

A Christian's Sincerity

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

III.1 On Choosing among the Virtues

The queen bee never takes wing without being surrounded by all her subjects; even so love never enters the heart but it is sure to bring all other virtues in its train; marshalling and employing them as a captain his soldiers; yet, nevertheless, love does not set them all to work suddenly, or equally, at all times and everywhere. The righteous man is “like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season” (Ps 1:3). Inasmuch as Love, watering and refreshing the soul, causes it to bring forth good works, each in season as required. There is an old proverb to the effect that the sweetest music is unwelcome at a time of mourning; and certain persons have made a great mistake when, seeking to cultivate some special virtue, they attempt to deploy it on all occasions, like the ancient philosophers who were always laughing or weeping. Worse still if they take upon themselves to censure those who do not make a continual study of this their pet virtue. St. Paul tells us to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15), and charity is patient, kind, liberal, prudent, indulgent.

At the same time, there are virtues of universal account, which must not only be called into occasional action, but ought to spread their influence over everything. We do not very often come across opportunities for exercising fortitude, magnanimity, or

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magnificence; but gentleness, temperance, modesty, and humility, are graces which ought to color everything we do. There may be virtues of a more exalted form, but at all events these are the most continually called for in daily life. Sugar is better than salt, but we use salt more generally and oftener. Consequently, it is well to have a good and ready stock in hand of those general virtues of which we stand in so perpetual a need.

In practicing any virtue, it is well to choose that which is most according to our duty, rather than most according to our taste. It was St. Paula's liking to practice bodily mortifications with a view to the keener enjoyment of spiritual sweetness, but obedience to her superiors was a higher duty; and, therefore, St. Jerome acknowledges that she was wrong in practicing excessive abstinence contrary to the advice of her bishop. And the apostles, whose mission it was to preach the Gospel, and feed souls with the bread of life, judged well that it was not right for them to hinder this holy work in order to minister to the material wants of the poor, weighty as that work was also. Every calling stands in special need of some special virtue; those required of a prelate, a prince, or a soldier, are quite different; so are those beseeeming a wife or a widow, and although all should possess every virtue, yet all are not called upon to exercise them equally, but each should cultivate chiefly those which are important to the manner of life to which he is called.

Among such virtues as have no special adaptation to our own calling, choose the most excellent, not the most showy. A comet generally looks larger than the stars and fills the eye more; but all the while comets are not nearly so important as the stars, and only seem so large to us because they are nearer to us than stars. So there are certain virtues which touch us very sensibly and are very material, so to say, and therefore ordinary people give them the preference. Thus, the common run of men ordinarily value temporal almsgiving more than spiritual; and think more of fasting, exterior discipline and bodily

mortification than of meekness, cheerfulness, modesty, and other interior mortifications, which nevertheless are far better. Do you then, Philothea, choose the best virtues, not those which are most highly esteemed; the most excellent, not the most visible; the truest, not the most conspicuous.

III.4. Exterior Humility

Elisha bade the poor widow “borrow vessels from your neighbors, empty vessels and not too few” and pour oil into all those vessels (2 Kings 4:3ff), and so in order to receive God’s grace in our hearts, they must be as empty vessels—not filled with self-esteem. The swallow with its sharp cry and keen glance has the power of frightening away birds of prey, and for that reason the dove prefers it to all other birds and lives surely beside it; even so humility drives Satan away, and cherishes the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit within us, and for that reason all the Saints—and especially the King of saints and his Blessed Mother—have always esteemed the grace of humility above all other virtues.

We call that vainglory which men take to themselves, either for what is not in them, or which being in them is not their own, or which being in them and their own yet is not worthy of their self-satisfaction. For instance, noble birth, favor of great men, popular applause, all these are things nowise belonging to ourselves, but coming from our forefathers, or the opinion of others. Some people are proud and conceited because they ride a fine horse, wear a feather in their hat, and are expensively dressed, but who can fail to see their folly, or that if anyone has reason to be proud over such things, it would be the horse, the bird, and the tailor! Or what can be more contemptible than to found one’s credit on a horse, a plume, or a ruff? Others again pride themselves upon their dainty moustaches, their well-trimmed beard or curled hair, their white hands, or their dancing,

singing and the like: but is it not a petty vanity which can seek to be esteemed for any such trivial and frivolous matters? Then again, some look for the world's respect and honor because they have acquired some smatterings of science, expecting all their neighbors to listen and yield to them, and such men we call pedants. Others make great capital of their personal beauty and imagine that everyone is lost in admiration of it; but all this is utterly vain, foolish and impertinent, and the glory men take to themselves for such matters must be called vain, childish and frivolous.

You may test real worth as we test balm, which is tried by being distilled in water, and if it is precipitated to the bottom, it is known to be pure and precious. So if you want to know whether a man is really wise, learned, generous or noble, see if his life is shaped by humility, modesty, and submission. If so, his gifts are genuine; but if they are only surface and showy, you may be sure that in proportion to their demonstrativeness so is their unreality. Those pearls which are formed amid tempest and storm have only an outward shell, and are hollow within; and so when a man's good qualities are fed by pride, vanity and boasting, they will soon have nothing save empty show, without sap, marrow or substance.

Honor, rank, and dignity are like the saffron, which never thrives so well as when trodden under foot. Beauty only attracts when it is free from any such aim. Self-conscious beauty loses its charm, and learning becomes a discredit and degenerates into pedantry, when we are puffed up by it.

Those who are punctilious about rank, title, or precedence, both lay themselves open to criticism and degradation, and also throw contempt on all such things; because an honor which is valuable when freely paid, is worthless when sought for or exacted. When the peacock opens his showy tail, he exhibits the ugliness of his body beneath; and many

flowers which are beautiful while growing, wither directly we gather them. And just as men who inhale mandragora from afar as they pass, find it sweet, while those who breathe it closely are made faint and ill by the same, so honor may be pleasant to those who merely taste it as they pass, without seeking or craving for it, but it will become very dangerous and hurtful to such as take delight in and feed upon it.

An active effort to acquire virtue is the first step towards goodness; but an active effort to acquire honor is the first step towards contempt and shame. A well-conditioned mind will not throw away its powers upon such sorry trifles as rank, position, or outward forms—it has other things to do and will leave all that to smaller minds. He who can find pearls will not stop to pick up shells; and so a man who aims at real goodness will not be keen about outward tokens of honor. Undoubtedly everyone is justified in keeping his own place, and there is no want of humility in that so long as it is done simply and without contention. Just as our merchant-ships coming from Peru with gold and silver often bring apes and parrots likewise, because these cost but little and do not add to the weight of a cargo, so good men seeking to grow in grace can take their natural rank and position, so long as they are not engrossed by such things, and do not involve themselves in anxiety, contention or ill-will on their account. I am not speaking here of those whose position is public, or even of certain special private persons whose dignity may be important. In all such cases each man must move in his own sphere, with prudence and discretion, together with charity and courtesy.

III.5. Interior Humility

To you, however, Philothea, I would teach a deeper humility, for that of which I have been speaking is almost more truly to be called worldly wisdom than humility. There

are some persons who dare not or will not think about the graces with which God has endowed them, fearing lest they should become self-complacent and vain-glorious; but they are quite wrong. For if, as the Angelic Doctor says, the real way of attaining to the love of God is by a careful consideration of all his benefits given to us, then the better we realize these the more we shall love him; and inasmuch as individual gifts are more acceptable than general gifts, so they ought to be more specially dwelt upon. Of a truth, nothing so tends to humble us before the mercy of God as the multitude of his gifts to us; just as nothing so tends to humble us before his justice as the multitude of our misdeeds. Let us consider what he has done for us, and what we have done contrary to his will, and as we review our sins in detail, so let us review his grace in the same. There is no fear that a perception of what he has given you will puff you up, so long as you keep steadily in mind that whatever is good in you is not of yourself. Do mules cease to be clumsy, stinking beasts because they are used to carry the dainty treasures and perfumes of a prince? “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7) On the contrary, a lively appreciation of the grace given to you should make you humble, for appreciation begets gratitude. But if, when realizing the gifts God has given you, any vanity should beset you, the infallible remedy is to turn to the thought of all our ingratitude, imperfection, and weakness. Anyone who will calmly consider what he has done without God, cannot fail to realize that what he does with God is no merit of his own; and so we may rejoice in that which is good in us, and take pleasure in the fact, but we shall give all the glory to God alone, who alone is its author.

It was in this spirit that the Blessed Virgin confessed that God had done “great things” to her; only that she might humble herself and exalt Him. “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she said, by reason of the gifts he had given her (Lk 1:49 and 46).

We are very apt to speak of ourselves as naught, as weakness itself, as the offscouring of the earth; but we should be very much vexed to be taken at our word and generally considered what we call ourselves. On the contrary, we often make-believe to run away and hide ourselves, merely to be followed and sought out; we pretend to take the lowest place, with the full intention of being honorably called to come up higher. But true humility does not affect to be humble and is not given to make a display in lowly words. It seeks not only to conceal other virtues, but above all it seeks and desires to conceal itself; and if it were lawful to tell lies, or feign or give scandal, humility would perhaps sometimes affect a cloak of pride in order to hide itself utterly. Take my advice, Philothea, and either use no professions of humility, or else use them with a real mind corresponding to your outward expressions; never cast down your eyes without humbling your heart; and do not pretend to wish to be last and least, unless you really and sincerely mean it. I would make this so general a rule as to have no exception; only courtesy sometimes requires us to put forward those who obviously would not put themselves forward, but this is not deceitful or mock humility; and so with respect to certain expressions of regard which do not seem strictly true, but which are not dishonest, because the speaker really intends to give honor and respect to him to whom they are addressed; and even though the actual words may be somewhat excessive, there is no harm in them if they are the ordinary forms of society, though truly I wish that all our expressions were as nearly as possible regulated by real heart feeling in all truthfulness and simplicity. A really humble man would rather that some one else called him worthless and good-for-nothing, than say so of himself; at all events, if such things are said, he does not contradict them, but acquiesces contentedly, for it is his own opinion. We meet people who tell us that they leave mental prayer to those who are more perfect, not feeling themselves worthy of it; that they dare not communicate

frequently, because they do not feel fit to do so; that they fear to bring discredit on religion if they profess it, through their weakness and frailty; while others decline to use their talents in the service of God and their neighbor, because they know their weakness, and are afraid of becoming proud if they do any good thing—lest while helping others they might destroy themselves. But all this is unreal, and not merely a spurious but a vicious humility, which tacitly and secretly condemns God’s gifts, and makes a pretext of lowliness while really exalting self-love, self-sufficiency, indolence, and evil tempers. “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” So spoke the prophet to King Ahaz; but he answered, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test” (Is 7:11-12). Unhappy man! he affects to show exceeding reverence to God, and under a pretense of humility refuses to seek the grace offered by the Divine Goodness. Could he not see that when God wills to grant us a favor, it is mere pride to reject it, that God’s gifts must needs be accepted, and that true humility lies in obedience and the most literal compliance with his will! Well then, God’s will is that we should be perfect, uniting ourselves to him, and imitating him to the utmost of our powers. The proud man who trusts in himself may well undertake nothing, but the humble man is all the braver that he knows his own helplessness, and his courage waxes in proportion to his low opinion of himself, because all his trust is in God, who delights to show forth his power in our weakness, his mercy in our misery. The safest course is humbly and piously to venture upon whatever may be considered profitable for us by those who undertake our spiritual guidance.

Nothing can be more foolish than to fancy we know that of which we are really ignorant; to affect knowledge while conscious that we are ignorant is intolerable vanity. For my part, I would rather not put forward that which I really do know, while on the other hand neither would I affect ignorance. When charity requires it, you should readily and

kindly impart to your neighbor not only that which is necessary for his instruction, but also what is profitable for his consolation. The same humility which conceals graces with a view to their preservation is ready to bring them forth at the bidding of charity, with a view to their increase and perfection; therein reminding me of that tree in the Isles of Tylos, which closes its beautiful carnation blossoms at night, only opening them to the rising sun, so that the natives say they go to sleep. Just so humility hides our earthly virtues and perfections, only expanding them at the call of charity, which is not an earthly, but a heavenly, not a mere moral, but a divine virtue; the true sun of all virtues, which should all be ruled by it, so that any humility which controverts charity is unquestionably false.

I would not affect either folly or wisdom; for just as humility deters me from pretending to be wise, so simplicity and straightforwardness deter me from pretending to be foolish; and just as vanity is opposed to humility, so all affectation and pretense are opposed to honesty and simplicity. If certain eminent servants of God have feigned folly in order to be despised by the world, we may marvel, but not imitate them; for they had special and extraordinary reasons for doing extraordinary things and cannot be used as a rule for such as we are. When David danced more than was customary before the Ark of the Covenant, it was not with the intention of affecting folly, but simply as expressing the unbounded and extraordinary gladness of his heart. Michal his wife reproached him with his actions as folly, but he did not mind being abased in her sight but declared himself willing to be despised for God's sake (see 2 Sam 6:16-23). And so, if you should be despised for acts of genuine devotion, humility will enable you to rejoice in so blessed a contempt, the cause of which does not lie with you.