

A Christian's Courage

St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life** (1608)

IV.1 We must not trifle with the Worldly

As soon as your worldly friends perceive that you aim at leading a devout life, they will let loose endless shafts of mockery and misrepresentation upon you; the more malicious will attribute your change to hypocrisy, designing, or bigotry; they will affirm that the world having looked coldly upon you, failing its favor you turn to God; while your friends will make a series of what, from their point of view, are prudent and charitable remonstrances. They will tell you that you are growing morbid; that you will lose your worldly credit and will make yourself unacceptable to the world; they will foretell your premature old age and the ruin of your material prosperity; they will tell you that in the world you must live as the world does, that you can be saved without all this fuss, and much more of the like nature.

This is vain and foolish talk: these people have no real regard either for your bodily health or your material prosperity. "If you were of the world," the Savior has said, "the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (Jn 15:19).

We have all seen men, and women too, pass the whole night, even several in succession, playing at chess or cards, and what can be a more dismal, unwholesome thing

* This selection is based upon an English translation in the public domain, edited and adapted with reference to the French text by Christopher O. Blum.

than that? But the world has not a word to say against it, and their friends are in no way troubled. But give up an hour to meditation or get up rather earlier than usual to prepare for Holy Communion, and they will send for the doctor to cure you of hypochondria or jaundice! People spend every night for a month dancing, and no one will complain of being the worse; but if they keep the one vigil upon Christmas Eve, we shall hear of endless colds and maladies the next day! Is it not as plain as possible that the world is an unjust judge, indulgent and kindly to its own children, harsh and uncharitable to the children of God? We cannot stand well with the world save by renouncing his approval. It is not possible to satisfy the world's unreasonable demands: "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Mt 11:18-19)

Even so, Philothea, if we give in to the world, and laugh, dance, and play as it does, it will affect to be scandalized; if we refuse to do so, it will accuse us of being hypocritical or morbid. If we adorn ourselves after its fashion, it will put some evil construction on what we do; if we go in plain attire, it will accuse us of meanness; our cheerfulness will be called dissipation; our mortification dullness; and ever casting its evil eye upon us, nothing we can do will please it. It exaggerates our failings and publishes them abroad as sins; it represents our venial sins as mortal, and our sins of infirmity as malicious. St. Paul says that charity is kind, but the world is unkind; charity thinks no evil, but the world thinks evil of everyone, and if it cannot find fault with our actions, it is sure at least to impute bad motives to them. Whether the sheep be black or white, horned or no, the wolf will devour them if he can. Do what we will, the world must wage war upon us. If we spend any length of time in confession, it will speculate on what we have so much to say about! if we are brief, it will suggest that we are keeping back something! It spies out our every act, and at the most

trifling angry word, sets us down as intolerable. Attention to business is avarice, meekness mere silliness; whereas the wrath of worldly people is to be reckoned as generosity, their avarice, economy, their mean deeds, honorable. There are always spiders at hand to spoil the honey-bee's comb.

Let us leave the blind world to make as much noise as it may, like a bat molesting the songbirds of day. Let us be firm in our ways, unchangeable in our resolutions, and perseverance will be the test of our self-surrender to God, and our deliberate choice of the devout life.

The planets and a wandering comet shine with much the same brightness, but the comet's is a passing blaze, which does not linger long, while the planets cease not to display their brightness. Even so hypocrisy and real goodness have much outward resemblance; but one is easily known from the other, inasmuch as hypocrisy is short-lived, and disperses like a mist, while real goodness is firm and abiding. There is no surer foundation for the beginnings of a devout life than the endurance of misrepresentation and calumny, since thereby we escape the danger of vainglory and pride, which are like the midwives of Egypt, who were bidden by Pharaoh to kill the male children born to Israel directly after their birth. We are crucified to the world, and the world must be as crucified to us. It holds us to be fools, let us hold it to be mad.

IV.2. Our need for Courage

However much we may admire and crave for light, it is apt to dazzle our eyes when they have been long accustomed to darkness; and on first visiting a foreign country, we are sure to feel strange among its inhabitants, however kindly or courteous they may be. Even so, my child, your changed life may be attended with some inward discomfort, and you

may feel some reaction of discouragement and weariness after you have taken a final farewell of the world and its follies. Should it be so, I pray you take it patiently, for it will not last—it is merely the disturbance caused by novelty; and when it is gone by, you will abound in consolations. At first you may suffer somewhat under the loss what you enjoyed among your vain, frivolous companions; but would you forfeit the eternal gifts of God for such things as these? The empty amusements which have engrossed you hitherto may rise up attractively before your imagination, and strive to win you back to rest in them; but are you bold enough to give up a blessed eternity for such deceitful snares? Believe me, if you will but persevere you will not fail to enjoy a sweetness so real and satisfying, that you will be constrained to confess that the world has only gall to give as compared with this honey, and that one single day of devotion is worth more than a thousand years of worldly life. But you see before you the mountain of Christian perfection, which is very high, and you exclaim in fearfulness that you can never ascend it. Be of good cheer, my child. When the young bees first begin to live they are mere grubs, unable to hover over flowers, or to fly to the mountains, or even to the little hills where they might gather honey; but they are fed for a time with the honey laid up by their predecessors, and by degrees the grubs put forth their wings and grow strong, until they fly abroad and gather their harvest from all the country round. Now we are yet but as grubs in devotion, unable to fly at will, and attain the desired aim of Christian perfection; but if we begin to take shape through our desires and resolutions, our wings will gradually grow, and we may hope one day to become spiritual bees, able to fly. Meanwhile let us feed upon the honey left us in the teaching of so many holy men of old, praying God that He would grant us doves' wings, so that we may not only fly during this life, but find an abiding resting-place in Eternity.

IV.10. How to strengthen the Heart

Examine from time to time what are the dominant passions of your soul, and having ascertained this, shape your life, so that in thought, word, and deed you may as far as possible counteract them. For instance, if you know that you are disposed to be vain, reflect often upon the emptiness of this earthly life, call to mind how burdensome all mere earthly vanities will be to the conscience at the hour of death, how unworthy of a generous heart, how puerile and childish, and the like. See that your words have no tendency to foster your vanity, and even though you may seem to be doing so but reluctantly, strive to despise it heartily, and to rank yourself in every way among its enemies. Indeed, by dint of steady opposition to anything, we teach ourselves to hate even that which we began by liking. Do as many lowly, humble deeds as lie in your power, even if you perform them unwillingly at first; for by this means you will form a habit of humility, and you will weaken your vanity, so that when temptation arises, you will be less predisposed to yield, and stronger to resist. Or if you are given to avarice, think often of the folly of this sin, which makes us the slave of what was made only to serve us; remember how when we die, we must leave all we possess to those who come after us, who may squander it, ruin their own souls by misusing it, and so forth. Speak against covetousness, commend the abhorrence in which it is held by the world; and constrain yourself to abundant almsgiving, as also to not always using opportunities of accumulation. If you have a tendency to trifle with the affections, often call to mind what a dangerous amusement it is for yourself and others; how unworthy a thing it is to use the noblest feelings of the heart as a mere pastime; and how readily such trifling becomes mere levity. Let your conversation turn on purity and simplicity of heart, and strive to frame your actions accordingly, avoiding all that savors of affectation or flirting.

In a word, let your time of peace—that is to say, the time when you are not beset by temptations to sin—be used in cultivating the graces most opposed to your natural difficulties, and if opportunities for their exercise do not arise, go out of your way to seek them, and by so doing you will strengthen your heart against future temptations.

IV.11 Anxiety

Anxiety of mind is not so much an abstract temptation, as the source whence various temptations arise. Sadness, when defined, is the mental grief we feel because of our involuntary ailments—whether the evil be exterior, such as poverty, sickness or contempt; or interior, such as ignorance, dryness, depression or temptation. As soon as the soul is conscious of some such trouble, it is downcast, and trouble sets in. Then we at once begin to try to get rid of it and find means to shake it off; and so far, rightly enough, for it is natural to us all to desire good and shun that which we hold to be evil.

If anyone strives to be delivered from his troubles out of love of God, he will strive patiently, gently, humbly and calmly, looking for deliverance rather to God's goodness and Providence than to his own industry or efforts; but if self-love is the prevailing object he will grow hot and eager in seeking relief, as though all depended more upon himself than upon God. I do not say that the person thinks so, but he acts eagerly as though he did think it. Then if he does not find what he wants at once, he becomes exceedingly impatient and troubled, which does not mend matters, but on the contrary makes them worse, and so he gets into an unreasonable state of anxiety and distress, till he begins to fancy that there is no cure for his trouble. Thus, you see how a disturbance, which was right at the outset, begets anxiety, and anxiety goes on into an excessive distress, which is exceedingly dangerous.

This restless anxiety is the greatest evil which can happen to the soul other than sin. Just as internal commotions and seditions ruin a commonwealth, and make it incapable of resisting its foreign enemies, so if our heart be disturbed and anxious, it loses power to retain such graces as it has, as well as strength to resist the temptations of the Evil One, who is all the more ready to fish (according to an old proverb) in troubled waters. Anxiety arises from an unregulated desire to be delivered from any pressing evil, or to obtain some hoped-for good. Nevertheless, nothing tends so greatly to enhance the one or retard the other as over-eagerness and anxiety. Birds that are captured in nets and snares become inextricably entangled therein, because they flutter and struggle so much. Therefore, whensoever you urgently desire to be delivered from any evil, or to attain some good thing, strive above all else to keep a calm, restful spirit—steady your judgment and will, and then go quietly and easily after your object, taking all fitting means to attain thereto. By easily I do not mean carelessly, but without eagerness, disquiet, or anxiety; otherwise, so far from bringing about what you wish, you will hinder it, and add more and more to your perplexities. “My soul is always in my hand, yet do I not forget your Law” (Ps 119:109), David says. Examine yourself often, at least night and morning, as to whether your soul is in your hand; or whether it has been wrested away from you by any passionate or anxious emotion. See whether your soul is fully under control, or whether it has not in anywise escaped from beneath your hand, to plunge into some unruly love, hate, envy, lust, fear, vexation, or joy. And if it has so strayed, before all else seek it out, and quietly bring it back to the presence of God, once more placing all your hopes and affections under the direction of his holy will. Just as one who fears to lose some precious possession holds it tight in his hand, so, like King David, we ought to be able to say, “My soul is always in my hand, and therefore I have not forgotten your Law.”

Do not allow any wishes to disturb your mind under the pretext of their being trifling and unimportant; for if they gain the day, greater and weightier matters will find your heart more accessible to disturbance. When you are conscious that you are growing anxious, commend yourself to God, and resolve steadfastly not to take any steps whatever to obtain the result you desire, until your disturbed state of mind is altogether quieted—unless indeed it should be necessary to do something without delay, in which case you must restrain the rush of inclination, moderating it, as far as possible, so as to act rather from reason than impulse.

If you can lay your anxiety before your spiritual guide, or at least before some trusty and devout friend, you may be sure that you will find great solace. The heart finds relief in telling its troubles to another, just as the body when suffering from persistent fever finds relief from bleeding. It is the best of remedies, and therefore it was that St. Louis counselled his son, “If you have any uneasiness lying heavy on thy heart, tell it immediately to your confessor, or to some other pious person, and the comfort he will give will enable you to bear it easily.”