

Ryan, Alphonsus  
Confidence, Sister?  
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**SHORT TALKS TO RELIGIOUS**

# **CONFIDENCE, SISTER?**

**By ALPHONSUS RYAN, O. F. M.**

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ST. ANTHONY'S GUILD  
PATERSON, N. J.



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**ST. ANTHONY'S GUILD  
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## FOREWORD

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IT WILL always remain true that it was pride — and no other sin — which sent Lucifer and his devotees hurtling down into hell; consequently, it will always be just as true that humility is the virtue most needed to ensure our salvation and to guarantee our progress in holiness. The only time our Lord used the expression, "Learn from Me," He followed it by no other reason than "for I am meek and humble of heart." Humility must come first, for it is the foundation of every other virtue. But it must not be forgotten that the other virtues also are important; they are relatively *very* important. The "United States," carrying rich cargoes across the seas, may dominate the ocean highways; but that does not mean that others among the ships over which she lords are not great also. Humility is the foundation of holiness only because there is meant to be a magnificent superstructure, consisting of the other virtues, built on it. Indeed, they must be built upon it. It would be a peculiar thing, surely, to dig a foundation unless one planned to erect a superstructure.

Confidence is one of the virtues which must be based upon, and grow out of, humility. In itself, confidence is a manifestation of the divine virtue of faith. Working through faith, confidence does not allow us to be dismayed at our own nothingness and frailty — and nothingness and frailty we are. We know in all humility that we are vile, and this very knowledge, activated by faith, makes us depend less and less on ourselves to do and to accomplish, and throws us more completely upon God, our refuge and our strength. That is why, no doubt, Father Faber calls confidence “the manliness of a humble soul.”

Reaching back into the free gift of our creation with all its attendant favors manifesting love and generosity of God, Father Alphonsus shows that most of us quickly make our first mistake on the path of holiness through excessive self-confidence. With subtle naïveté we imagine ourselves to be building up the spiritual edifice and we relegate God to the position of a mere supervisor, whereas He is in all reality the architect. We need simply to carry out His plans in our soul’s regard. There is a

necessity for us to be more conscious, with Saint Francis of Assisi, of our own nothingness, and of God's omnipotence, so that we can say with a little more conviction each time: "My God and my all!"

— LEONARD D. PEROTTI, O. F. M.

## PLAN

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- I. No holiness except from God
- II. Ignorance of our true position between the omnipotence of the Creator and the nothingness of the creature
- III. The nothingness of every creature
- IV. Big sinners' realization of this fact
- V. Pride as the frustration of God's plan for our sanctification
- VI. Pride in our "spiritual progress"
- VII. How God works to show our nothingness
- VIII. Our reaction — despair
- IX. Motives for confidence



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# CONFIDENCE, SISTER!

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## I. NO HOLINESS EXCEPT FROM GOD

**M**AN of himself is incapable of holiness. Even if he were born into this world free from the stain of original sin, he would not by that fact be holy, nor would he, of himself, be able to acquire holiness; for holiness does not mean merely freedom from sin. Holiness is an essential attribute of God Himself, which He wills to share with His little creatures; and apart from this participation in the Divine Life willed by God there is no holiness possible in the creature. From all eternity God has willed to share the happiness of the Beatific Vision with humanity. He had a plan for each individual soul whereby, through the free gift of sanctifying grace, the creature would be raised from the natural to the supernatural level, becoming capable of participating in the very life of the Blessed Trinity. Original sin made the plan more difficult of realization, but did not essentially change it. Instead of having to deal with creatures who were docile, enlightened, eager to correspond with

the eternal designs, God had now to face the results of sin, which made His creatures rebellious, prone to pride and every other evil, weak-willed, spiritually blind, impaired in intellect and subject to disease.

## II. IGNORANCE OF OUR TRUE POSITION BETWEEN THE OMNIPOTENCE OF THE CREA- TOR AND THE NOTHINGNESS OF THE CREATURE

This spiritual blindness and darkness of the intellect is one of the major obstacles to the development of the Divine Life in us; not only does it hide from us knowledge of where our real good is to be found, but it causes us to be, to an extent, unaware of our deficiencies, unable to appreciate the true position of human beings between the omnipotence of the Creator and the nothingness of the creature.

Human beings are obsessed with the idea that they are something; at all costs they will strive to be something. They are still trying to prove some truth in that deceit of the Serpent: "You will be like God" — as if finite man could ever assume the attributes of the infinite Creator. They see themselves

with certain talents, capabilities, powers, which they attribute to themselves and exploit to the best advantage, hoping to acquire thereby more independence, more self-sufficiency, more power over others, more luxury and creature comfort.

### III. THE NOTHINGNESS OF EVERY CREATURE

No matter how they disguise the truth from themselves, the plain fact is far from what they would like to believe. Any human being, be he prince or beggar, is in the last analysis dust and sin. God formed him from dust, gave him as a free gift life, intellect, will, beauty, talents, his immortal soul and, in the supernatural order, sanctifying grace. Any good act done by that creature, any act meriting an eternal recompense was made possible solely because God gave a special grace to accomplish it—it was through a free gift from God that he was even able to attempt it. The only actions done independently of God are those sinful acts whereby a man has freely chosen time and again to forfeit his eternal happiness and frustrate God's plan for him.

#### IV. BIG SINNERS' REALIZATION OF THIS FACT

These are the plain facts; yet how many realize them? Strangely enough, it is often those who have strayed furthest from the path of justice; who have plunged deep into sin of every kind, who have a clearer understanding of the real position of human beings, rather than those who are cultivating what is called "the spiritual life." Hence we see great saints arising from the ashes of terrible sin — St. Augustine, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Margaret of Cortona, St. Angela of Foligno and others. The underlying reason for this apparent anomaly is the fact that human nature, impaired by original sin, even when it is not tempted to sins of the baser sort, inclines to pride, which is in itself a more formidable barrier to grace than any other sin; it is more insidious, being less apparent to the person possessed by it.

#### V. PRIDE AS THE FRUSTRATION OF GOD'S PLAN FOR OUR SANCTIFICATION

Pride is the stumbling-block of many would-be saints in the religious life. Anxious to shine in the sphere in which they find

themselves, debarred by their very profession from satisfying any worldly ambitions, sanctity appears to them as an "accomplishment," just as playing the violin or possessing linguistic ability might have appeared had they pursued a worldly career. They are anxious to progress in this "science of the saints." They make prodigious efforts, consult books, experience pleasure when they see themselves becoming "models of religious perfection" as far as the outward observances of their Rule are concerned. In time, when years of struggle to approximate the degree of regularity required by the "perfect religious" have given way to the self-complacency of achievement, they may feel in a position to try to spur on the other less regular religious whom they have been secretly or openly criticizing during their apprenticeship.

## VI. PRIDE IN OUR "SPIRITUAL PROGRESS"

In the sanctification of a soul, the Holy Spirit first endeavors to wean it from sin. When this has been accomplished and the happiness of serving God has been realized

and relished by the soul, a new path opens out before it. Detached from the things of earth and with no further ambition within that sphere, it believes it sees the possibility of being "something" in the spiritual life. It attributes its new spiritual aspirations to its own latent goodness (which, of course, it had always dimly suspected), and it has a kind of mental photograph of the "saint" it means to become by its own efforts (seconded, of course, by the Holy Spirit) in no long time. Although it does not realize it, "the last state of that soul is worse than the first." In its blindness and ignorance it has been pulled out of a thicket on one side of the road by the Holy Spirit, and straightway has blundered across the road and fallen into the ditch on the other side! God must begin His work all over again.

## VII. HOW GOD WORKS TO SHOW US OUR NOTHINGNESS

With infinite patience God sets to work. This time His task is to show the soul its real state, its true position, altogether apart from its personal sins. God cannot com-

municate His holiness to a creature until that creature has a correct idea of itself. It is as if a mother had a frail and delicate child. She realizes that with great care and love she can gradually make her child strong and healthy like other children, provided the little one will submit to her treatment and trust that she knows the extent of its weakness. But what could she do if her child became obsessed with the idea that it was quite as strong as the other hardy youngsters of the neighborhood; if it insisted on braving all weathers to go and play in the woods and fields; and scornfully rejected all her attentions and remedies, suggesting that she was deceiving it all the time about the state of its health? We know that there could be only one end to such a state of affairs. Because the child refuses to admit its weakness, ignores the symptoms of disease in its frail constitution, all the mother's love is powerless to prevent her little one from running head on into disaster.

So it is with us and God our Father. He is our Father, He wants to exercise His rights as father in our regard. He asks us in the very beginning of our spiritual life to

“become like little children.” He wants us to admit our weakness, to realize that we must depend on Him for everything. If we have never fully acknowledged this weakness, if we cannot admit that we are worse, far worse than sick children, if we are unwilling to give ourselves to God, not clothed with our self-made perfection but as a little heap of misery and sin, then it is a sure sign that our sanctification has not even begun.

God does all He can to bring us to this realization as a preliminary to His sanctifying action on our soul. By our repeated failures to “acquire” virtue, He lets us see our helplessness; He makes us aware of the persistence of our faults which we thought would be eradicated merely by the wishing on our part. If we pride ourselves on our regularity and zeal for strict observance, He will send us sickness perhaps, or overwhelm us with such lassitude that we will no longer be the outstanding member of our community in these matters. After — it may be — years, it is borne in on us that for all our frenzied efforts, our cocksure hopes of success, our prayers and our desires, we have made no headway in the direction we



hoped. We used to find such joy in prayer, but that has died away too. We begin to wonder if we even have, or ever had, a vocation.

### VIII. OUR REACTION — DESPAIR

It is at this precise point, when the Holy Spirit has achieved — in spite of our blindness and stupidity — the first necessity of our spiritual life, that we are in danger of undermining all His work by a return to pride which engenders discouragement. Because we had such a high idea of ourselves, we are disappointed in ourselves for having failed to reach it. We are disgusted, because it seems to us that something must have been culpably lacking in our efforts. Our next reaction is to assume that God too is disappointed and disgusted with us. It is but a step from that to the "cui bono?" of the "spoiled saint."

Yet our assumption has no basis whatever in theology. God is changeless — His love for us cannot change to disgust. As a matter of fact, He has been working patiently all these years to file down our pride, to make us understand that we are just weak, helpless children in His eyes, and to ask us to

commit ourselves unreservedly to His sanctifying action, without formulating any plans in our sin-muddled, stupid heads.

Now at last He has brought us to our knees. We finally discover that we are helpless and hopeless. But is not this a reason for despondency? If we are so hopeless, what is the use of making an effort? In our sin and misery we can never please God.

That is true. But God is good, unalterably good, and He loves His creatures with a changeless love which asks only that they submit to His action in order to be pleasing to Him in His way. Surely He asks very little! Yet we will give Him anything but this. He is our Father — let us never forget this. Somehow, in the minds of many Christians the old Judaic conception of God has lingered. They think of Him as a taskmaster who gives some work to be done, and will, according to its quality, pay the wages it merits; or as a rigorous judge, scrutinizing our every action in order to seek out the flaws and duly punish them. Nothing could be further from the truth. God, Infinite, Paternal Love has no other interest in us than to make us holy. To do this there are no lengths to which He will not go.

To begin with, He has gone to the unimaginable length of becoming our Father in very fact. The Eternal Father has but one Son according to nature, God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity; in order that He might extend His paternity to us, He has willed that His adorable, only-begotten Son should assume our human nature, should receive in His human created soul such superabundance of sanctifying grace that we might be given as it were of its overflow. Thus there is conferred on us the same title of sonship as Christ had in His human nature.

#### IX. MOTIVES FOR CONFIDENCE

God the Father has given us His Son to be our possession. "A Child is born to us and a Son is given to us" (Isa. 9:6). What ground for confidence! The Father no longer sees us as isolated heaps of misery, but only in His Son, as part of the Mystical Body of His Son, who is infinitely pleasing to Him. Now if Jesus belongs to us, all His merits, His holiness, His life, His prayer, His power with the Father, His passion and death belong to us likewise. It

is true that we are miserable and powerless to achieve our own holiness. But Jesus will give us of His holiness if we, like little children, will submit, in union with Him, our elder Brother, to the plan our loving Father has laid down for our sanctification.

God has given us Jesus for our possession. "And how can He fail to grant us also all things with Him?" When Jesus is present in our soul, the Father and the Holy Spirit are also present. Not only are they present, but they are actually our possession. They do not act as strangers in our house, but they give themselves to our soul, they touch it, they imprint on it the image of their substance, and by this close intimacy, they make it able to participate in their divine activity.

Why should we worry about our weakness and our misery? We have the great God of heaven and earth within our soul to grant us of His holiness if we will but receive it, instead of trying to invent a holiness of our own.

Some people imagine that if they are to receive anything from God they must go to Him with a reserve fund of merits on their own part; otherwise they cannot hope

to win their petition. Nothing could be more opposed to the Christian concept of the virtue of hope, which teaches us to hope for grace and favors, not through any merit of our own, but relying solely on the goodness of God and the merits of Jesus Christ. God will bestow His gifts on us, not because we are good, but because He is good and because He loves us, loves us infinitely in His Son.

Let us never lose confidence. God our loving Father has a plan for every one of us, a plan which, if we will but allow Him to work it out in us, will bring us to sanctity. He knows we are weak and wretched—He sees our wretchedness far more plainly than we do, and He makes allowances for the blunders we have made through our blindness and spiritual stupidity. Every detail of our lives up to the present has been a part of His plan. When we have gone contrary to His loving designs for us, our Father has patiently arranged other details to form us to the image of His Son.

When we become aware of our sinfulness, our nothingness, our powerlessness for any good, let us beware of losing heart. We shall be tempted to think that we mean

nothing to God, that we can contribute nothing to His glory. Of ourselves, of course, this would be true; but in His ineffable goodness God has willed that we should share in an infinite contribution to His eternal glory. How can this be? It can be, and it is, because the Father's glory consists in the love given Him by His Divine Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Since the time of the Incarnation — and even in a certain sense, before it, because all was present to the mind of God, the Divine Son, Jesus Christ (that is, the whole Christ) includes God made man and all the members of His Mystical Body. Christ is not divided: there is only one Christ. So the Eternal Father cannot look at Him without seeing His Mystical Body too. Neither can He look at us without seeing in us His only-begotten Son.

Let us have confidence not in our own efforts but in the merits of Christ. Ah, the merits of Christ! The Eternal Father must accept them. They are worthy to purchase any and every grace for us according to the Father's adorable will. A

confidence that rests solely on Jesus' power with the Father will never give way to despondency in the hour of struggle and danger.

We should plunge ourselves into the merits of Christ, and be willing to lose our life of self in order that the Divine Life, the life intended for us by God's plan, may absorb us wholly and allow us to say with St. Paul: "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me."

## QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

1. Have I a firm conviction that of myself I am incapable of holiness?
2. Am I ignorant of my true attitude: that I am still trying to prove some truth in the Serpent's deceit: "You will be like God"?
3. Do I realize that any act of mine meriting an eternal recompense was made possible solely because God gave me a special grace to accomplish it?
4. Is my attitude in the spiritual life one of self-complacency?
5. Do I realize that if I refuse to admit my weakness God's love is powerless to prevent me from running headlong into disaster?
6. Am I convinced that, by my repeated failure to "acquire holiness," God lets me see my helplessness?
7. God's love for me cannot change to disgust. Do I meditate on that? God is changeless.



8. When I do at times realize my nothingness, my helplessness and my hopelessness, do I give way to despondency, or do I throw myself like a brokenhearted child into His arms?
9. To me, is God a hard taskmaster, a vigorous judge, scrutinizing every action so as to seek out my failures and duly punish them? If so, I have not even begun to understand God. Infinite Love only wants to make us holy. Do I doubt that?
10. Do I strive to realize that God the Father no longer sees me as an isolated heap of misery, but only in His Son, as part of His Mystical Body?
11. Jesus belongs to me; therefore, His works, prayer, sacrifice; His holiness, His life, His death, His power with the Father, are mine. Do I ever thank Him for the infinite treasure that He has placed at my disposal to pay for the graces I need in order to be holy?

12. Do I believe that the Eternal Father cannot look at His own Divine Son without seeing His Mystical Body too, and therefore me, a member of that Body?

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An unbounded confidence in the infinite merits of Jesus opens the soul to bloom fully before the sun of God's eternal love — in peace and happiness.



