

## A Christian's Obedience

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

### I.1 True Devotion

You aspire to devotion, my dear Philothea, because as a Christian you know that it is a virtue most acceptable to the Divine Majesty. But seeing that the small errors we commit in the beginning of any undertaking are apt to grow as they proceed, and to become irreparable at the last, it is important that you should thoroughly understand the virtue of devotion—and that because although there undoubtedly is such a virtue, there are also many spurious and idle counterfeits, and unless you know which is real, you may deceive yourself by pursuing a false and superstitious version of it.

Each of us paints devotion according to our own desire and imagination. One man sets great value on fasting and believes himself to be leading a devout life, so long as he fasts rigorously, although the while his heart is full of bitterness, and while he will not moisten his lips with wine, perhaps not even with water, in his great abstinence, he does not scruple to steep them in his neighbor's blood through slander and detraction. Another man reckons himself as devout because he repeats many prayers daily, although at the same time he does not refrain from all manner of angry, irritating, conceited, or insulting speeches among his family and neighbors. This man freely opens his purse in almsgiving but closes his heart to all gentle and forgiving feelings towards those who are opposed to

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\* 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.

him; while that one is ready enough to forgive his enemies but will never pay his rightful debts save under pressure. All these people are conventionally called devout but fail to be so in truth. When Saul's servants sought to capture David, Michal induced them to suppose that the lifeless statue lying in his bed, and covered with his garments, was the man they sought; and in like manner many people dress up their exterior with the visible acts expressive of earnest devotion, and the world supposes them to be devout and spiritual-minded, while all the time they are lifeless statues.

All true and living devotion, Philothea, presupposes the love of God; and, indeed, it is neither more nor less than a true love of God, though not always of the same kind. For that love, when shining on the soul, we call grace, which makes us acceptable to his Divine Majesty; when it strengthens us to do well, it is called charity; but when it attains its fullest perfection, in which it not only leads us to do well, but to act carefully, diligently, and promptly, then it is called devotion. The ostrich never flies, the hen rises with difficulty, and achieves but a brief and rare flight, but the eagle, the dove, and the swallow, are continually on the wing, and soar high; even so sinners do not rise towards God, for all their movements are earthly and earthbound. Well-meaning people, who have not as yet attained a true devotion, attempt a manner of flight by means of their good actions, but rarely, slowly and heavily; while really devout men rise up to God frequently, and with a swift and soaring wing. In short, devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us and causes us to work briskly and lovingly; and just as charity leads us to a general practice of all God's commandments, so devotion leads us to practice them readily and diligently. And, therefore, we cannot call him who neglects to observe all God's commandments either good or devout, because in order to be good, a man must be filled with love, and to be devout, he must further be very ready and apt to

perform the deeds of love. And inasmuch as devotion consists in a high degree of real love, it not only makes us ready, active, and diligent in following all God's commands, but it also excites us to be ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible, even such as are not enjoined upon us, but are only matters of counsel or inspiration. Even as a man just recovering from illness, walks only so far as he is obliged to go, with a slow and weary step, so the converted sinner journeys along as far as God commands him but slowly and wearily, until he attains a true spirit of devotion, and then, like a sound man, he not only gets along, but he runs and leaps in the way of God's commands, and hastens gladly along the paths of heavenly counsels and inspirations. The difference between love and devotion is just that which exists between fire and flame—love being a spiritual fire which becomes devotion when it is fanned into a flame; and what devotion adds to the fire of love is that flame which makes it eager, energetic, and diligent, not merely in obeying God's commandments, but in fulfilling his Divine counsels and inspirations.

## **II.2. The Excellence of Devotion**

Those who sought to discourage the Israelites from going up to the Promised Land, told them that it was a land which “devours its inhabitants” (Numbers 13:32), that is, that the climate was so unhealthy that the inhabitants could not live long, and that the people there were “men of a great height,” who looked upon the new-comers as mere grasshoppers (Numbers 13:33). It is just so, my dear Philothea, that the world runs down true devotion, painting devout people with gloomy, melancholy aspect, and affirming that religion makes them dismal and unpleasant. But even as Joshua and Caleb protested that not only was the Promised Land a fair and pleasant country, but that the Israelites would

take an easy and peaceful possession thereof, so the Holy Spirit tells us through his saints, and our Lord has told us with his own lips, that a devout life is sweet, happy, and loveable.

The world, looking on, sees that devout persons fast, watch and pray, endure injury patiently, minister to the sick and poor, restrain their temper, check and subdue their passions, deny themselves in all sensual indulgence, and do many other things which in themselves are hard and difficult. But the world sees nothing of that inward, heartfelt devotion which makes all these actions pleasant and easy. Watch a bee hovering over the mountain thyme; the juices it gathers are bitter, but the bee turns them all to honey, and so tells the worldling, that though the devout soul finds bitter herbs along its path of devotion, they are all turned to sweetness and pleasantness as it treads; and the martyrs have counted fire, sword, and rack but as perfumed flowers by reason of their devotion. And if devotion can sweeten such cruel torments, and even death itself, how much more will it give a charm to ordinary good deeds? We sweeten unripe fruit with sugar, and it is useful in correcting the flavor even of that which is good. So devotion is the real spiritual sweetness which takes away all bitterness from mortifications and prevents consolations from disagreeing with the soul: it cures the poor of sadness, and the rich of presumption; it keeps the oppressed from feeling desolate, and the prosperous from insolence; it averts sadness from the lonely, and dissipation from social life; it is as warmth in winter and refreshing dew in summer; it knows how to abound and how to suffer want; how to profit alike by honor and contempt; it accepts gladness and sadness with an even mind, and fills men's hearts with a wondrous sweetness.

Ponder Jacob's ladder: it is a true picture of the devout life. The two poles that support the steps are types of prayer which seeks the love of God, and the sacraments which confer that love; while the steps themselves are simply the degrees of love by which

we go on from virtue to virtue, either descending by good deeds on behalf of our neighbor or ascending by contemplation to a loving union with God. Consider, too, who they are who trod this ladder: men with angels' hearts, or angels with human forms. They are not youthful, but they seem to be so by reason of their vigor and spiritual activity. They have wings with which to fly and attain to God in holy prayer, but they have likewise feet wherewith to tread in human paths by a holy gracious conversation with men; their faces are bright and beautiful, inasmuch as they accept all things gently and sweetly; their heads and limbs are uncovered, because their thoughts, affections and actions have no motive or object save that of pleasing God; the rest of their bodies is covered with a light shining garment, because while they use the world and the things of this life, they use all such purely and honestly, and no further than is needful for their condition—such are the truly devout. Believe me, Philothea, devotion is the sweetest of sweets, the queen of virtues, the perfection of love. If love is the milk of life, devotion is the cream thereof; if it is a fruitful plant, devotion is the blossom; if it is a precious stone, devotion is its brightness; if it is a precious balm, devotion is its perfume, even that sweet odor which delights men and causes the angels to rejoice.

### I.3. Devotion is suitable to every Vocation and Profession

When God created the world, he commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind, and even so he bids Christians—the living trees of his Church—to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation. A different exercise of devotion is required of each—the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. I ask you, Philothea, would it be fitting that a bishop should seek to lead

the solitary life of a Carthusian? And if the father of a family were as regardless in making provision for the future as a Capuchin, if the artisan spent the day in church like a nun, if the nun involved herself in all manner of business on her neighbor's behalf as a bishop is bound to do, would not such a devotion be ridiculous, ill-regulated, and intolerable? Nevertheless, such a mistake is often made, and the world, which cannot or will not discriminate between real devotion and the indiscretion of those who fancy themselves devout, grumbles and finds fault with devotion, which is really nowise concerned in these errors. No indeed, Philothea, the devotion which is true hinders nothing, but on the contrary it perfects everything; and that which runs counter to the rightful vocation of any one is, you may be sure, a spurious devotion. Aristotle says that the bee sucks honey from flowers without damaging them, leaving them as whole and fresh as it found them; but true devotion does better still, for it not only hinders no manner of vocation or duty, but, contrariwise, it adorns and beautifies all. Throw precious stones into honey, and each will grow more brilliant according to its several color: and in like manner everybody fulfils his special calling better when subject to the influence of devotion: family duties are lighter, married love truer, service to our King more faithful, every kind of occupation more acceptable and better performed where that is the guide.

It is an error, nay more, a very heresy, to seek to banish the devout life from the soldier's guardroom, the mechanic's workshop, the prince's court, or the domestic hearth. Of course, a purely contemplative devotion, such as is specially proper to the religious and monastic life, cannot be practiced in these vocations, but there are various other kinds of devotion well-suited to lead those whose calling is secular, along the paths of perfection. The Old Testament furnishes us examples in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, Job, Tobias, Sarah, Rebecca and Judith; and in the New Testament we read of St. Joseph, Lydia

and Crispus, who led a perfectly devout life in their trades. We have St. Anne, Martha, St. Monica, Aquila and Priscilla, as examples of household devotion, Cornelius, St. Sebastian, and St. Maurice among soldiers; Constantine, St. Helena, St. Louis, Blessed Amadaeus, and St. Edward on the throne. And we even find instances of some who fell away in solitude—usually so helpful to perfection—some who had led a higher life in the world, which seems so antagonistic to it. St. Gregory dwells on how Lot, who had kept himself pure in the city, fell in his mountain solitude. Be sure that wheresoever our lot is cast we may and must aim at the perfect life.

### **V.3. Examination of the Soul as to its Progress in the Devout Life**

This second point is somewhat lengthy, and I would begin by saying that there is no need for you to carry it out all at once. . . . After each point of examination observe where you have failed, and what is lacking to you, and in what you have chiefly failed, so that you may be able to explain your troubles, get counsel and comfort, and make fresh resolutions. . . .

To begin this examination,

1. Place yourself in the presence of God.
2. Invoke the Holy Spirit, and ask light of him, so that you may know yourself, as St. Augustine did, crying out, “Lord, teach me to know you, and to know myself;” and St. Francis, who asked, “Who are you, Lord, and who am I?” Resolve not to note any progress with any self-satisfaction or self-glorification, but give the glory to God alone, and thank him duly for it.

Resolve, too, that if you should seem to yourself to have made but little progress, or even to have gone back, that you will not be discouraged thereby, nor grow cool or

indolent in the matter; but that, on the contrary, you will take fresh pains to humble yourself and conquer your faults, with God's help.

Then go on to examine quietly and patiently how you have conducted yourself towards God, your neighbor and yourself, up to the present time.

#### **V.4. Examination of state of our soul towards God**

1. What is the state of your heart with respect to mortal sin? Are you firmly resolved never to commit it, come what may? And have you kept that resolution from the time you first made it? Here is the foundation of the spiritual life.
2. How do you stand towards the commandments of God? Are they acceptable, light, and easy to you? He who has a good digestion and healthy appetite likes good food and turns away from that which is bad.
3. How do you stand towards venial sins? No one can help committing some such occasionally; but are there none to which you have any special tendency, or worse still, any actual liking and clinging?
4. With respect to spiritual exercises—do you like and value them or do they weary and vex you? To which do you feel most or least disposed, hearing or reading God's Word, meditating upon it, calling upon God, confession, preparing for and receiving communion, controlling your inclinations? What of all these is most distasteful to you? And if you find that your heart is not disposed to any of these things, inquire into the cause, find out whence the disinclination comes.
5. With respect to God himself: does your heart delight in thinking of God, does it crave after the sweetness thereof? Do you feel a certain readiness to love him, and a definite inclination to enjoy his love? Do you take pleasure in dwelling upon the immensity, the goodness, the tenderness of God? When you are immersed in the occupations and vanities of this world, does the thought of God come across you as a welcome thing? Do you

accept it gladly, and yield yourself up to it, and your heart turn with a sort of yearning to him? There are souls that do so.

6. If a wife has been long separated from her husband, so soon as she sees him returning, and hears his voice, however encumbered she may be with business, or forcibly hindered by the pressure of circumstances, her heart knows no restraint, but turns at once from all else to think upon him she loves. So it is with souls who really love God, however engrossed they may be; when the thought of him is brought before them, they forget all else for joy at feeling his dear presence, and this is a very good sign.

7. With respect to Jesus Christ as God and man—how does your heart draw to him? Honeybees seek their delight in their honey, but wasps hover over stinking carrion. Even so pious souls draw all their joy from Jesus Christ, and love him with an exceeding sweet love, but those who are careless find their pleasure in worldly vanities.

8. With respect to Our Lady, the saints, and your guardian angel—do you love them well? Do you rejoice in the sense of their guardianship? Do you take pleasure in their lives, their pictures, their memories?

9. As to your tongue—how do you speak of God? Do you take pleasure in speaking his praise and singing his glory in psalms and hymns?

10. As to actions—have you God's visible glory at heart, and do you delight in doing whatever you can to honor him? Those who love God will love to adorn and beautify his house. Are you conscious of having ever given up anything you liked, or of renouncing anything for God's sake? It is a good sign when we deprive ourselves of something we care for on behalf of those we love. What have you ever given up for the love of God?