

BOOK ONE

Practical advice about the spiritual life

I. WE MUST TAKE CHRIST FOR OUR MODEL, AND DESPISE THE SHAMS OF EARTH

*He who follows me can never walk in darkness,*¹ our Lord says. Here are words of Christ, words of warning; if we want to see our way truly, never a trace of blindness left in our hearts, it is his life, his character, we must take for our model. Clearly, then, we must make it our chief business to train our thoughts upon the life of Jesus Christ.

2. Christ's teaching—how it overshadows all the Saints have to teach us! Could we but master its spirit, what a store of hidden manna we should find there! How is it that so many of us can hear the Gospel read out again and again, with so little emotion? Because they haven't got the spirit of Christ; that is why. If a man wants to understand Christ's words fully, and relish the flavour of them, he must be one who is trying to fashion his whole life on Christ's model.

3. Talk as learnedly as you will about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, it will get you no thanks from the Holy Trinity if you aren't humble about it. After all, it isn't learned talk that saves a man or makes a Saint of him; only a life well lived can claim God's friendship. For myself, I would sooner know what contrition feels like, than how to define it. Why, if you had the whole of Scripture and all the maxims of the philosophers at your finger-tips, what would be the use of it all, without God's love and God's grace?

¹ Jn 8:12.

*A shadow's shadow, a world of shadows*²—nothing matters except loving God and giving him all your loyalty. And the height of wisdom is to set your face towards heaven by despising the world.

4. What folly, to hunt for riches that will not last, and put your trust in them! What folly, to set your heart on worldly honours, and scheme for your own advancement! What folly, to obey the promptings of sense, and covet the prizes that will soon cost you dear! What folly, to pray for a long life, without caring whether it is lived well or badly; to think only of your present existence, instead of making provision for the world to come; to fall in love with what passes in a moment, instead of hurrying on to the goal where eternal happiness awaits you!

5. There is one proverb of which we cannot remind ourselves too often, *Eye looks on unsatisfied; ear listens, ill content*.³ Make up your mind to detach your thoughts from the love of things seen, and let them find their centre in things invisible. Those who follow the call of sense only soil their consciences, and lose the help of God's grace.

2. ON TAKING A LOW VIEW OF ONESELF

As for knowledge, it comes natural to all of us to want it; but what can knowledge do for us, without the fear of God? Give me a plain, unpretentious farm-hand, content to serve God; there is more to be made of him than of some conceited University professor who forgets that he has a soul to save, because he is so busy watching the stars. To know yourself—that means feeling your own worthlessness, losing all taste for human praise. If my knowledge embraced the whole of creation, what good would it do me in God's sight? It is by my actions that he will judge me.

2. Why not take a rest from this exaggerated craving for mere knowledge which only has the effect of distracting and

² Eccles 1:2.

³ Eccles 1:8.

deluding us? People are so fond of passing for learned men, and being congratulated on their wisdom—yes, but what a lot of knowledge there is that contributes nothing to our souls' welfare! And there can be no wisdom in spending yourself on pursuits which are not going to promote your chances of salvation. All the talk in the world won't satisfy the soul's needs; nothing but holiness of life will set your mind at rest, nothing but a good conscience will help you to face God unashamed.

3. The wider, the more exact your learning, the more severe will be your judgement, if it has not taught you to live holily. No art, no science should make a man proud of possessing it; such gifts are a terrifying responsibility. Meanwhile, however well satisfied you are with your own skill or intelligence, never forget how much there is that remains unknown to you. Let us have no airs of learning; own up to your ignorance; what is the use of crowing over some rival, when you can point to any number of Doctors and Masters who can beat you at your own game? If you want to learn an art worth knowing, you must set out to be unknown, and to count for nothing.

4. There is no lesson so profound or so useful as this lesson of self-knowledge and of self-contempt. Claim nothing for yourself, think of others kindly and with admiration; that is the height of wisdom, and its masterpiece. Never think yourself better than the next man, however glaring his faults, however grievous his offences; you are in good dispositions now, but how long will they last? Tell yourself, "We are frail, all of us, but none so frail as I."

3. HOW TRUTH IS TO BE LEARNT

Oh to be one of those to whom truth communicates itself directly—not by means of symbols and words, whose meaning changes

with time, but in its very nature! Our own estimate, our own way of looking at things, is always putting us in the wrong, by taking the short view. And here are we, splitting hairs about all sorts of mysterious problems which do not concern us—we shall not be blamed, at our judgement, for having failed to solve them. Strange creatures that we are, we forget the questions which really matter to us, matter vitally, and concentrate, of set purpose, on what is mere curiosity and waste of time. So clear-sighted we are, and so blind!

2. Why should we be concerned to divide up things into “classes” and “families”? We get away from all this tangle of guess-work, when once the Eternal Word speaks to us. From him alone all creation takes its origin, and therefore all creation has but one voice for us; he, who is its origin, is also its interpreter.⁴ Without him, nobody can understand it, or form a true judgement about it. Until all things become One for you, traced to One source and seen in One act of vision, you cannot find anchorage for the heart, or rest calmly in God. O God, you are the truth; unite me to yourself by an act of unfailing love! I am so tired of reading about this and that, being lectured to about this and that, when all that I want, all that I long for, is to be found in you. If only they would hold their tongues, these learned folk! If only the whole of creation would be silent in your presence, and you, you alone, speak to me!

3. Once a man is integrated, once his inner life becomes simplified, all of a piece, he begins to attain a richer and deeper knowledge—quite effortlessly, because the intellectual light he receives comes from above. Freedom of heart is his, and simplicity of intention, and fixity of resolve, and he finds that he is no longer distracted by a variety of occupations; he acts, now, only for God’s glory, and does his best to get rid of all self-seeking. There is no worse enemy to your freedom and

⁴ This sentence can be taken in various ways. The last part of it is a quotation from the Vulgate rendering of Jn 8:25.

your peace of mind than the undisciplined affections of your own heart. Really good and holy people plan out beforehand in their minds how they are to behave in given circumstances; the course of their lives does not sweep them away into following their lower instincts, they shape it for themselves, according to the dictates of right reason. To be sure, the conquest of self demands the hardest struggle of all; but this has got to be our real business in life, the conquest of self—no day passed without beating our own record, without gaining fresh ground.

4. We find no absolute perfection in this world; always there is a background of imperfection behind our achievement; and so it is that our guesses at the truth can never be more than light obscured by shadow. The humble man's knowledge of himself is a surer way to God than any deep researches into truth. No reason why we should quarrel with learning, or with any straightforward pursuit of knowledge; it is all good as far as it goes, and part of God's plan. But always what we should prize most is a clear conscience, and holiness of life. How is it that there are so many people who put knowledge first, instead of conduct? It means that they are constantly at fault, and achieve little—sometimes next to nothing. If only these people would take as much trouble to weed out their imperfections, and to cultivate good qualities, as they take over the learned theses they propound, we should hear less about sins and scandals, less about lax behaviour in religious houses. After all, when the day of judgement comes we shall be examined about what we have done, not about what we have read; whether we have lived conscientiously, not whether we have turned fine phrases. Where are they now, Doctor This and Professor That, whom you used to hear so much about when they were alive, and at the height of their reputation? They have handed over their chairs to other men, who probably never waste a thought on them; while they lived, they counted for something, now they are never mentioned.

5. So soon it passes, our earthly renown. Well for them, if they had practised what they taught; then indeed they would have studied to good purpose. How often the worldly pursuit of useless knowledge brings men to ruin, by distracting their attention from God's service! They must play the great man, they will not be content with a humble part, and it only leads to frustration. True greatness can only be reckoned in terms of charity; the really great man is one who doesn't think much of himself, and doesn't think much of rank or precedence either. The only clear-sighted man is one who treats all earthly achievements as dirt, because he wants to win Christ; the only educated man is one who has learned to abandon his own will and do God's will instead.

4. ON CAUTION IN OUR UNDERTAKINGS

We do wrong to be influenced by every rumour we hear, every suggestion that comes to us; patient care is needed if we are to weigh up the pro's and con's of the business as God sees it. Unfortunately—such is our frailty—people are often ready to believe the worst, instead of the best, about others, and to hand the story on. A fully formed Christian does not believe everything he hears; he realizes how weak human nature is, how bent on mischief, how untrustworthy in its statements.

2. Here is a very wise rule: never act in a hurry, and always be ready to alter your preconceived ideas. And here is another principle that goes with it; don't be too ready to accept the first story that is told you, or hand on to others the rumours you hear, and the secrets entrusted to you.⁵ Find out some wise counsellor to advise you, a man of enlightened conscience, and be prepared to go by his better judgement, instead of trusting your own calculations. Believe me, a holy life gives a man the wisdom that

⁵ "The secrets entrusted to you"; or perhaps, "the opinions you have formed."

reflects God's will, and a wide range of experience. The humbler he is, the more submissive in God's service, the more wise and calm will be his judgements on every question.

5. ABOUT READING HOLY SCRIPTURE

It is for truth, not for literary excellence, that we go to Holy Scripture; every passage of it ought to be read in the light of that inspiration which produced it, with an eye to our souls' profit, not to cleverness of argument. A simple book of devotion ought to be as welcome to you as any profound and learned treatise; what does it matter whether the man who wrote it was a man of great literary accomplishments? Do not be put off by his want of reputation; here is truth unadorned, to attract the reader. Your business is with what the man said, not with the man who said it.

2. Mankind is always changing; God's truth stands for ever.⁶ And he has many ways of speaking to us, regardless of the human instruments he uses. Often enough, our reading of Holy Scripture is distracted by mere curiosity; we want to seize upon a point and argue about it, when we ought to be quietly passing on. You will get most out of it if you read it with humility, and simplicity, and faith, not concerned to make a name for yourself as a scholar. By all means ask questions, but listen to what holy writers have to tell you; do not find fault with the hard sayings of antiquity—their authors had good reason for writing as they did.

6. ABOUT IMMODERATE PASSIONS

Once a man sets his heart on anything immoderately, he loses his peace of mind—the proud man, the avaricious man, how little peace they enjoy! It is the detached, the humble, that live wholly at rest. Strange, how easily a man can be attracted and overcome by some slight, some trumpery affection, if he is not yet utterly

⁶ Cf. Ps 116[117]:2.

dead to self! He has no spiritual fibre; nature (you may say) is still strong in him; he has a bias towards the things of sense. And how should he detach himself altogether from worldly desires? Does he leave them ungratified? It is a constant source of irritation to him. Does anybody thwart them? He is ready to fly into a rage.

2. On the other hand, if he gives way to them and gets what he wants, all at once he is struck down by remorse of conscience; that is all that comes of yielding to passion—he is no nearer the peace of mind he aimed at. No, the heart can only find rest by resisting its passions, not by humouring them; heart's rest is for the fervent, the devout, not for the carnally minded, for those who give themselves over to the love of outward things.

7. ABOUT FALSE CONFIDENCE, AND HOW TO GET RID OF SELF-CONCEIT

It is nonsense to depend for your happiness on your fellow men, or on created things. What does it matter if you have to be the servant of others, and pass for a poor man in the world's eyes? It is nothing to be ashamed of, if you do it for the love of Jesus Christ. Why all this self-importance? Leave everything to God, and he will make the most of your good intentions.

Put no confidence in the knowledge you have acquired, or in the skill of any human counsellor; rely on God's grace—he brings aid to the humble, and only humiliation to the self-confident.

2. Do not boast of riches, if you happen to possess them, nor about the important friends you have; boast rather of God's friendship—he can give us all we want, and longs to give us something more, himself. Do not give yourself airs if you have physical strength or beauty; it only takes a spell of illness to waste the one, or mar the other. Do not be self-satisfied about your own skill or cleverness; God is hard to satisfy, and it is from him they come, all these gifts of nature.

3. He reads our thoughts, and he will only think the worse of you, if you think yourself better than other people. Even your good actions must not be a source of pride to you; his judgements are not the same as man's judgements, and what commends you to your fellows is not, often enough, the sort of thing which commends you to him. If you have any good qualities to shew for yourself, credit your neighbour with better qualities still; that is the way to keep humble. No harm, if you think of all the world as your betters; what does do a great deal of harm is to compare yourself favourably to a single living soul. To be humble is to enjoy undisturbed peace of mind, while the proud heart is swept by gusts of envy and resentment.

8. ON THE DANGERS OF TOO CLOSE INTIMACY ⁷

No need to share your secrets with the world at large; find some man of good sense and piety to be your confidant, and put your difficulties to him. Grudge the time you spend in youthful company, or with strangers from outside. Let us have no flattery of the rich, no fondness for being seen about with important people; humble and simple folk, the pious and the well-disciplined—these are to be your associates, and your talk must be of gracious things. Nor should you be on familiar terms with anybody of the opposite sex; of all good holy women make but one reckoning, and commend them to the mercy of God. Keep your friendship for God and his holy Angels, shunning the acquaintance of men.

2. Your kindness—everybody has a claim on that; but familiarity has its disadvantages. Sometimes we know a person only by reputation, and that reputation a dazzling one, and then we meet him, and it does not bear looking into. And sometimes,

⁷ Chapters 8 and 9 are meant primarily for religious.

perhaps, when we ourselves imagine that people are enjoying our society, they are really beginning to take a dislike to us, having had time to detect the flaws in our character.

9. ON OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSIVENESS

To stand at your post under obedience, to live at the disposal of a superior, what a blessing it is! How much less dangerous to be obeying orders than to be giving them! And yet there are plenty of people who live under obedience because they have to, not from any love of it; such people find it irksome, and are always ready to complain of their position. Believe me, they will have no sense of freedom until they learn to make a wholehearted surrender of self for the love of God. Roam about as you will, never will you find rest without humble surrender to the will of a superior. The idea that you can find it by drifting about from one monastery to another is a common one, but it is only a dream.

2. True enough, we all like to have our own way, and we all have a preference for the people whose views agree with our own. But the divine presence is among us; we must aim at peace, and with that aim in view each of us will have to sacrifice, now and again, his own way of thinking. After all, the wisest of us is not omniscient, and it is a pity to be so sure about your own point of view that you never listen to other people's. Quite possibly you are right; but if you forget about that, and let the other man have his way for the love of God, you'll have made the most of the situation.

3. How often I have heard the truth acknowledged, that there is more safety to be found in taking advice than in giving it! A man's judgement may be as sound as you will; but if he cannot bring himself to agree with others when there is good reason, and the nature of the case demands it, it's a sure sign of pride and obstinacy.

10. ABOUT USELESS GOSSIPING

Keep clear, as best you may, from the babel of human voices; it is wonderful what distraction is to be found in the discussion of worldly affairs, even when the motive for it is perfectly innocent. Frivolity is infectious, and makes easy prisoners of us. I wish I had kept silence, this many a time, instead of enjoying the society of my fellow men!

What is it that makes us so fond of talking, of gossiping with our friends? We hardly ever come away from it without a guilty conscience. What makes talkers of us, is that we find relaxation, on both sides, in the mere bandying of words; we want an escape from the tedious whirligig of our thoughts. We like giving expression to what is in our minds, especially about the good things we enjoy, or would like to enjoy, and the difficulties we find in our way.

2. And the pity of it is that usually it does no good at all; we may get comfort from finding an outlet like that, but it interferes, more than a little, with that inward comfort which is the gift of God.

We need more watchfulness, more prayer; our time mustn't be frittered away in doing nothing. When you have leave and leisure for talking, let your talk be such as makes for spiritual profit. Victims as we are of bad habit, unambitious as we are about our souls' progress, we speak so unguardedly! And yet there is talk which can be a great spiritual help to us—I mean, the earnest exchange of ideas about spiritual things; especially when two souls, well matched in temper and disposition, find themselves drawn together in God.

11.(A)⁸ HOW TO ATTAIN PEACE

We could have peace to our hearts' content, if only we would not concern ourselves with the things other people are saying

⁸ There is no obvious connection between the two halves of this chapter.

and doing, things which are no business of ours. How can a man expect to have lasting peace when he is always minding other people's business, always looking out for the chance of engaging in external activities, so that recollection is only possible in a small degree, or at rare intervals? Blessed are the simple; they shall have peace to their hearts' content.

(B) ABOUT THE AMBITION TO DO BETTER

2. We hear of Saints who reached the heights, and became great contemplatives; how did they manage it? They made it their business to wean themselves away from all earthly desires; this left them free to cling, with every fibre of their hearts, to God, and attend to the business of their own souls. We are not like that; we get wrapped up in the objects of our own affections, worried, too, over transitory things; seldom do we conquer a single fault, and the ambition to make daily progress never really kindles us; all is coldness and indifference.

3. If only we could die to self altogether, and enjoy complete interior freedom! Then the rest would follow; we should be able to taste the flavours of the spiritual life, and have some experience of what is meant by heavenly contemplation. There is only one obstacle, but it is a formidable one—we have not got rid of passion and desire; we are not really trying to set our feet on the ideal path the Saints trod. When we encounter even the slightest degree of difficulty, we are all too ready to turn, in despair, to human consolations.

4. And yet, if we would only play the man, and stand our ground, depend upon it, we should find heaven coming to our aid. As long as they rely on his grace, God is always ready to help people who put up a fight; he only gives us the opportunity of fighting because he wants us to win.

You are careful about the external observances of religion? Yes, but if we identify our souls' progress with things like that,

we shall soon come to the end of our spiritual resources. We have to apply the axe to the root of our natures, and clear our passions away, before we can attain to peace of mind.

5. If we could manage to eradicate one of our faults every year, how soon it would make perfect men of us! As things are, it is just the other way round; we often feel that our lives were better, and more free from taint, when we first turned to God than they are now, after all these years spent in religion. Our eagerness, our sense of achievement, ought to be growing intenser every day; and here we are, treating it as something remarkable when some poor remains of that early enthusiasm are still left to us!

If we would only put constraint on ourselves, just a little, at the very beginning! The rest would follow, simply and cheerfully enough.

6. Oh, it is not easy, saying good-bye to the ways we have got accustomed to, but it is much easier than a frontal attack on the will; and if you cannot win the day in light skirmishes, what success can you expect when it comes to the really difficult part? You must begin by saying No to your inclinations, getting out of bad habits, or they will involve you in worse trouble as time goes on. If you could but realize what a difference it makes, a life well lived, the peace of mind it would bring you, the encouragement it would give to others! I can't help thinking you would be more deeply concerned about your progress in the spiritual life.

12. WHY IT IS GOOD FOR US NOT TO HAVE EVERYTHING OUR OWN WAY

It's good for you to go through difficult times now and again, and to have your will thwarted; the effect is often to make a man think—make him realize that he is living in exile, and it is no use relying upon any earthly support. It's good for you sometimes to hear men's voices raised against you, and to find that you are making a bad impression, or at least a false impression, on others, even when you

are doing your best, and with the best intentions. It often makes for humility; prevents you from having too good an opinion of yourself. It's when we make a bad surface impression, and people are ready to think ill of us, that we learn to fall back upon God's judgements, because he witnesses all our actions from within.

2. And that is what we are aiming at; a man ought to rely so firmly on God that he has no need to be always looking about for human support.

A good Christian man⁹ can derive profit from the afflictions, the temptations, the unhallowed thoughts which assail him. At such times, he realizes more than ever his need of God; he becomes conscious that no power for good lies in him, apart from divine grace. He falls to prayer, sighing and groaning over the misery he endures, tired, now, of life itself, and wishing that death might come, so that he could lose himself, and be with Christ. No better warning could be given him that in this world neither true freedom of mind nor true peace is to be found.

13. HOW TEMPTATIONS ARE TO BE KEPT AT BAY

As long as our life here lasts, we shall never be rid of difficulties and temptations; that is why the book of Job tells us that man's life on earth is one long probation. Each one of us, then, has his own temptations, calling for special care; he must pray over them and be on the watch against them, or the Devil is sure to find an opportunity of taking him unawares—the Devil, our unsleeping enemy, who roams about continually, looking for his prey.¹⁰ Nobody can reach to such heights of sanctity that he is never tempted; there is no such thing as being above temptation altogether.

2. These temptations can be a wearisome burden to a man, but none the less of great use; they humiliate him, and purify

⁹ Literally "A man of good will." In Luke 2:14, this phrase almost certainly means "men upon whom God looks with favour." But it is sometimes understood to mean "men in good dispositions."

¹⁰ Cf. 1 Pet 5:8.

him, and teach him wisdom. Trials and temptations—these have always been the stepping-stones by which the Saints marched forward; only those who failed at the test forfeited their chances, and fell back.

Nowhere will you find a monastery so enclosed, or a hermitage so remote, that temptation and difficulty cannot follow you there.

3. Never, as long as he lives, can a man tell himself that he is beyond the reach of temptations; we are sinners born, and the focus of them lies in ourselves. When one of them leaves us, another comes instead; there will always be trials for us to endure—have we not lost the gift of happiness? People often try to run away from temptation, only to find that they are plunged in it deeper than ever; you can't win a battle by simply running away. You need patience and humility, if you want to rise superior to all your enemies.

4. The man who is content with a mere mechanical avoidance of his faults will make little headway; all at once the temptations will come and make themselves felt more acutely than before. Believe me, patience and endurance, with God's grace to aid them, will bring you better success in the end than any violence, any frantic efforts on your own part.

When temptation comes, the oftener you take advice about it the better. And when others ask for your advice in this way, do not treat them harshly; ply them with words of comfort, such as you would wish to hear if you were in their case.

5. When we are tempted to do wrong, the root of the trouble is always the same—fickleness of mind, and want of trust in God. A ship without a rudder, how easily the waves drive it this way and that! So it is with the man who has grown slack, and lost his sense of aim; you never know what he will be tempted to do next.

Temptation, to elect souls, is what the fire is to iron; it tests their quality. Often enough, our capacities are greater than we know, and it is only when we are tempted that our true nature

appears. All the same, we ought to be careful about temptation, especially in its early stages; easier to dispose of your enemy, if you never let him set foot within the gateway of the mind, but meet him outside, on the threshold, the moment he knocks. One of the poets has a tag about it:

*Check the first fault; too late the medicine's brewed
When poisons rage inveterate in the blood.*

That is how it is with us; at first it is a mere thought confronting the mind; then imagination paints it in stronger colours; only after that do we take pleasure in it, and the will makes a false move, and we give our assent. It is all so gradual, this wholesale infiltration of our malignant enemy; and all because we put up no resistance at the start. The longer they last, these sluggish reactions of ours, the feebler a man's resistance grows from day to day, and the enemy's assault more powerful.

6. Are these temptations fiercest when the soul first turns to God, or in the later stages of its advance? It differs with different people; and there are some who have a rough passage, you may say, all through their lives, while the tests to which others are subjected are gentle enough. It is all part of God's design for us, so wise, so just, always taking into account the circumstances of each man's life and the merit of his actions, with the salvation of the elect as the end of it.

7. No reason, then, for despair when we find ourselves exposed to temptation; it only means that we must pray to God more earnestly than ever, asking for his gracious help in all our trials. Has not St. Paul told us that God, with the temptation itself, will ordain the issue of it, and enable us to hold our own?

Humbly, then, let us submit to God's dealings with us, when any temptation or trial comes; it is the humble soul he will set free, and lift up to greatness.

8. No such test as these of a man's spiritual progress, no such occasion of merit, no such arena to shew his fighting qualities. After all, when a man is not conscious of any difficulties in his path, is it any special credit to him to be devout and zealous? But let him carry himself patiently when everything goes against him—then there is good promise of spiritual advancement.

Why is it that some people are preserved from grave temptation, yet fight a losing battle all the time against their petty, day-to-day faults? Surely it is to keep them humble; with such proof of their frailty in things of little moment, they are not likely to err through self-confidence where great issues are at stake.

14. ON AVOIDING HASTY ESTIMATES

Watch your own step; be slow to criticize the doings of other people. When we criticize others, we get nothing for our pains; how often we make mistakes! How carelessly it can lead us into sin! Be your own critic; pull yourself to pieces; then you will have something to shew for your trouble. Again and again our judgement about a thing depends on the way our sympathies are engaged; a personal preference can easily rob us of the power to see straight. This obstinacy in our own opinions would have less power to disturb our judgements, if all the desire of our hearts found its only scope in God.

2. But too often some hidden force within, some attraction that meets us from outside, will sweep us off our feet. Plenty of people are influenced in their actions by these undercurrents of self-seeking, without having any idea of it. All seems to go well with them, as long as everything turns out in accordance with their wishes, their plans; but when once their wills are thwarted, they lose their balance and get depressed in no time.