our nature. In fact, charity does more than *unite* us to God: it makes us like Him; in a manner, it divinizes us. "God is love" (I Jo. 4, 16); so that the soul who is transformed by love becomes more and more like its Creator, whose very breath and being is love. You see then how it is that we become holy as the Father is holy, perfect as He is perfect. Divinized first by grace in baptism, we become "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet. 1, 4); then, as we advance in grace (Heaven grant that we do!) and in divine love, which is nothing else than grace in action, we become more and more conformed to the image of Jesus and, by the same token, more perfect in our resemblance to the Father.

2. Once we have these definitions and principles clearly in mind, the way is opened to answer another question that begins to vex our minds as soon as this matter of Christian perfection is brought up, viz., "Is perfection possible?" Frequently we hear men say that it is not. What shall we answer to this? Simply scale down the words of Jesus, as is customary among the worldly? By no means! To know what is meant by perfection is to realize that this sublime ideal is within our reach; that it does not lead to despondency by requiring of us what is not possible to human weakness, but rather leads us to freedom and true joy.

Let us note first of all, by way of corollary from what has been said thus far, that there are two kinds of perfection: the one human and natural! the other divine and supernatural. We have the human kind in view when we speak of the perfection of a painter or musician, or of any human work or

workman. This kind of perfection is, in truth, impossible. The skilled critic can observe defects in the work of a Michaelangelo or a da Vinci; teachers of grammar are wont to point out, not without satisfaction, grammatical mistakes in Shakespeare; and the old saying has it that "Even Homer nods." What shall be said of the rest of us poor mortals if these towering geniuses of our race are not free from imperfection? If Jesus had asked *human* perfection of us, we would indeed be led to despair.

Many Christians, confusing the perfection spoken of by Jesus with this natural and human kind, fancy that they will attain the true and highest end in life by pursuing refinement and intellectual culture as their proper goal. But such objects, however excellent, are but goods of the natural order and therefore infinitely below what is least in the supernatural order; just as the highest knowledge obtainable by the senses is out of all proportion inferior to the least achievement of thought, since the latter belongs to a higher order of reality. This is why carpenters and fishermen can possess Christian perfection although having no intellectual culture; why men like St. Joseph Cupertino or St. John Vianney (the Cure of Ars), who seem by nature little (if any) better than dunces, can be raised to the altars of the Church, while the memory of most of the great scholars and artists contemporary with them has perished. Those who devote themselves to the arts or sciences, or to the acquisition of culture, as their proper end in this life, do not live as Christians at all, but rather as good pagans.

It is the other, the *supernatural* perfection, that God demands of us. Here is a paradox indeed! While human perfection is impossible, even to men

endowed with great genius, divine perfection is possible to the least! St. Thomas will again explain. ⁽¹¹⁾

It is necessary to distinguish two kinds of supernatural perfection; the one may be called absolute, the other relative. Now, since perfection is love for God, absolute perfection can be this only that *God is loved as He deserves to be loved*; and since God is infinitely lovable, absolute perfection is an infinite love for God. Is such perfection possible to us? Clearly not; our power of loving, like all our other powers, is bounded, finite. Only God has infinite powers; only God can love infinitely; therefore, only God is capable of absolute perfection. To minds accustomed to view self-love solely as a defect, that God loves Himself infinitely, may sound surprising and be hard to understand. Yet even in ourselves self-love is a fault only when it is selfish, wrongly motivated, and inordinate; to love our own souls and spiritual welfare, and to seek the latter with great eagerness, is an act of virtue. So it is with God; seeing that He is all-good, He cannot but love Himself, and this infinitely; it would be wicked of Him to turn aside from such goodness in aversion!

Relative perfection is again of two kinds: one of which is proper to the saints in heaven, while the other belongs to the faithful on earth. The former is this: God is loved, not indeed as He deserves, since this would be impossible also for saints and angels, *but with all their powers, exhausting their energies*, as it were, *in a continuous act of love*. This perfection is impossible to men because of the exigencies of human life, which divert our time and talents to a hundred necessary tasks. On earth even the saints

(11) II II, 184, 2, c.

must eat—although, like the Angelic Doctor, they may be so lost in contemplation, that there needs to be a kind of guardian specially appointed to remind them of such elementary necessities! The nearest approach among us to the perfection enjoyed by our fellow Christians in the Church Triumphant is to be found in those cloistered communities where many hours are given each day to chanting the divine praises. But even in these retreats, from which the world and its cares are shut out as far as possible, the religious must likewise engage in activities concerned with their bodily welfare.

That (relative) perfection which is possible to the faithful on earth is this: they do not love God as He deserves, neither do they love Him uninterruptedly with the totality of their powers, but at any rate they *remove from their souls whatever opposes or hinders the upward movement of their affections to God*. Man's work in seeking perfection is simply the negative task of removing sin *and imperfection* from his soul, so that God may pour into it His precious gifts of grace and charity. This does not mean that the work of perfection is itself negative; it means that the positive work of sanctification is the effect of the Holy Spirit's operations in souls. Man's part is but to clear the way for the entrance of grace and free the soul from whatever would hamper the divine action.

That supernatural perfection is possible to man is due, then, to the fact that it is in the end, not man's work at all, but God's; and "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19, 26), even to the making of saints from clods like ourselves!

3. When we inquire what it is that prevents our affections from rising to God, we come to the practical task; and the answer will enable us to frame a procedure that will make our program of spiritual effort intelligent and orderly. St. Thomas, in the article from which we have been drawing this doctrine, briefly mentions two things that keep our affections from God. The one is that evil which is so far incompatible with charity that the two cannot exist together in the same soul; this is mortal sin, which must be removed before even the beginnings of devout Christian life can be made. But the soul can and should go further; and the Christian, besides eliminating serious sin, which is directly contrary to love, should also labor to rid himself of all that hinders the soul from giving its affection to God *wholly*. What is it that prevents such total love for God? St. Thomas does not consider the matter at length but simply mentions such faults as are found among beginners and proficients in the spiritual life. ⁽¹²⁾ These, as we learn from writers on the spiritual life, are venial sins, attachments to creatures, deliberate imperfections, preoccupations with the fleeting joys of this world. As we free our souls from such influences, the love of God can possess us more and more, pushing its roots into every remote corner of our souls. Christians who are not in the state of mortal sin should not imagine that their work is finished; they have scarcely begun!

A procedure is important. If you wish to be a typist, you must follow some method; if you desire to draw or to paint, you must seek out a master, who will show you what to do. Without some kind

(12) This refers to those who are in the Purgative and Illuminative ways; i.e., those who, having left behind serious sin, are on the way of spiritual progress but are not yet perfect.

of a definite program, we can scarcely know how to begin—much less how to go on. How then shall we set about removing the obstacles to divine love? If we may call upon a saint to comment on the words of a saint, Francis de Sales, one of the great masters of the spiritual life, will help us in this practical task. In the first part of his *Introduction to a Devout Life* he outlines the steps that are to be taken first by one desirous of advancing in virtue. Altogether there are three steps, or, as he calls them, purgations; and his insistence on them at the beginning of a devout life is in perfect accord with the Angelic Doctor's teaching that man's part in the work of perfection is the negative one of removing obstacles. The first purgation is that from mortal sin (Chap. VI). The second goes deeper and seeks to get at and destroy the "affection for sin," in addition to all the "affections, connections and occasions which lead toward it" (Chap. VII). Finally, the purpose of the third purgation is to find and destroy, not sin, but the hidden roots of sin. This is the one that will chiefly occupy souls who, while not living in serious sin, have not yet reached perfection; it consists in eliminating, first, affections for venial sin; secondly, evil inclinations; thirdly, affections for creature-pleasures, or, as the saint puts it, for "unprofitable amusements," which include things like "play, dancing, feasting, dress, and theatrical shows." (Chap. 22, 23, 24).

Here, then, is a practical procedure that will enable us to advance in the love of God day after day. It is a program, also, which all of us must adopt, for—"every Christian, each according to his condition, must strive for the perfection of charity," and is to accomplish this by "growing in char-

ity until death.”⁽¹³⁾ It follows, also, that every soul receives sufficient grace, not only for salvation, but also for sanctity. These graces are offered progressively according to the individual’s need and merit, and will lead him, if he is faithful, to the perfection of the Christian life. What a mean opinion of the divine bounty and of the merits of Jesus have those persons who refuse to make the effort necessary to pursue sanctity on the pretended grounds that they “have not the special graces,” that it would be “presumptuous” of them to aspire to so high an ideal, or that “no one can go beyond the grace given him by God.” It is surely true that no one can go beyond grace; but God gives us all sufficient grace to be saints. “He who has not spared even His own Son, but has delivered Him for us all, *how can He fail to grant us also all things with Him?*” (Rom. 8, 32) “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me,” wrote St. Paul (Phil. 4, 13); so can we do “all things” in union with Christ our Lord, in virtue of the grace which comes to us from Him. “Because in *everything* you have been enriched in Him . . . that you lack *no grace*.” (I Cor. 5, 7) It is not God’s fault that we are not saints, it is our fault; it is not due to any deficiency of divine grace, but to our own meanness and want of generosity. “We ought to have the holiness of Apostles. There is no reason except our own wilful corruption, that we are not by this time walking in the steps of St. Paul or St. John, and following them as they followed Christ. What a thought is this!”⁽¹⁴⁾

(13) Garrigou-Lagrange: *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, p. 191.

(14) Newman: *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. I, Sermon VI, “The Spiritual Mind.”

Chapter III

THE TWO WAYS OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

1. No one doubts the sublimity of the Christian ideal of perfection. No one would deny that to seek it is most commendable. But there is a general impression that, although commendable, it is not necessary. So that a further question arises, once we have settled the important doctrinal matters treated in the foregoing sections: granted that we are all called to perfection, are we *obliged* to heed this call? Or is this ideal one to which noble and generous natures *may* aspire without, however, suffering serious harm if they do not? May the ordinary run of men ignore the divine invitation altogether? Or, to put the question in another form, is perfection a precept or a counsel?

Let us be quite clear as to what is meant by these terms. A precept is a commandment which binds under pain of sin. The degree of this obligation varies according to the gravity of the matter commanded. The precept to attend Holy Mass on Sundays binds under pain of mortal sin, although, if there is sufficient reason, one may miss Mass without fault or loss of salvation. The precept to receive confirmation binds less strictly; one does not commit serious sin here unless there is contempt for it, or deliberate neglect of the opportunity to receive it. There is another class of precepts which, since they stipulate means which are wholly indispensable for salvation, carry a more serious obligation than all others; there can be no dispensation from them, and even ignorance cannot excuse from

their fulfillment. The precept to receive baptism binds in this way: there can be no salvation without baptism, at least in desire. Ignorance of this law may eliminate malice or neglect, but it cannot supply the defect which results from the failure to observe the divine decree; for Jesus said that "unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (Jo. 3, 5)

On the other hand, a counsel is a direction, given by Christ, which fixes a desirable course of action without requiring us to follow it under pain of sin. It is a recommendation, an optional rule of life, intended to help men in their efforts to live as "children of God." St. Thomas (with the whole of Christian tradition) teaches that there are three main counsels, by which those who follow them renounce the three general varieties of human goods: poverty, by which they abandon the goods of fortune, like wealth and reputation; chastity, by which they give up bodily consolation; obedience, by which they strip themselves of the most precious interior good, namely, the will and the power of self determination. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Other counsels in the Gospel can be related to these three main ones, since what they effect is a renunciation, in some particular form, of the goods which are foresworn by poverty, chastity, and obedience. Whenever Jesus enjoins us to adopt some high idea, yet does not insist on it as a law whose infringement is sinful, we may say that he is giving a counsel. For example, he tells us not to resist evil; if some one strikes us on one cheek, we are to turn the other. Still, we may defend ourselves or our property without fault; should we avail our-

(15) Summa Theol., I II, 108, 4, c.

selves of this right, we of course fail to observe the ideal conduct recommended by Jesus, but we do not by that fact fall into sin.

If the call to perfection is a precept, then we are bound to observe it under pain of more or less serious sin; if, on the contrary, it is a counsel, then we *need* not strive for it, although to do so would be most praiseworthy. What is it—*precept* or *counsel*?

To answer this question, we need only keep in mind what is meant by perfection; it is love. Is love a precept or a counsel? "Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?" the lawyer asked. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind." This is the greatest and the first *commandment*." (Matt. 22, 37-38)

Perfection is a precept. The too common notion that it is a counsel is without foundation in the Scriptures or Christian Tradition. St. Thomas, who poses for himself the same question that we are discussing, says that, since perfection is love, it is preceptive and consists primarily and essentially in the *command* to love God, secondarily in the *command* to love our neighbor. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Further, this precept must be grouped with the strictest kind, those which fix an indispensable means of salvation. For charity is necessary for salvation; therefore perfection, at least in substance, that is in its lowest degree, is also necessary. What is this lowest degree? "To love nothing more than God, nothing as much as God, nothing contrary to God." ⁽¹⁷⁾ He who has not this perfection does not fulfill the precept.

(16) II II, 184, 3, c.

(17) II II, 184, 3, ad 2.

There is, however, this difference between the precept of perfection and other precepts. The others oblige us *at once*. For example, I am obliged *now* to attend Holy Mass on Sundays; and each time I miss through my own fault, I am guilty of grievous sin. On the contrary, the precept of perfection does not bind me *now*, as a thing to be realized *at once* (since this is impossible). It binds me *as an end* or goal, for which I must presently strive, but which I can attain only after years of struggle. We are not obliged to be perfect *now*; yet we must not relax our efforts to obtain perfection now. St. Paul thus describes the Christian attitude: "Not that I have already obtained this, or already have been made perfect, but I press on hoping that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it already. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind, I strain forward to what is before, I press on towards the goal, to the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3, 12-14)

Perfection is not only *a* precept, it is *the* precept. Since it is love, it is the primary and essential law, "the whole law and the prophets." (Matt. 22, 40) Here is the manner in which one of Christ's Vicars has stated this law ⁽¹⁸⁾: "Christ has constituted the Church holy and the source of sanctity, and all those who take her for guide and teacher must, by the Divine Will, tend to holiness of life—'This is the will of God, your sanctification,' says St. Paul. What kind of sanctity? The Lord Himself declared it when He said, 'Be ye perfect as your

(18) Encyclical on the Third Centenary of St. Francis de Sales.

heavenly Father is perfect.' *Let no one think that this is addressed to a select few and that others are permitted to remain in an inferior degree of virtue. The law obliges, as is clear, absolutely everyone in the world without exception.*"

2. Most errors concerning this doctrine come from the misinterpretation of an incident narrated in the Gospel. Asked by a rich young man what is necessary to enter into eternal life, Jesus replied, "Keep the commandments." "Which?" countered his questioner. And Jesus said: "Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and mother, and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." To this the young man said, "All these I have kept from my youth; what is yet wanting to me?" Then Jesus made the reply which causes all the difficulty: "If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast . . . and come, follow me." (Matt. 19, 16-21) *If thou wilt be perfect*—from these words it is concluded that perfection is optional, and that certain teachings contained in the Gospel are not strictly necessary because "they belong to perfection."

In considering this incident, however, we cannot interpret it in a sense contrary to the doctrine already explained. Surely St. Thomas was aware of this text (indeed, in a moment we shall cite his interpretation of it), and yet he did not see in it any contradiction to his teaching that perfection is a precept. Pope Pius XI was also presumably acquainted with it, yet we have just seen him affirm that perfection is a *law* that binds everyone in the

world without exception. Clearly the words of Jesus cannot mean that perfection is a counsel. What do they mean? Simply that, *if* one accepts Our Lord's challenge and strives for perfection, certain conditions must be fulfilled; for since men are free, they may reject what God decrees as law; it is this freedom which explains the use of the word "if."

A parallel case will help to make this clear. Suppose that you are ill and send for a doctor. After examining you, he says, "*If you wish to get well, you must go to bed and take the medicines which I prescribe for you.*" Now the doctor knows perfectly well that you wish to recover; otherwise, you would not have sent for him! Why then does he use (what appears to be) a conditional form; why does he say, "*If you wish to get well . . .*"? Clearly, the "if" does not indicate a condition at all, but a certain logical sequence that follows upon your request. What the doctor means is this: "*Since you wish to recover, having requested my services, here is what you must do . . .*" Similarly, in saying "if" to the young man, Jesus does not mean that it is optional for him to be perfect. He is referring to the question that had been asked ("What is yet wanting to me?") and explaining what the rich young man must do *if* he really is earnest about overcoming his defects.

In effect, what Jesus says is this: "*Since you would be perfect, having asked in what you are still lacking, here is my answer . . .*" The "if" cannot be taken to indicate that perfection is either a precept or a counsel. We must look elsewhere for certainty in this matter; here Jesus is simply explain-

ing *how* perfection is to be obtained by those who are in earnest about seeking it.

It is a principle of Scripture study that, in order to understand any doubtful text aright, we should consider its "parallel places," i.e., the words of other sacred writings which cover the same ground but speak from a different point of view or mention different details or use clearer language. Looking into the other Synoptic Gospels for the account of the rich young man, we will find the above interpretation borne out completely. The conditional "if" is not here used at all, but Jesus is quoted as saying to the young man, who has just boasted that he has kept the whole Mosaic law, "*One thing is still lacking to thee . . . sell all thou hast . . . and come, follow me.*" (Lc. 18, 22; Mc. 10, 21)

The variation in the expressions, which is sufficiently explained by the difference of languages (since St. Matthew's Gospel as we have it is a translation from the Aramaic, while the others were written in Greek) throws new light on the matter and makes it clear that Jesus is not suggesting a merely optional course of conduct, but is demanding of the young man something over and above the Mosaic code. Other texts point inescapably to the conclusion that this demand is a genuine precept: "Love the Lord thy God . . .," "Be thou perfect . . .," "This is the will of God . . .," "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice,"—all of these are given imperatively, not conditionally or by way of counsel; so that we are dealing with a strict command.

There are other difficulties that come from this story of the rich young man; and, while we are on the subject, it will be worth while to consider them

all. For example, since Jesus told him that, to enter life, he should keep the *commandments*, it might seem to follow that perfection is not necessary after all, but that one can enter into life by observing the commandments (i.e., of the Mosaic code); and Our Lord's statement is so understood at times. The error here consists in limiting the word "commandment" too much. When Jesus uses it here, shall we imagine that He refers only to the commands given through Moses, while excluding His own "new commandment," that of love, which He calls the greatest and first? That, on the contrary, He does include the law of love among the commandments which He has in mind as necessary for entering into eternal life is clear from the fact that He mentions it explicitly among the commandments which He enumerates. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," He said, thus showing that love is necessary "to have eternal life."*

Another difficulty comes of the fact that Jesus looked on the young man and loved him, a detail which is supplied by St. Mark (10, 21). In spite of this, the young man refused the invitation and turned away sad. This must mean (it is concluded) that one can refuse the call to perfection and still be saved. It means no such thing! If you look at the Gospel, you will see that Jesus looked lovingly upon the young man *before* issuing His invitation, and also before the other had refused to abandon his riches and follow Jesus. *After* this refusal we hear Jesus say something quite different, something which does not suggest, and scarcely admits, that

*In practice, the love of neighbor contains also the love of God; it is our practical way of manifesting this love: "he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Rom. 13, 8). Hence, we say that the command to love our neighbor contains implicitly the precept of perfection.

the young man was saved, i.e., "With what difficulty will they who have riches enter the kingdom of God!" (Mc. 10, 23)

One reason why this text presents so many difficulties is because, as St. Thomas notes, it contains both a precept and a counsel. ⁽¹⁹⁾ When Jesus says, "Go, sell whatever thou hast and give to the poor," these words are not to be taken as containing a precept; they are a counsel, the counsel of poverty. The reason that we know this is that all men are not strictly obliged to get rid of their money and property. The precept, St. Thomas says, is contained in the phrase, "Follow me."

This is an invitation to the divine companionship and love; and love is perfection. In this short phrase, so easily overlooked, especially when the first part of Our Lord's statement is given almost exclusive attention, there is decisive proof that the Divine Master is imposing perfection as a precept. Moreover, the Angelic Doctor by this analysis throws added light on the subsequent history of the rich young man: if the latter rejected the precept, then he could not have been saved; if he refused the counsel only, then he may have been saved, although surely men render their salvation difficult (to say at least) when they do not walk in the vocation to which they are called by God.

3. In speaking of the precepts and counsels, people sometimes use them to designate two "kinds" of Christianity. "We must distinguish carefully between precepts and counsels," they say; "for although all are bound by the commandments, not all are bound by the counsels." They go on to assert

(19) II II, 184, 3, ad 1.

that ordinary Christians are bound only by the commandments, whereas religious are obliged to observe the counsels. Since by the commandments they understand the ten commandments of the Decalogue, they then conclude that the higher duties of the Gospel are not meant for themselves, but only for religious.

The distinction between commandments and counsels is legitimate and also necessary; but what these persons constantly forget is that perfection itself is a precept and not a counsel. Since they identify the commandments with the natural law, they take it for granted that perfection belongs among the counsels. This distinction, necessary to form a correct conscience, thus becomes an excuse for setting aside the lofty teachings and obligations of the Gospel. But this is not the intention of those for whom the distinction comes. For example, in dealing with the love of enemies, St. Thomas says that the *commandment* requires that we be prepared to love all men including enemies in case of need, but that it *belongs to perfection* to love them in individual cases aside from need.⁽²⁰⁾ Through failure to understand the mind and method of the Saint, one might conclude wrongly from this teaching that we have no obligation to what he says belongs only to perfection. But we cannot forget that St. Thomas elsewhere lays it down, as we have shown, that perfection is itself obligatory. The reason that he distinguishes what belongs to the commandments and what to perfection is that, without such knowledge, we would be prone to fall into grave errors in forming our conscience, multiplying the possibilities of

(20) II II, 25, 8, c.

sin, and falling into discouragement. Offenses against the commandments make us guilty of sin *now*, whereas, since perfection binds us as an end, we are not guilty of sin the moment that we fail to comply with all of its requirements, but only when we ignore it over our whole life. To be wrong in this matter, and to think that each act that is not perfect makes us guilty of sin would place an intolerable burden upon us. On the other hand, if we forget that perfection is a precept, although not binding us under pain of sin in every individual act, we will fall into tepidity and eventually commit sin.

In a similar way we distinguish the obligations that we have towards our parents *in justice* from those that arise *out of love*. Justice demands that we do not injure them, love requires that we treat them with devotion. Now a sin against the justice that we owe our parents would be a graver matter than a failure to show them love in some particular instance; thus it would be worse to shoot one's father than to omit some courtesy to him. Still, love is the higher law; and who will conclude that, because injustice is the graver sin, there is no duty to practice love? So also *nature* and *reason* require us to observe the commandments of the Decalogue, and whoever refuses this duty commits grievous sin against the justice that is due to God. Because such sins offend against an *elementary* duty that we owe to God, they are more serious than the failure to act in accordance with the duty of love, which is imposed by the Gospel. But may we conclude from this that the precepts of the Gospel are unimportant? Here also, in our relations with God as with our

parents, love is the higher law and the nobler duty. And perfection, which is the same as love, binds men in the manner of love.

Since it is thus not true that the commandments and counsels divide Christianity into two separate sections, how are we to understand the relationship between them? St. Thomas, with his usual marvelous lucidity, sums up the relationship by showing that the precept of perfection establishes *the end* of the Christian life, whereas the counsels designate the *best means*. We see then why the counsels are not obligatory for all: "Since that which falls under the precept can be fulfilled in different ways, one does not become a transgressor of the precept because he does not fulfill it in *the best ways possible*; that he fulfills it *in any way* at all is sufficient."⁽²¹⁾

There is only one precept of perfection, and it determines an end that is necessary for all; there are, however, various ways of reaching this end, and it is permissible to follow any of these. Suppose that a man dies in New York, having left a will by which he divides his fortune among three nephews who live in Chicago, the only condition being that they must go to New York to obtain their share of the money. They go at once (we will suppose) but adopt different modes of travel, one going by air, another by train, another by automobile. This, of course, they may do, for the will fixes only their destination and does not require them to adopt any special mode of transportation. So it is with us Christians in our pilgrimage through this world. The Father decrees that, to receive our inheritance as Sons of God, we

(21) II II, 184, 3, ad 2.

must all go towards a particular destination: the perfection of charity. But He does not determine *how* we are to reach this goal; of the several possible ways, He leaves us to make our own choice; and we are safe so long as we take a means that is fitted to obtain the end which has been set for us.

In general, we may say that there are two ways of Christian life, two ways by which men may travel to perfection; the one is the way of the Christian religious, the other that of the Christian laity. To the man who goes by plane for his inheritance, let us compare the great hermits and saints who, casting all worldly goods and cares behind, go to God at once; they want the shortest route, the fastest mode of travel. To the one who goes by train we can compare religious; these, having still some contact with the world, and somewhat retarded thereby, nevertheless go in the same direction as do the greatest saints. Finally, the man who travels by automobile, following a route that goes up and down and winds about, is like the Christian layman who makes his way circuitously among the concerns of the world, but who must yet direct his steps towards the same sanctity which religious and saints pursue.

The way of the Christian religious, the Church holds, is the higher way; not because there is anything wrong with the way taken by the laity, but simply because the religious life enables those who enter upon it to put quickly aside the things that hinder our love from going wholly and at once to God. For by his vows, as we have said, the religious renounces the three great human goods—those of fortune, of the body, and of the soul—which, by their attractiveness, tend to absorb man's attention

and to alienate his affections from God. Bound as we are to love God with our whole heart, we may love other things only in and through and because of God. By giving up all earthly goods in a heroic renunciation, there is a greater opportunity for the religious to keep his affections from lighting upon the vain and fleeting pleasures of earth. He therefore abandons the things of the world, not because he fancies them evil (as a Christian he calls them "goods"), but because he is able in this way to love and serve God with greater singleness of purpose.

If the way of the layman is not so high or so difficult as that of the religious, yet, considered from a certain point of view, it offers an even greater challenge. "It is even a greater thing, it requires a clearer, steadier, nobler faith to be surrounded with worldly goods, yet to be self-denying; to consider ourselves but stewards of God's bounty and to be faithful in all things."⁽²²⁾

Moreover, marriage and family life, which are the ordinary state of the layman, are a means of perfection and a true vocation. Christ made marriage a sacrament, and in it He gives to the wedded pair special sacramental graces which will help them attain holiness in this new condition of life, as well as to sanctify the children who are born of their union. "Women will be saved *by* child bearing, if they continue in faith and love *and holiness* with modesty." (I Tim. 2, 15)

Through Christian marriage and family life, new saints are to be brought into the world—converters of souls, lovers of the cross, citizens in the Kingdom of God. Yet not only are parents to become holy by

(22) Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. III, Sermon I.

bringing children into the world, not only are they to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in sanctifying these children, but their own *sacramental union* is itself, no mere human bond, but a *partnership in holiness*, a union transformed by charity and obliging husband and wife in a special way to support one another in charity.

Pope Pius XI summarizes this doctrine as follows: "The love, then, of which We are speaking is not that based on the passing lust of the moment nor does it consist in pleasing words only, but in the deep attachment of the heart which is expressed in action, since love is proved by deeds. This outward expression of love in the home demands not only mutual help but must go farther; must have as its *primary purpose* that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and *perfecting* themselves in the *interior life*, so that through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more *in virtue*, and above all that they may grow in true love toward God and their neighbor, on which indeed 'depend the whole Law and the Prophets' (Matt. 22, 40). For *all men of every condition*, in *whatever honorable walk of life* they may be, *can and ought* to imitate that most perfect example of holiness placed before man by God, namely Christ Our Lord, and by God's grace to arrive at the *summit of perfection*, as is proved by the example set us of many saints."⁽²³⁾

The doctrine in this passage should be pondered deeply and at length. Let us stop for a moment to enumerate its chief points. Married couples are called to perfection, and even to the highest perfec-

(23) Casti Connubii (On Chaste Wedlock)

tion; the effort to achieve holiness is the noblest expression of their mutual love. They are to lead an interior life, such a life as is ordinarily thought of as belonging to convents and monasteries; but Christ's Vicar says that it belongs also to the home. This is, after all, not remarkable: how else can there be saintly priests and religious, lovers of the interior life, unless as children they have been spiritually trained in deeply religious homes? Husband and wife are to cooperate in living a spiritual life just as two religious might assist each other in their efforts to reach God; the marriage union is in very truth a partnership in holiness.

There are other very important doctrines set down in this short passage from Pope Pius XI. All men *can*, he says, aspire to perfection. This, then, is the doctrine of the Church, and those who say that sanctity is impossible to laymen, or in the midst of the activities of the world, are dangerously near heresy. Furthermore, all men *must* aspire to perfection; there is an obligation, a duty, a law from God; and no one may say, "This is not for me." Finally, *any honorable occupation* is a fit means for acquiring perfection. Some occupations are not honorable, others are scarcely so. While in such walks of life, it is certain that men cannot become saints; but their duty then is to change their occupation, not to exempt themselves from their primary obligation as Christians. This holds for all conditions of life—for rich and poor, for learned and unlearned, for great and the small: all must aspire to the highest sanctity. To the assertion that there are two general ways of striving for perfection, that of the Christian religious and that of the laity, we may

now add that there are innumerable particular ways—as many, in fact, as there are honorable occupations and various conditions of life.

The truths we have been here explaining have their own special Doctor: St. Francis de Sales. One of the great spiritual writers and directors of the Church, perhaps his chief contribution to the religious life of his times was showing that sanctity, which formerly had seemed to belong to the cloister exclusively, really obliged men and women in the world as well. “. . . My intention,” said he, “is to instruct such as live in towns, in families, or at court, and who, by their condition, are obliged to lead, as to the exterior, a common life; who frequently, under imaginary pretense of impossibility, will not so much as think of undertaking a devout life. . . .”⁽²⁴⁾ The first chapters of his *An Introduction to the Devout Life* are devoted to affirming and illustrating the great doctrinal truth that men in the world can and should achieve holiness. For this reason has the Holy See in our times recalled the work of this saint, raised him to the dignity of a Doctor of the Church, and designated him as the particular guide for Christian laymen.⁽²⁵⁾

Let us conclude this section by adding to what has been already said one more important and serious thought. If the lay state differs from that of religious by the fact that the latter, because of their vows, are bound by the counsels, while the former are not, it must nevertheless be asserted that the laity are also held to cultivate the spirit and the virtues of which the vows are a particular external

(24) *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Preface.

(25) Cfr. The Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on the Third Centenary of St. Francis de Sales.

expression. That is to say, for example, that although a married man may not take a vow of poverty, since his state in life binds him to care for his family, still he must practice poverty of spirit and detachment of heart; or, as St. Thomas says, he must renounce all things, if not in fact, at least *according to a certain preparation of mind*, so that he is *ready* to give up or distribute *all his goods*.⁽²⁶⁾

St. Paul also demands the highest detachment of those in the world, saying that "those who buy" should be "as though not possessing; and those who use this world, as though not using it." (I Cor. 7, 30-31) The same is true in regard to the other counsels. Laymen must observe chastity according to their state. Those unmarried must observe a virginal chastity as rigorously as any religious; those married must live in accordance with the different, but still high and exacting, demands of married chastity: "those who have wives" should be "*as if they had none*."

Finally, laymen must practice obedience by observing the commandments of God and the precepts of their lawful superiors, civil and ecclesiastical. This virtue also requires them to abandon themselves to all providential arrangements in their regard, including the trials with which they are visited in this life. In a word, all Christians are bound to observe the spirit of the vows by practicing the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience.

(26) II II, 184, 7, ad 1.

Chapter IV

I PRESS ON TOWARDS THE GOAL. . . .

There is another serious problem to be dealt with in considering the Christian's obligation to seek perfection. Let us put it in the form of an objection, an objection that is actually made quite often to the doctrine we have been studying. "What you say is true," it is admitted; "all are certainly bound to strive for holiness. However, there are degrees of holiness, and it is not necessary to possess the highest degree. Even with the lowest, one can enter into heaven; and it is sufficient for ordinary mortals to work for this more modest attainment."

It is easy to see the purpose and result of this objection; it immediately releases Christians from all higher spiritual endeavors and permits them to adopt mediocrity as a deliberate goal. One is now not only able to forget the command of Jesus to be perfect; one is performing a positive act of virtue in forgetting it.

It is true that there are degrees of perfection. Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." (Jo. 14, 2) There is a hierarchy among the saints. Our Lady stands above all, the Queen of Saints; then St. John the Baptist; then the Apostles and Evangelists; the great Doctors, martyrs, and confessors. St. Teresa of Lisieux tells how, as a child, she could not understand how all the saints could be completely happy and still have different degrees of sanctity. Then her sister filled two glasses, a large one and a small one, with water, and the saint then saw how it could be that souls might be

filled with the love of God and nevertheless have various degrees of love.

May one conclude, however, from the fact that there are different degrees of sanctity that we are free to choose the lowest degree as our own ideal? If so, then all the elaborate structure of doctrine that we have built up so far is vain, like a beautiful palace built in a remote region where no one can live. It would mean that we could ignore with impunity all the lofty legislation of the Gospel, that we could neglect the invitation of Jesus to follow Him, that we could almost set at nought the very purpose of the Incarnation, which is to make men sharers of divinity, by remaining satisfied with a natural standard of good conduct that was already known before the coming of Christ.

Let us once more go to the Angelic Doctor for assistance in a matter so serious; his thoughts concerning the Gospel teaching will give us the greatest possible security. He attacks the identical problem that we are considering, although he states it in somewhat different terms by asking whether we should look upon the higher degrees of perfection as of precept or counsel. That is, may we hold that, while the lowest degree of perfection is commanded, and therefore necessary for salvation, the higher degrees are counsels and accordingly do not oblige us to concern ourselves with them? We will say nothing here about the spiritual dwarfishness of those who would deliberately choose a lesser ideal when they know of greater; we will consider only whether one may choose the lower ideal at all.

St. Thomas answers that the higher degrees of perfection fall under the precept; yes, even the

highest degree, which can be realized only in heaven, is commanded as an end which we must seek already in this life. Therefore, we may not limit ourselves to aiming for the lowest degree of perfection, but must set ourselves to try for the highest. The saint gives two reasons for this teaching. ⁽²⁵⁾

First of all, the words, or form, of the precept itself show that what God demands of us is a *total* love: "Love the Lord thy God with thy *whole* heart, with thy *whole* mind, and with thy *whole* strength." The insistent repetition of the word "whole" wherever this precept is given is of the greatest doctrinal significance. Totality and perfection mean the same things, remarks the saint, quoting Aristotle. Therefore a perfect love of God is enjoined by the precept.

The second reason is taken from St. Paul's teaching that "the end of the precept is charity." (I Tim. 1,5) Since all the other ordinances of God are directed towards love, which is thus their end and fulfillment, we may not measure or limit the love that we will give to God. The reason is that it is not possible to measure an end that is desired, but only the means which are directed towards obtaining the end. For example, a doctor cannot measure the amount of health he will give to a patient; he cannot restore ten dollars worth of health to a poor patient, and a hundred dollars worth to a rich man. In both cases he must will to restore health without limiting it in any way. Of course he may (and must!) measure the means which he employs to effect a cure; he gives his medicines in certain doses and he fixes an exact regimen to be followed in eating and drinking.

(25) II II, 184, 3, c et ad 3.

It is the same with charity; since it is the end of Christian effort, it cannot be measured or limited; that is, we may not limit ourselves to loving God moderately, or up to a certain point only. Here also we may dispose and measure only the means. This is why a man may debate whether, in his case, it is better to enter into the married vocation or to follow the counsels; or whether the love of God would have him use this particular time for prayer or for serving the poor. But as to the end, charity—this is to be sought without limit: “the measure with which we are to love God,” said St. Bernard, “is to love Him without measure.”

2. It remains true, however, as St. Thomas also notes,⁽²⁶⁾ that whoever reaches the lowest degree of perfection will be saved. What then would happen, *in practice*, to one who, neglecting the full demands of the precept, would content himself with aiming for the lowest degree of holiness? The attempt to actually realize Christian perfection presents a new difficulty, a difficulty quite distinct from the doctrinal problem that we have been discussing so far, a difficulty in the practical order. No doubt, to consider the matter from a purely doctrinal point of view, the lowest degree of perfection is sufficient for salvation; but the question is whether, in view of actual difficulties that must be taken into account in living a Christian life, one can reach this lowest degree without striving for complete holiness.

A backward student (to consider a parallel case) may know with perfect clearness that, if he makes 75%, he will pass in his examinations. But suppose that, instead of making every effort pos-

(26) II II, 184, 3, ad 2.

sible, as should be done by one deficient in talent, he deliberately takes it easy, desiring to obtain only the necessary 75%. It is scarcely likely that he will succeed in getting even the passing grade! Although, considered *in itself*, the 75% may be sufficient, the student must *in practice* recognize his own deficiencies and gauge his efforts accordingly; otherwise he will fail. So also, it may be stated as a truth abstractly true for the spiritual life that the lowest degree of perfection is sufficient for salvation; but this does not settle the practical problem of whether imperfect men, relaxing their efforts and not caring for high achievements, will be able to reach even the lowest degree.

In actually seeking after perfection, of whatever degree, there are certain difficulties and obstacles to be encountered, certain weaknesses in ourselves that must be taken into our reckoning. In view of these, to adopt a deliberate policy of carelessness and half-hearted effort is surely to expose one's self to the possibility, almost to the certainty, of losing one's soul. Practical exigencies must be allowed for in our calculations; and they are so instant and exacting that we must strain all our energies to achieve even the minimum required by God. If God does not tempt us beyond our strength, certainly He allows us to be tempted to the limit of our strength; great saints, knowing this, pray humbly, "And lead us not into temptation!" We are warranted then in stating as a principle that **IN PRACTICE** *it is necessary* **TO AIM at the highest degree of perfection in order with certainty** **TO OBTAIN the lowest.**

Soldiers, when they fire a long-range cannon

that will shoot for miles, do not point the cannon's mouth directly at their target. If they were to do this, then the projectile, because of its weight and other influences bearing upon it, would fall to the ground long before reaching its objective. The gun is directed to an imaginary point high up in the air, for the gunners know that, upon reaching that point, the shot will, as it were, fall on their objective by a gradual descent. Moreover, they must make many complicated calculations, allowing for the weight of the projectile, the curvature and movement of the earth, the direction of the winds. If they err in any of these, they will not hit their mark.

It is for similar reasons that, in order to reach the lowest degree of perfection, we must aim at the highest. We must allow for external factors that will cause us, unless we take them into account, to fail in our aim. We must not forget the dead-weight of our own flesh, which pulls us towards the things of earth and away from God. We must particularly allow for the sinister and dangerous twist towards evil which is in our flesh as a result of the Fall. This is strong enough to make St. Paul cry out, "For I do not the good that I wish, but the evil that I do not wish, that I perform. Now if I do what I do not wish, it is no longer I who do it, but the Sin that dwells in me." (Rom. 7, 19-20) Let *us* then not imagine that we can safely overlook this evil tendency! Furthermore, we must take account of the greatness of temptation, the weakness of the flesh, the violence of passion, the strength of unmortified appetites, and the malice of the devil who, "as a roaring lion, goes about seeking someone to devour." (I Pet. 5, 8) Relaxed powers, carelessness, and un-

consciousness of danger are no match for dangers such as these. The challenge of the Christian life is such as to demand all our strength. Yes, and more than our strength! "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the Principalities and Powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual force of wickedness on high." (Eph. 6, 12) If we overcome the difficulties that beset us in this life, it will be only because of divine strength that is communicated to those who, by sanctity, are united to Jesus Christ: "I can do all things *in Him who strengthens me.*" (Phil. 4, 13)

Even the lowest degree of perfection is in reality no easy hurdle. It is given a false appearance of ease by carelessness of speech, as when it is said, "All that we must do is to avoid mortal sin," or "It is necessary *only* to avoid mortal sin." For the most of us poor mortals this is already a severe demand, and one to be satisfied only by great and sustained effort and full correspondence with grace. If we reflect on the terms used by St. Thomas to describe the minimum love necessary to avoid mortal sin, we will see at once that this is not to be accomplished without high spiritual endeavor; for what is required, as we have already said, is that one love nothing more than God, nothing as much as God, nothing contrary to God.

The love of God is a love of preference; and the minimum demanded is that God be loved above every creature, a minimum that must be expressed in a practical way by renunciation of all attachment to creatures that would separate us from God. "It is an action of the providence of the Holy Ghost,

that in our ordinary version, *which His Divine Majesty has canonized and sanctified by the Council of Trent, the heavenly commandment of love is expressed by the word dilection rather than by the word love; for although dilection is a kind of love, yet is it not a simple love, but a love of choice and election, which sense the word itself conveys, as the glorious St. Thomas notes. . . . It is a love which must prevail over all our loves, and reign over all our passions. And this is what God requires of us—that among all our loves His be the dearest, holding the first place in our hearts; the warmest, occupying our whole soul; the most general, employing all our powers; the highest, filling our whole spirit; and the strongest, exercising all our strength and vigour.”⁽²⁷⁾

* * * * *

3. *In practice, therefore, we may, and should, ignore the fact that there are degrees of perfection.* Our business, imposed on us by the precept, is to strive for the highest perfection. No doubt all will not achieve this; nor does Almighty God intend that they should. He predestines different souls to various degrees of holiness, but gives to all sufficient grace, “according to the measure of Christ’s bestowal” (Eph. 4, 7), to reach the height eternally decreed for them. Hence the reader will have observed that *nowhere in these pages has it been said that all men are actually TO ATTAIN the highest degree of perfection; what has been said is that all men must DESIRE and STRIVE FOR the highest degree.* We do not hold that a man in the world must

*That is, in the Vulgate Version of the Bible, which the Council of Trent made official for the Church.

(27) St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Bk. X, Chap. VI.

be as holy as a Carmelite, but that he must *seek* such holiness.

The degree of a man's holiness does not depend on his own efforts, therefore, but on the endowment of grace which he has received from God. Certainly he must correspond with grace; but supposing that he does this to the fullest extent possible, he would still reach that degree of sanctity foreordained by God, and could go no further. Here, however, notice a startling and pivotal fact, upon which hinges the Christian's practical spiritual program: *No one knows the degree of grace meted out to him by Almighty God.*

Still God expects every man to realize all the possibilities of the grace given to him; for, as St. Gregory says, "he who is called to sublime sanctity, will not be saved without it." How, then, are we to be saved if, on the one hand, we must achieve the degree of holiness fixed for us by God, while, on the other, we cannot know what this degree is? A hunter cannot hit a target whose whereabouts he does not know! Can we? Obviously not; so that the only practical policy we can follow is to seek to love God with our whole heart, i. e., for the highest degree of perfection. Doing this, we can be sure of rightly corresponding with grace and, therefore, of reaching the perfection intended for us. Hence, St. Francis de Sales says that the obligation to strive for perfection is universal and equal;⁽²⁸⁾ that is, all men are alike bound to strive for the highest perfection.

A distinction current among the Scholastics will help in understanding this matter; the distinc-

(28) *Treatise on the Love of God*, Bk. X, Chap. VI.

tion between the order of intention and the order of execution. That belongs to the order of intention which is envisioned and intended by the will; that belongs to the order of execution which is actually done. For example, suppose that an athlete *intends* to make a jump of twenty-two feet in order to break a record. He trains with this in mind; on the day of the meet, however, his actual jump is only twenty feet. His effort, in the order of intention, is a jump of twenty-two feet; in the order of execution, it is twenty feet. In order to make the lower jump, he had to try for the higher. Had he attempted to jump only twenty feet, convinced beforehand that he could do no better, then it is likely that he would have gone even lower than this.

Now *in the order of intention* all men are obliged to aim at absolute perfection, because that is what the precept calls for; however, *in the order of execution*, some will achieve lower degrees of holiness than others. This explains a statement made before, i. e., that to actually reach even a low degree of holiness (in the order of execution), it is necessary to aim for the highest degree (in the order of intention). If one should deliberately seek only a lower degree, then, like the athlete, he will undoubtedly go even lower. In order to arrive at that perfection decreed for us by God, it is necessary to aim at absolute perfection. Otherwise, as the athlete who makes a careless effort and fails in an easy test, he will not fulfill even the conditions necessary for salvation.

The reason why the athlete reaches only twenty feet, although he intends twenty-two, is because with the lower jump he has reached the limits of

his physical powers; and he is, as it were, foredoomed to failure in any attempt to go higher. Likewise the reason that John Smith reaches a lower degree of holiness than St. Francis of Assisi (supposing full correspondence with grace—a very dubious supposition for the most of us) is that less grace is given to him and he cannot rise beyond what grace enables him to do; that is, he has reached the limit of his supernatural powers.

One's state in life also has an important effect on the degree of sanctity that he is able to reach; a more perfect state of life, like that of a religious or a bishop, brings special opportunities and graces with it. In striving for holiness, every individual must always live in accordance with the duties of his state; so that the manner of striving for perfection, i. e., the particular works and duties by which it will be accomplished, differ according to whether one is a priest, layman, a workman, a doctor, the father or mother of a family. As a mariner, while ultimately regulating his course by the north star, nevertheless uses a compass as his proximate and practical guide, so must we, in doing the divine will, follow the duties that belong to our state as the handy and immediate indicator of what God desires of us in our particular circumstances.

Sometimes this truth, i. e., that men must seek for holiness in accordance with duties of state, is taken as an exemption for those living in the world from the duty to become holy. But this is just another error and evasion; men are to become holy *by means of* the duties of their state in life, provided only that theirs is an honorable state. Of course, one's vocation and state are part of the endowment

determined and apportioned by God; and the limits which they set to the individual's holiness, are to be taken as providentially arranged.

These limits are as unknown to us as the quantity of grace that God reserves for each soul; and it is to be remembered that, although certain states of life are higher than others, still God varies his graces from person to person regardless of their state; so that people in the world may be holier than religious, and lay-brothers may outstrip bishops. In any case, the degree of holiness intended for anyone is God's secret and God's business. One cannot know this beforehand, anymore than the athlete can know beforehand how high he will be able to jump on the day of trial. We should therefore allow God to take care of *His* part in our sanctification. On our side, we must take care of what has been entrusted to us; and this is, in the order of intention, absolute perfection, that is, the totality of love. There are no degrees of perfection in the order of intention; here all are equally bound to strive for the summits of holiness. The degrees are in the order of execution and will be taken care of by God. We need not fear that His part will be neglected!

* * * * *

4. Suppose that, in spite of all the considerations we have put down in these pages, one would still refuse to strive for high sanctity and of set purpose limit himself to the lowest degree, asserting that this is enough *for him!* What would be the effect on that decision? What would happen to such a man?

We will not attempt a private speculation in so serious a problem. Rather, we will allow the saints

to speak, as we have done throughout. For their mentality is the one that we need in striving for sanctity.

Here is St. Augustine's answer to our question: "*If you say, 'It is enough,' you have already perished.*" St. Alphonsus de Liguori adds: "Do you say that for you it is sufficient? If you do, *you are lost.*"⁽²⁹⁾

These strong words from men who are saints and doctors of the Church cannot be airily dismissed as hyperbole; they are sober, doctrinal fact. It is completely and literally true that he who says he has done enough, has already taken the road which will at length bear him to perdition, and a sufficient basis for this austere teaching is provided by two solid dogmatic reasons which we will now proceed to describe.

The first is simply that God withdraws His grace from those who neglect it. If every day you were to give some little gift to a child, a niece or nephew, and the child, instead of receiving your gifts with thanks and caring for them, were at once to destroy them or throw them away, surely you would soon grow tired of such perversity and cease from your foolish kindness. In like manner, God, when He sees that we neglect the precious graces that are offered to us every day, stops giving them to us; and for this reason St. Alphonsus reckons as one of the punishments for tepidity "the withdrawal of God's grace."⁽³⁰⁾

(29) St. Augustine's words are: "*Si autem dixeris, sufficit; et peristi.*" Sermo CLXIX, XV. It is quoted by St. Alphonsus in *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, Chapter V.

(30) *op. cit.* Chap. V. A definition of tepidity is given in the same place. Bl. Henry Suso, St. Alphonsus says, represents Jesus as saying, in his *Vision of the Rocks*: "These are the tepid who only seek to avoid mortal sin."

What a terrible penalty for carelessness! It means in the end that like a small child lost in a great city, the soul is left to its own resources in a world that is forever hostile to God and all efforts to reach Him. This could have only one result: spiritual ruin; for "without Me you can do NOTHING" (Jo. 15, 5). A soul who is punished in this way is incapable of repentance, of conversion, of growth in faith or love, or of any other supernatural activities, none of which can be accomplished without grace. St. Paul describes the dreadful condition of those souls who are thus left without God's special aid: "God has given them up to a reprobate sense, so that they do what is not fitting; being filled with all iniquity, malice, immorality. . . ." (Rom. 28,1)

Spiritual blindness is the first step in the downward movement that follows the withdrawal of grace. This is commonly spoken of in the Scriptures. "Go, and thou shalt say to this people: Hearing, hear, and understand not: and see the vision, and know it not. Blind the heart of this people, and make their eyes heavy, and shut their eyes: lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted and I heal them." (Isa. 6, 9-10) The same effect is indicated by St. Paul when he says, in the text quoted, that those so punished are delivered to a reprobate *sense*, i. e., a dullness and deficiency of spiritual perception, which allows souls to fall into every manner of sin, as a blind man might fall into a pit.

The carnal man, the man without spiritual perceptions, cannot understand the things of God. He has no sense to guide him in the spiritual world; he is like a ground mole that can feel its way about in

the darkness of the earth, but stumbles and cannot see in broad daylight. Accordingly he has no knowledge of his own position in relation to God, no appreciation of the malice of sin, no sensitiveness to the presence of temptation, no awareness of his own danger. Moreover, the loss of grace would affect, not only his mind, but also his will. And though he were not at once, as a result of this, to fall into gross sin, yet he would be unable to perform those supernatural acts of virtue so necessary to spiritual life and growth. Thus his soul would slowly wither and finally die, as does the body when it is given no nourishment or opportunity for exercise and movement.

No doubt, since God desires to save all men and gives to all sufficient grace for sanctity, He will never turn away from one who seeks Him with sincere desire. But this means no more than that abandonment by divine grace is man's fault and not God's. It is man, turning away from God, who is responsible, and not any niggardliness on the part of God. But the effect is in either case the same.

The second reason why he who refuses to strive after high sanctity endangers his very salvation is given in an ancient rule of the spiritual masters: "In the Christian life, there is no standing still; one goes either forward or backward." As soon as we slacken in our spiritual efforts, the poison which is in us from birth begins to spread imperceptibly, and, unless stopped, will enter the springs of our spiritual vitality, causing first retrogression and then death. Our nature, although good in its essential components, is nevertheless touched with disease as a result of the Fall; as a cancer enters into the

body and, without destroying its victim's essential humanity, nevertheless infects all his organs and saps his strength, so the effects of original sin, while not changing the essential goodness of human nature as it comes from the hands of God, still enter very deeply into the soul, poison its actions, and undermine its spiritual health. "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, no good dwells." (Rom. 7, 18)

True, with the help of God's grace, we can overcome the evil: "If by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live." (Rom. 8, 13) But it is equally true that whoever fails to remove it by mortification will die: "If you live according to the flesh you will die." (Rom. 8, 13) Once a man leaves off striving for holiness, he begins to live "according to the flesh," i.e., according to the desires and appetites of his fallen nature; and in doing so, although his life may appear externally virtuous, he has become involved in dark laws of spiritual disease and moral disintegration that will in due time bring about his ruin.

Each day a mother weighs her infant, watching the scales closely for evidence of growing strength. Should it happen that, of a sudden, the child's development stops and its weight remains the same for several days, the mother becomes alarmed and sends for a doctor. Why? The child *seems* healthy. But the mother knows that, since growth has ceased, there is something the matter; disease, it must be, has entered the little body; and the mother does not forget, despite the outward appearance of health, that disease is the seed of death.

This is what is meant by the statement that,

in the spiritual life, there is no standing still; the fact that development ceases is already evidence that disease has set to work. The person may be aware of no change. He is regular in his devotions; he is, he feels sure, in the state of grace, and this is, after all, sufficient for salvation. He is resolved not to commit serious sin; and so long as he holds to this purpose, surely he cannot be lost. No, not all at once. He is like the infant; outwardly robust, nevertheless dark laws are already operating to bring about his death.

Mark well, we speak of this process of spiritual decline as under the iron compulsion of *law*. Such is the doctrine of St. Paul, who describes the law of the members and the law of sin (Rom. 7, 22), which gradually lead men, by a powerful inner force, into sin and death. Of course we need not submit to this law, but those who live according to the flesh are already under it by their own free choice; and once under it, unless there is a conversion of heart, they must suffer its dreaded consequences. The masters of the spiritual life, basing themselves on this law, and expressing it concretely, tell us in one of their axioms that "Imperfections dispose the soul to venial sins, and venial sins dispose it to mortal sin."

That is the process of decay, once deliberate imperfection has begun; that is, once a soul has ceased striving for perfection. Yet the lukewarm soul fancies himself healthy and has a great contempt for imperfections and venial sins, refusing to bother about them; he is like a man who is contemptuous of his ailment because it has not *yet* killed him. The saints would tell the lukewarm soul (if he would look into their teachings) that

the state of tepidity is a more dangerous condition than mortal sin. ". . . Remaining in a state of tepidity, you will stand in greater danger of damnation [than one who commits mortal sin]; because you will easily fall from that state into mortal sin, and then there will be but little reason to hope for your resuscitation." (31)

One who falls into sin through weakness can confidently hope for the grace of repentance and the forgiveness of his offense; but since God withdraws grace from the tepid, they cannot be so confident of help when they fall; and as their souls are filled with unmortified passions, disordered affections, and worldly desires, they are scarcely in a condition to correspond with grace even were it to be granted them.

It is, then, because of the law of sin at work in our members that we must affirm, with St. Augustine, that he who says he has done enough has already perished. Contemplating this law whose dread workings he has just described so well, St. Paul exclaimed: "Unhappy man that I am! Who will deliver the body of this death?" It sounds like a cry of despair; and it would be but for the grace of Christ. Because of Christ, however, the Apostle can answer his own question, joyfully, in the next breath: "The grace of God through Jesus Christ Our Lord"! (Rom. 7, 24-25)

It is divine grace that gives us the power by which we can be delivered from sin and death. Were it not for this gift of God, every infant born into the world would be doomed to spend an eternity separated from God. But grace sets in motion a law more powerful than the law of sin, and in

(31) St. Alphonsus, *op. cit.*, Chap. 6.

the opposite direction. This is the Law of the Spirit, whose end is our *sanctification*. If we set to work resolutely to correspond with grace, then sanctity will be the result; and it is only the effort to reach sanctity that will make us safe.

Chapter V

"IN THIS SIGN. . . ."

When Germany, after World War I, was engaged in the work of reconstruction, the leaders of its several parties and interests, recognizing that the future of the country was largely in the hands of its youth, inaugurated a number of youth movements through which they hoped to realize in the coming generation the ideals in which they placed their hopes of national greatness. Knowing that true greatness and prosperity can be obtained only through Christianity, German Catholics did not fail to grasp the importance of the situation; and they, like the others, started a movement in which they sought to embody the noblest ideals of Christianity in a form that would exert the greatest influence over youth.

The method which they considered best for obtaining this end was to emphasize the positive aspects of Christianity while not making its negative side too prominent. By the positive side they meant the privileges and dignity of the Christian vocation, the nobility of the Christian ideal of life, the transformation that Christ's teaching can effect in the lives of individuals and societies. One of the chief means by which it was planned that this positive Christianity should spread its beneficial influence was through the liturgy and liturgical participation.

The purpose of the Catholics, thus carefully planned, was also ably carried out, as was evidenced by the books inspired by the German Catholic

youth movement. There was only one defect in the program; yet so important was this that in the end it caused the whole effort to fail. The defect was the attitude of the Catholic leaders towards negative Christianity. This, the shadowed side of the Master's teaching, was to be kept in the background, or at least not pushed too prominently into the foreground, because, since it comprises the avoidances entailed by moral living, together with the sacrifices and denials that Christ demands of us, too much attention to it (so the Catholics thought) would tend to repel young people marked by light-heartedness and love of life.

Here a profound mistake was made. Sometimes indeed negative Christianity is *falsely* understood to embrace only the "Thou shalt not's" of the ten commandments; and there is no doubt that insistence only on these "don'ts" would fail to inspire youth (or anyone else for that matter). But then, too, if our instruction were not to go beyond that, we would not be teaching Christianity at all, either positive or negative; for these "Thou shalt not's" are the negative, not of the Gospel teaching, but of Natural Law.

The negative practice of Christianity is the elimination from the soul of that selfish, possessive, merely natural love of creatures which retards the work of grace and prevents the soul from advancing in divine love. It includes, of course, the avoidance of sin, but goes much deeper and requires a renunciation, at least interiorly, of all the goods of earth. It is a demand for sacrifice, for a kind of heroism, from those who would reach what is high and holy. And to gloss over this aspect of Christianity, we say, is a fatal mistake.

In the first place it is a psychological mistake. For the young love heroism, high loyalty, and sacrifice in the name of noble ideals; cutting out these elements takes from Christianity precisely that which would most appeal to them. When dignified Churchmen, aging theorists, tired intellectuals or comfort-loving bourgeois formulate youth programs they should keep this in mind. Warm-blooded youth is not much attracted by such dull ideals as comfort, security, regularity, respectability; they want adventure, surprise, novelty, insecurity, strenuous effort, heroism.

Moreover, an under-emphasis of negative religious practices gives a false and distorted view of Christianity itself. For the negative is but the reverse of the positive, and the latter is impossible without the former, just as it is impossible to have the sun without shadows—indeed, it is the very brightness of the sun that causes the shadows. You must take them together, as a unit; both, or neither. As light appears, darkness must disappear, and you cannot imagine the coming of light without the disappearance of darkness. So also divine life (the positive) cannot come into our souls except with the disappearance of that spiritual darkness which St. John of the Cross teaches ⁽³²⁾ consists in a love for the vanities of this world, a love which must be expelled through the negative practices of renunciation, self-denial, penance.

The final and deepest reason for the *inevitable* failure of the policy we have been describing comes

(32) “. . . All the affections which it (i.e., the soul) has for creatures are pure darkness in the eyes of God, and, when the soul is clothed in these affections it has no capacity for being enlightened and possessed by the pure and simple light of God.”—*Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Book I, Chap. IV, Par. I.

of the fact that neglect of negative Christianity means disregard of the indispensable means for realizing the positive values of supernatural living.

Only on condition of removing darkness can the sun flood the earth with its light; only on condition of removing darkness from our souls can divine grace flood them with its light; but if men love darkness rather than the light, and accordingly cling to darkness, then certainly they cannot possess the light.

The negative in Christianity has the same function as a negative in photography: it is a means of producing the positive. If you have a picture that you would like to have reproduced, this cannot be done directly. First a negative must be made with a camera; this gives the picture in exact reverse. Then from this negative, and by means of it, a positive print is made. It is the same with Christian teaching. No doubt there is need to make speeches and write books about the positive aspects of Christianity: about grace, the splendor of the sacramental system, the liturgy, the love of God. But men cannot realize in their own lives these positive values simply by listening to the speeches or reading the books. For this they must be *purified*; and only in proportion as purification is accomplished in them will God's grace have freedom to work its marvels in their souls. This purification is the work of negative Christian practice—of denial, of renunciation, of penance. Without these the positive in Christianity, although it may be known abstractly, cannot be *experienced*.

The German youth leaders were not free from confusion concerning the true meaning and function of negative Christianity. They rightly wished

to avoid tiresome hammering on the "Thou shalt not's" of the Decalogue. Exclusive concern with these, the most primitive and rudimentary obligations of religious living—too often the only method of religious instruction—does no more than weary, repel, and provoke those whom it claims to help. Worse yet, this "method" does not provide sufficient motivation for realizing in practice even the elementary demands that it makes. Unfortunately, the German leaders did more than remove this false conception of Christianity; they discarded as well those negative practices which are simply inseparable from the teaching and way of life that is truly and fully Christian; that is, they failed to insist on the heavy demand for sacrifice that Our Lord makes of us all. In doing this they lost the very essence of Christianity and the source of its life. For what is called negative Christianity is best symbolized by the cross. Can you take the cross from Christianity? If you do, you take away its center and essence and the secret of its divine vitality. Christianity *is* the Cross.

At the time that the Catholics were making their supreme effort to gain the young, another movement, dominated by an outstanding leader, was working for the same end. The methods of this leader, however, were quite different from those of the Catholics. He had his own positive ideal of a greater Germany. This was certainly inferior to the Christian conception; nevertheless, that it might be realized, he did not hesitate to call upon all Germans, and especially the young, to make heavy sacrifices. He put them in uniforms, housed them in barracks—in short, he demanded that they live a hard and laborious life, far different from the

softness that they had enjoyed before; he even required that they should sacrifice their private careers in the interest of their country. Finally, at a time when the world was still sickened from the slaughter of World War I, these young people were taught that they must be prepared to give their lives for their Fatherland. The leader of this movement, you know, was Adolph Hitler.

There is no need to say who won the youth of Germany. It was not the Church. Catholic leaders were afraid to ask heroism of youth lest they lose them altogether. Hitler won the youth of Germany, or a very large section of it, precisely by demanding the heroic. Against the apathy, indifference, and even hostility, of many Germans, Hitler was enabled to carry on his depredations in the political and military sphere because of a vanguard of young German men and women who had been trained in a fanatical devotion to the Fuehrer and his ideals.

2. Are not Catholic leaders all over the world making the same mistake that was made by the German Catholics? When will we come to the realization that youth wants heroism? That the way to win youth is to demand the most, not the least? Of course to teach heroism to others, Catholic leaders, both lay and clerical, must themselves have a heroic devotion to their cause. They cannot, amid ease and security and the comforts to life, outline an abstractly admirable (or highly respectable and dull) program that will be capable of winning the loyalty of the young. The leaders must themselves be on fire with the love of Jesus Christ; they must have the glorious inward vision of the Christian way of life as described in the Sermon on the

Mount; they must know *from personal experience* (not simply from books!) the sublimity of the Christian ideal, and they should be able to *lead* others to it, and not merely direct them, as from a map, over territory with which they themselves are not personally familiar.

They must have, as Pius XI said, an “uncontrollable zeal for souls”* and they must be capable and willing to spend themselves, as did their Master, in bringing the Gospel to the poor. They must, in a word, personify their ideal; then others will gather round them, inspired by such devotion and eager for sacrifice in a noble cause. Only then will youth be aroused from spiritual torpor and indifference and their enthusiasms gathered round the standard of the cross. If on the other hand, Catholic youth leaders fail to do this, then in our generation also they will hand over the world to Christ’s enemies.

Why do people like novels? Is it not because they are carried away by the imaginary exploits of the heroes and heroines of whom they read? Would you say, then, that average men are repelled by heroism? On the contrary, they have the greatest admiration for it. Nor are they content with contemplating as from afar the actions of the hero in the tale; they must fancy themselves in his (or her) place that they too may enjoy these marvellous adventures, at least vicariously. It is their own dull and drab lives—not the heroic and strenuous life—that they find distasteful. Moving picture theatres testify to the same truth—crowded as they are with seekers for adventure, even if only at second hand.

*Encyclical, *Firmissimam Constantiam*

"But that is just the point!" perhaps you will say. "These novel and movie addicts are enthusiastic enough over imaginary feats of derring do, but it is doubtful whether they would have any stomach for the real thing." One can scarcely make such an objection today, however. Living in the midst of World War II, we are witnesses to the fact that the girls and boys who a few months ago were crowding neighborhood theatres to see celluloid heroes and heroines are themselves capable of the heroic. Every day we read stories of their wonderful courage, endurance, and heroic self-sacrifice. We Catholics should remember that these young men whose pictures we see in our papers receiving medals for gallantry were a short time ago sitting beside us in Church. Priests might well bear in mind that these heroes were not long since sitting in the pews before them. These are the young people of whom we were not long since saying that it is not well to ask too much; these are the ones we had in mind when we maintained that our instruction should be confined to positive Christianity while there should be no emphasis in this day and age on its hard, unpleasant, sacrificial obligations. What folly! The government asks supreme sacrifices—and gets them!

In our case, was it really that we had reason to doubt the youth? Or was it perhaps that we who were in the positions of leadership—priests, editors, writers, educators, teachers, organizers, heads of movements—was it not that we ourselves were unprepared to give an example of heroic devotion to the cause of Jesus Christ? What if all the glorious heroism being shown by young people today were being employed, not in the interests of

war and destruction, but of personal devotion to Jesus Christ! How quickly would we everywhere establish the Kingdom of God on earth!

3. The heroes of fiction can also reveal to us why it is that ordinary men love heroism and are capable of it themselves. What makes a hero heroic? It is love. Love demands sacrifice; indeed, sacrifice is the measure of love, and heroism is nothing but great sacrifice inspired by love. Because all men are capable of love, so are all capable of sacrifice and heroism, for these are love's best and truest—nay, inevitable, expression. The hero performs his deeds for love of country, or love of family, or love of her whom he desires to make his wife; and his heroism consists precisely in overcoming the obstacles that hinder his love's fulfillment.

“Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son; and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation. ‘Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’” These are the words of no less than the Church herself; she addresses them to couples standing before her altars seeking to be married. That on so happy an occasion as this Our heavenly Mother should thus already speak of sacrifice, and complete sacrifice at that, shows how inseparable it is from love. Whether the love is that between humans, or between God and man, it is a giving of self, a surrender, therefore a sacrifice.

The supreme example is God Himself—giving up His Son for love of us. For us likewise, al-

though first of all for the love of the Father, Jesus suffered His Passion and Death. How therefore can any policy of religious instruction or program of spiritual action hope to teach positive Christianity without teaching also the negative? How can there be hope of progress in love while there is forgetfulness of sacrifice?

Men who love are capable of sacrifice for the one they love; and if their love is perfect, their sacrifice will be complete. So says the Church (and, in so saying does but confirm what we know already from experience). If then we are to strive for perfect love of God, must we not also be ready for *complete* sacrifice, that is, for heroism? If, moreover, we wish to share with others the privilege and the joy of loving God, must we not also dare to demand sacrifice of them? ⁽³³⁾

If Christians are incapable of sacrifice then it can only be that they do not love; if they refuse heroism, it can only be because their love is imperfect. Behind all of Christian teaching is the invitation of Jesus to share in His love and enter into His companionship. This will assuredly not bring us a life of ease, for "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8,20) "Follow me!" He says over the centuries to us all; and love demands that we follow Him wherever His path may lead, through whatever hardships and dangers and trials. Those who follow Him most closely exult, not in the honors and joys received through association with Him, but in the sufferings and sac-

(33) Speaking of American youth particularly, Pope Pius XII said "Only a young man and woman of self-sacrifice—We were almost going to add, heroic self-sacrifice—will escape the flood" (i.e., the flood of "black paganism" that is sweeping over the world).—Address to Eucharistic Congress, June 26, 1941.

rifices they sustain for His sake: "From the Jews five times I received forty lashes less one. Thrice I was scourged, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a day and a night I was adrift on the sea; in journeyings often, in perils from floods, in perils from robbers, in perils from my own nation, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils from false brethren; in labor and hardships, in many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness . . ." (II Cor. II, 24-27))

If Christians shrink from the slightest hardship, what must be their love for Christ? If they do not know the name of penance, and shudder at the thought of learning it, can they follow one whose "whole life was a cross and a martyrdom"? Did Christ found His religion to keep us snug and comfortable? That is not what He said. "The kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence," He told His followers; "and the violent hear it away." (Matt. 11, 12) The violence here spoken of, say the commentators, is violence to one's self. And St. Peter asserts that it is the very vocation of Christians to bear suffering and trials: "Unto this, indeed, you have been called . . ." (I Pet. 2, 21)

What would St. Paul say of us, of our love of comforts, of our shrinking from hardship? What would he think of this "prudent" fear of ours—the fear that, by acknowledging sacrifice to be an essential part of Christianity, we shall lose the loyalty of Christians, young or old? Certainly if there is genuine love of Christ among us, such fears could not exist: "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution,*

or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword?" What splendid contempt he shows for such paltry threats to so glorious a love! He positively revels in sacrifice for the name of 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 any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord." (Rom. 8, 35-39) That is not mere boasting, although it is boasting; it is not the language of a superman. It is the language of love.

The saint is a lover. If we want to understand his austerities, his macerations of the body, his hours given to prayer, his fasting, we must go to the lover. To know why the saint spends such long hours in prayer, ask the lover why he spends such long hours in dreaming. If you want to know why the saint keeps vigil all night, ask the lover why he keeps vigil all night—in the snow if needs be. If you are curious as to why the saint does not eat, or finds no relish in his food, ask the lover why he does not eat or finds no relish in his food. The saint is in love; and love "bears with all things" and "endures all things." (I Cor. 13, 7)

The saint is therefore a hero. He is the hero above all others, the hero of a divine adventure. He can sustain any ordeal, he is ready for any sacrifice for the One that he loves. If so few people can grasp this, it is not, as we have seen, because they are repelled by heroism, but because they do not understand this particular kind of love. Yet it is a simple love, a love that is required of us all as the first commandment of God.

If we could only understand that the demand for sanctity is in reality an invitation to divine love! If we would only see that we are no longer under a law of fear, but under the law of love; no longer slaves, but children and spouses of the Most High! Then we would know that, in asking great sacrifice, God is not placing an intolerable burden upon us but is giving us a glorious opportunity. We would realize that it is unnecessary to run away from the drabness and squalor of everyday life and waste our energies in a dream-world of novels and moving pictures. We have the chance for heroism right where we are! Men need not wait for the slaughter of war to show courage, endurance, selflessness. Sanctity is a kind of heroism that is within every man's reach. God, who gave us the appetite for heroism, did not fail to give us the means for satisfying it.

Only that is true heroism which advances some noble cause, benefits men in some way, helps the weak, brings true happiness to greater numbers of our fellows, establishes the Kingdom of God on earth. The "heroic" deeds of pirates and robbers are a misfortune to the world. Yet because good men prefer comfort and respectability to heroism, mankind, with its craving for heroism, is left to give its admiration to false heroes; it will do this rather than live without them.

The heroism of war brings destruction and suffering; and therefore, however admirable in itself, is very often reprehensible in its motives and horrible in its effects. How unfortunate that today, in what claims to be an age of enlightenment, men still admire and glorify the physical display of strength, brutal exercise of force, courage at the

mere animal level! Look at the pictures in front of theatres or the illustrations for stories in popular magazines. The hero is forever in an aggressive attitude, knocking down or shooting "the villain." It is any wonder that we remain at heart barbarians, that brutality entertains and pleases us, that even the horrors of a war find us taking the sadistic pleasure in the sufferings of our "enemies." From age to age men hand on a tradition of brutality for its own sake, of courage and strength exercised without high purpose, or even under the impulse of evil motives.

Is it not time that the appetite for the heroic be re-directed and placed at the services of beneficial forces? That men are really capable of admiring heroes other than gangsters, or prize fighters, or athletes, or soldiers, is clearly enough evidenced by the acclaim given to those heroes of science who have exposed their lives to grave danger in order to alleviate human suffering. Indeed, ordinary men are capable of admiring even the high spiritual heroism of the saints, as is evidenced by the huge crowds that followed such men as St. Simon Stylites, St. Francis of Assisi, St. John Bosco. All that Christians need to be capable of similar devotion is —*not* the gift of miracles!—but *love* for the person of Jesus Christ. When we really love Him, we shall be ready to follow Him through poverty, contempt, physical suffering, or any other hardship. "O Beloved Word of God," we would pray with St. Ignatius of Loyola, "teach me to be generous, to serve Thee with that perfection which Thy majesty claims, to give without calculation, to fight without heeding wounds, to labor without repose, to expand myself in Thy service without thought

of other reward than that of knowing that I do Thy most holy will."

This saint (Ignatius), so eager to form apostles who would spread everywhere the name and knowledge of Jesus, knew that heroism would be necessary for this, and in his Exercises he sought to nerve those whom he was directing to pray thus: "I wish and desire, and it is my deliberate determination, provided only it be to Thy greater service and praise, to imitate Thee in bearing all injuries, and all reproach, and all poverty, as well actual as spiritual, if only Thy divine Majesty be pleased to choose and receive me to such a state."

If we respond to this challenge; if we take Christ at His word and seek for perfection, however high the cost or complete the sacrifice demanded, then Christianity, and not totalitarianism, will dominate the new age. But not otherwise. We cannot cast fire on the earth with tepid water. The Christian must be ready for the cross. Only in this sign shall he conquer.

