

THE COMPLETE FÉNELON

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*Translated and Edited by  
Robert J. Edmonson, CJ, & Hal M. Helms*



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*The Complete Fénelon*

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## INTRODUCTION TO *The Complete Fénelon*

**I**n 1651, when François Fénelon was born, an exhausted Europe was recovering from the Thirty Years' War. Britain could not provide a balance of power, embroiled as it was in the civil war that had led to the execution of its king in 1649. So the 1648 Peace of Westphalia had left France as the dominant power in Europe. Within France, a series of revolts against the crown had begun in 1648, and the outcome of the struggle was by no means certain.

France dominated in the arts and letters as well as in politics. The creation of the *Académie Française* (the French Academy) in 1635 had standardized the French language. In 1637 René Descartes had established the principles of modern science and philosophy. Throughout Europe, the French language and French science and culture were held in such high esteem that the use of French was widespread in every court. The scene was set for the golden age of French literature.

It was into this moment of history that François Fénelon was born in southwestern France. Like so many of the ancient minor nobility, Fénelon's parents had a large family—and a long list of creditors. But their fervent loyalty to the crown during the revolts brought them letters of gratitude from the king. So when Fénelon chose to follow his uncle, the bishop of Sarlat, in pursuing a career in the church, his family's solid reputation had paved the way for his entry into higher studies. After being ordained and completing his doctorate in 1677, Fénelon soon began to minister, to preach, and to write.

During Fénelon's childhood, the young Louis XIV firmly suppressed the disaffected nobles, and then contrived to keep the most powerful of them under his thumb by building the lavish palace of Versailles and enticing them to live there. He kept them busy with endless balls and theatrical and musical performances.

With the nobles firmly under his control, Louis turned his attention to another perceived threat to the unity of his realm. The Edict of Nantes (1598) had granted a measure of religious liberty to Protestants.

After the death of Louis' queen in 1683 and his marriage to the devout Catholic Madame de Maintenon in 1684, Louis was not long in revoking the right of Protestants to practice their religion. Many fled the country, and those who stayed were required to convert to the Catholic faith.

Fénelon's talent having been quickly recognized, he was named soon after ordination as superior of a Paris mission to new converts to the Catholic church. By 1684 he was invited to preach in Meaux, whose bishop, Bossuet, was counted among France's finest orators. Soon Fénelon was invited to go on a preaching mission with the renowned prelate.

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 created a need for the best Catholic preachers in France. The young Fénelon was named director of the mission to convert the Protestants of Saintonge and Aunis—the center of French Protestantism. There, Fénelon won the hearts of the Protestants with his gentleness and moderation. But Fénelon's restraint did not pass unnoticed among more extreme Catholic factions, who blocked his nomination as bishop of Poitiers.

His mission among the Protestants accomplished, Fénelon returned to Paris where he served as spiritual director to the duke and duchess of Beauvilliers and their family of eight daughters. Out of this experience came Fénelon's first major work. *The Education of Girls* revealed a remarkable presentation of the value of education for young women.

In 1689 the duke of Beauvilliers was named governor over the king's sons and grandsons. Having revealed his abilities as a teacher and preacher, Fénelon was immediately made personal tutor to the king's grandson, the young duke of Burgundy. By the age of thirty-eight Fénelon had achieved a prominent platform for his gentle teachings.

For the benefit of his pupil, Fénelon wrote his *Fables* (moral lessons in the form of fairy tales), his *Dialogs of the Dead* (in which bygone historical figures tell what they learned from life), numerous spiritual writings, and *The Adventures of Telemachus* (a commentary in epic style on how kings ought to reign). For nearly ten years he devoted himself to his charge, patiently turning this wild young man into a model of docility.

As tutor to the heir to the throne, Fénelon gained access to the court of Versailles, where a group of devout Christians welcomed his presence and looked to him for guidance and spiritual direction. His friendship and his correspondence with them continued throughout his life.

Among Fénelon's correspondents was Madame de Maintenon, who had founded a school for girls of impoverished nobility; Fénelon was a frequent visitor and speaker at the school.

The peak of Fénelon's career came in the mid-1690s, when he was elected to the *Académie Française* (1693) and appointed archbishop of Cambrai (1695). Another man would have lived out his life as a political favorite and died in comfortable obscurity. Fénelon, however, chose a different path. Surrounded by the untold wealth enjoyed by the courtiers at Versailles and by many members of the clergy, Fénelon sought a different treasure—a treasure that was to cost him the favor of Madame de Maintenon and the king, and his position at the court.

Before we attempt to understand Fénelon's fall from favor and subsequent banishment from the court, we need to understand the era in which he lived.

The religious wars of the sixteenth century and the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century brought about widespread disillusionment with religious institutions. Alongside the religious fanaticism of these two centuries, a great flowering of art, music, literature, and philosophy sprang up, as Renaissance humanism gave way to scientific rationalism.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) denounced reliance on authority and Aristotelian logic, calling for a new scientific method based on inductive generalization from careful observation and experiment.

Galileo (1564–1642) created the science of mechanics and applied the principles of geometry to the motions of bodies.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) later applied the principles of mechanics to every field of knowledge, emphasizing the law of self-preservation as the basis of human behavior.

But it was René Descartes (1596–1650) who had perhaps the most lasting influence on the French mentality. Refusing to accept any belief,

even his own existence, until he could prove it to be necessarily true, he made mathematics the model for all science.

Not merely the province of an intellectual elite, these scientific and philosophical views permeated every level of French society, including the church. Their emphasis on the mind's reasoning left little room for the heart. One who sought to experience God with a deeper heart experience was viewed at best as anachronistic, and at worst as a dangerous threat to the strength of the nation.

There were a few whose experiences with God could not be ignored.

The French priest Saint Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) established charitable works to help society's most underprivileged.

The French nun Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–90) experienced visions of Christ.

The simple French monk known as Brother Lawrence (1620?–91) determined to practice the presence of God throughout his life.<sup>1</sup>

In 1688 Fénelon met a woman whose teachings were to have a profound effect on his experience of God. Though steeped in the culture and teaching of his day, Fénelon felt a perplexing lack in his life that remained unfulfilled until his encounter with Madame Guyon.

Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717) had begun to introduce into France the doctrine of Quietism, based on the belief that perfection lies in the utter abandonment of oneself to God. At first well received by the clergy and the pope, the doctrine soon aroused severe criticism because the abandonment it calls for can turn into passivity.

The archbishop of Paris was quick to criticize Madame Guyon, and in 1688 she was imprisoned. But she was released the next year through the influence of Madame de Maintenon, and during the next several years she was often present at the court, forming a circle of friends including Fénelon. Eventually, however, Madame de Maintenon began to find Madame Guyon's teaching suspect.

Without the aid of her former protectress, Madame Guyon was imprisoned again in 1695. When she was attacked, she called for a

theological conference to examine her work. The commission met at Issy, near Paris in 1695, and at its conclusion, thirty-four articles were drawn up condemning certain errors of the Quietist teaching. These articles were signed by Bossuet, Fénelon, and Madame Guyon herself. This time her incarceration was to last until 1703, when she was released on the condition that she live in exile from Paris.

In 1695, the year of Madame Guyon's second imprisonment, Fénelon was made archbishop of Cambrai. Due to the entangled European politics of the time, his appointment carried not only religious authority, but also several titles of nobility and considerable revenues. And Fénelon was still tutor to the king's grandson. At the age of forty-four, this son of impoverished provincial minor nobility had achieved enormous prestige.

But 1695 marked a turning point in Fénelon's life, for in that year he became involved in a controversy with Bossuet over Madame Guyon's teachings. Having at last found satisfaction for his spiritual hunger, Fénelon felt the need to vindicate his spiritual mentor. Concerned that the truth might be lost in the condemnations of Madame Guyon, in 1697 Fénelon published *Explication des maximes des saints*, in which he set forth the difference between true and false spirituality, using the writings and experiences of many saints as verification. But Bossuet, the celebrated orator who had once aided Fénelon's career, now aimed his acerbic pen at the one who rose to Madame Guyon's defense. Immediately fiercely attacking the book, Bossuet in the years following waged a prolonged and bitter literary battle against Fénelon. Thomas Merton explains what happened:

Bossuet was a court preacher, a "solid" ecclesiastic, a man of duty, no doubt, and a great influence for good at Versailles. But he also knew the meaning of a career, and was too realistically engaged in the practicalities of that career to be bothered with the vicissitudes of interior conflict, or with the experience of trouble and of light which led Fénelon into the ways of the mystics. Dangerous ways, of course. One can well understand Bossuet's consternation at Fénelon's friendship with Mme Guyon. She was not only bizarre and rash, she was not only a distinctly bad influence

among the devout ladies of Versailles, but some of her propositions were so strange as to seem heretical. This Bossuet could see. But because he saw this, he could see nothing else. He could not see that Fénelon saw it just as well. He could not see that Fénelon was able to distinguish between the error and the exaggeration of Mme Guyon's language, her neurotic excesses, and the core of genuineness in her experience. Nor did he realize that Fénelon had gone far beyond Mme Guyon, and had really understood the Catholic tradition of mysticism that led back through St. Francis de Sales and St. John of the Cross to the Fathers of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The polemic between Fénelon and Bossuet continued for several years. The two prelates appealed to Rome. After months of delay, at the insistence of Bossuet and the King of France, in 1699 Pope Innocent XII issued a bull condemning twenty-three propositions in Fénelon's book. He is said to have been very reluctant to do this, and to have remarked that "Fénelon erred by loving God too much!"

Fénelon's statements were not always as safe as Bossuet's, and in one book [*Maxims of the Saints*] he set down a few formulas which, closely and technically examined, proved to be erroneous or ill-sounding. (Nothing of Fénelon's was ever found to be heretical.) The fact remains that in the realm of mysticism, Fénelon knew what he was talking about and Bossuet did not. Not only was Fénelon experienced in these matters, he was also the better, the more learned and wiser theologian. If the Church (the Pope himself being extremely reluctant) saw fit to censure some of the propositions in which Fénelon sought to refute quietism and correct its excesses, Rome has nevertheless repeatedly approved of the doctrine itself as it has been lived and taught by the saints. The most recent of these is Therese of Lisieux, whose "little way" is not only very close to Fénelon, but often echoes him practically word for word. There is no more quietism in Fénelon than there is in the "little way" or, for that matter, in St. John of the Cross.<sup>3</sup>

In 1699, the same year Fénelon's spiritual writings were condemned, his *Telemachus* was published without his permission. Written for his

royal pupil, the book for which Fénelon is best known in secular history states that kings exist for the benefit of their subjects, and denounces war. Louis XIV found the book to be an arrow aimed directly at his autocratic, war-filled reign. Fénelon was stripped of his position at court and exiled to his diocese.

Another man would have become bitter at such self-serving and cynical treatment. Fénelon's reaction to his condemnation and exile revealed the strength of his character. His defense of Madame Guyon had cost him everything he had worked so hard to achieve, but not a trace of bitterness could be found in him.

Perhaps, after all, this gives us a clue as to the real "crime" of Fénelon in the eyes of the King and of the Court. He refused to submit to their power and he persisted in identifying himself with a cause that was, in their eyes, despicable chiefly because it was weak. This in turn is reflected in the judgment of later generations upon his spirituality. One could hardly do anything but ridicule a doctrine that seemed to put a premium on helplessness, passivity, and "annihilation." And this was a very convenient way of overlooking the real strength, indeed the *superior* moral strength, of Fénelon.<sup>4</sup>

True to the course he had set for himself, Fénelon submitted meekly to his condemnation and exile, and set about with considerable energy to improve the lot of the peasants of his diocese and deepen the spiritual life of all with whom he came in contact.

Right up till his death in 1715, Fénelon never ceased his correspondence with those at court who had become his spiritual children.

When Louis XIV's son died in 1711 and the young duke of Burgundy became the heir to the throne, the devout circles at court were optimistic. Had the young man ascended the throne and followed Fénelon's advice, who knows? Perhaps the horror of the French Revolution would have been avoided. But this was not to be, for the young man died before Louis XIV, and the king's spoiled and inept great-grandson took the throne as Louis XV.

To this day, French historians do not understand Fénelon. At best, he was the hapless upstart who dared to argue with Bossuet and condemn

Louis XIV. At worst, he was a dangerous subversive who threatened the strength of the French nation.

But throughout Fénelon's lifetime and the centuries that have followed, Christians who have felt drawn toward a life of closer communion with God have found in Fénelon's writings a depth of understanding of their struggles that has been a source of profound encouragement. Fénelon's penetrating letters of advice and counsel to his friends have been translated and widely distributed in a number of languages, and have found a wide audience in English translation.

Fénelon's writings show how deeply he was steeped in the Scriptures: words from biblical passages can be found on nearly every page that Fénelon wrote. So acquainted with the Scriptures was Fénelon's audience, that it was his practice to quote from Scripture without giving the reference—his readers would recognize them instantly. To help today's reader catch the freshness of the original, we have been true to his style and have not given Scripture references directly within the text. Readers who wish to find the Scriptures mentioned in these writings will find extensive notes, keyed to the text, at the end of this volume.

It is our prayer that as you read *The Complete Fénelon* and sit at the feet of this wise counselor and teacher, you will find encouragement and strength on your journey toward the heart of God.

## ABOUT THIS EDITION

### *A Note from the Publisher*

One of the first books that Paraclete Press published was a volume of letters by François Fénelon. The editor of that book, Hal M. Helms (1923–1997), entitled it *The Royal Way of the Cross*. Father Hal, as he was known, was a beloved member of The Community of Jesus and a gifted speaker and writer whose gentle spirit and love for Jesus radiated from his life. Using an excellent nineteenth-century translation by H. Sidney Lear, Helms applied his editorial skills to modernizing and editing the text. That well-received volume contained fifty-two of Fénelon's letters.

Requests from readers for more of Fénelon's letters led to Helms's editing another fifty-one letters originally translated by Lear. This second volume was published in 1997 as *Fénelon: Talking with God*. That same year, we asked another editor and member of our Community, Robert J. Edmonson, CJ, to translate eighty-five of Fénelon's meditations on themes from Scripture. Rather than modernizing earlier translations, because Edmonson is expert in the French language, he went back to the original French, using texts printed in the early 1700s. Those meditations were published in a volume entitled *Fénelon: Meditations on the Heart of God*.

The introduction to that last volume, with its in-depth overview of Fénelon's life and influence, was reedited and used as the foundation for the introduction to this new edition of *The Complete Fénelon*, with additions from Helms's introduction to *The Royal Way of the Cross*.

*The Complete Fénelon* incorporates our three previous editions of Fénelon, and adds to them. For this new book, Edmonson did additional modernization of parts one and two and reedited part three. Then he translated twenty-one personal meditations by Fénelon on important days and seasons of the church year. The new translation, entitled *God of My Heart: Meditations on Feast and Fasts*, constitutes part four of *The Complete Fénelon*, and is published in English here for the first time.

Occasional footnotes throughout the text have been provided by the editors. More exhaustive endnotes explain the details of theological nuance as well as the source of Scripture quotes and allusions.

We have entitled this new book *The Complete Fénelon*, not because it contains everything penned by this prolific writer, but because it contains a comprehensive selection of his writings for Christians in the form of both letters and meditations. Other writings by Fénelon, such as his fables and his political works, are available in editions from other publishers.

#### THE SCRIPTURE VERSIONS USED IN THIS EDITION

Part 1, *The Royal Way of the Cross*: Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptures are from NIV.

Parts 2 and 3, *Talking with God* and *Meditations on the Heart of God*: The versions used for the Scriptures are noted individually.

Part 4, *God of My Heart*: Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptures are from NRSV.

# PART ONE

The Royal Way  
of the Cross



## INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

### *The Royal Way of the Cross*

**I**t is important to remember as one reads these letters and meditations that they were originally written to individuals, and that they often deal with very specific problems. The same is true, of course, of St. Paul's letters in the New Testament. In both cases, it is necessary to bear this in mind to avoid stressing some point out of the context and spirit of the whole. For example, Fénelon speaks in one of his letters about the need for softening the corrective word to others. To whom was he speaking? To someone, no doubt, whose self-righteousness and anger made such words a weapon and expression of self. On the other hand, he rebukes someone else for over-sensitivity to correction, calling such sensitivity the evidence of self-love. He himself invites correction without sparing, and certainly does not mince words or equivocate in speaking truth to those for whom he was responsible. All this needs to be borne in mind when reading or interpreting any individual passage.

This compilation seeks to set forth a multifaceted view of the “royal way of the Cross,” as Fénelon saw and expressed it. He believed that God was in all things in his own life and in the lives of his readers—in things fair and things unfair, things pleasant and things unpleasant. And he invites us to share this way of looking at life.

#### FÉNELON'S TERMINOLOGY

Fénelon often uses words in a different way from their modern meaning. The following definitions will help the reader grasp Fénelon's meanings:

*Disintegration*: losing our unity by breaking our lives into separate parts.

*Mortification*: the subjection and denial of bodily passions and appetites by abstinence.

*Mortified*: having an attitude or practice of mortification.

*Recollection*: the tranquility of mind that comes from quiet religious contemplation.

*Recollected*: being in a state of recollection.

*Scruples*: an excessive concern to be right in small details, particularly where religious restrictions or denials are concerned. We would probably call it a “legalistic” attitude today. Jesus referred to the Pharisees’ scruples when he spoke of washing the outside of the cup, while within was all manner of filth and uncleanness that they were overlooking. That is the kind of thing Fénelon is concerned with in those he is counseling.

*Scrupulous*: being excessively concerned to be right in small details.



# 1

## SEEING OUR TRUE SPIRITUAL STATE BEFORE GOD

In order to make your prayer more profitable, it would be well from the beginning to picture yourself as a poor, naked, miserable wretch, perishing of hunger, who knows only one man of whom he can ask or hope for help. Or picture yourself as a sick person, covered with sores and ready to die unless some compassionate physician will take him in hand and heal him. These are true pictures of our condition before God. Your soul is barer of heavenly treasure than that poor beggar is of earthly possessions. You need them more urgently, and there is no one but God of whom you can ask or expect them. Again, your soul is infinitely more sin-sick than that distressed, stricken patient, and God alone can heal you. Everything depends on his being moved by your prayers. He is able for all this: but remember that he wills to act only when he is asked earnestly and with real neediness.

When once permeated with this truth, then proceed to read over the subject of your meditation, either in Holy Scripture or in whatever book you may be using. Pause after a verse or two, to follow out such reflections as God may put into your mind. In order to help forward your beginnings, to rouse your mind from its ordinary inattention, you would do well to thank him for his Word, the oracle by which he teaches us his will, and for his willingness to teach us. It would be well to humble yourself and confess that you have not heeded his teaching better or profited by it more, examining wherein you have specially neglected it, or are neglecting it, and how far your life has been in conformity to God's will or in opposition to it.

Lay your shame before God. Reflect on the occasions that cause you to commit these faults and the best means of avoiding or remedying them. Consider what the Lord justly requires of you that you may keep from such falls and repent of the past. Think of how greatly you are bound to obey him, however hard it may seem, how profitable it is to do so, how disgraceful and dangerous it would be to leave it undone.

Remember that we are weakness itself, as daily experience proves, and offer yourself to Jesus Christ. Abhor your slackness and faithlessness and ask him to fill your heart with all that he would see in it. Ask him to strengthen this will, so that you may go on doing better. Trust in his goodness and in his solemn promises never to forsake us in time of need. Lean upon his words, and rest in the hope that he will confirm what he has worked in you so far.

## 2 REAL CONVERSION

We must yield to God when he urges us to let him reign with us.

Did you hesitate or resist so much when the world sought to seduce you through its passions and pleasures? Did you resist evil as forcefully as you resist what is good? When it is a question of going astray, being corrupted, lost, of acting against the inmost consciousness of heart and reason by indulging vanity or sensual pleasure, we are not so afraid of going too far; we choose, we yield unreservedly. But when the question is to believe that we, who did not make ourselves, were made by an all-wise, all-powerful Hand—to acknowledge that we owe all to him from whom we received all, and who made us for himself—then we begin to hesitate, to deliberate, to foster subtle doubts as to the simplest, plainest matters. We are afraid of being credulous, we mistrust our own feelings, we shift our ground. We fear to give too much to him for whom nothing can be too much, though we never gave him anything yet. We are actually ashamed of ceasing to be ungrateful, and of letting the world see that we want to serve him! In a word, we are as timid, shrinking, and shy about what is good, as we were bold and unhesitatingly decided concerning what is evil.

All I would ask of you is simply now to follow the leadings of your inmost heart toward what is good, as you once followed those of your worldly passions toward evil. Whenever you examine the foundation

of your religion, you will easily see that there is nothing substantial to be said against it, and that those who oppose it do so only to evade the rules of holy living, rejecting God out of self-seeking. But in all honesty, is it fair to be so broad-minded on behalf of self, and so narrow where God is concerned?

Do not argue. Either listen to your own heart, in which God, so long forgotten, is now speaking lovingly, notwithstanding past unfaithfulness; or consult such friends as you know to be right-minded and sincere. Ask them what they find God's service to be, whether they are sorry that they pledged themselves to it, and whether they think they were too credulous or too bold in their conversion. They, like you, were in the world. Ask whether they regret having forsaken it, and whether the intoxication of Babylon is sweeter than the peace of Zion? No, indeed! Whatever crosses may attend the Christian's life, we need never lose that blessed peace of heart through which we accept every suffering, desiring no happiness that God denies. Can the world give as much? You can tell. Are people of the world always satisfied with everything that comes to them, content without all that they do not have? Do they do everything out of love and with their heart?

What are you afraid of? Of leaving that which will soon leave you?

What are you afraid of? Of following too much goodness, finding a too-loving God; of being drawn by an attraction that is stronger than self or the charms of this poor world?

What are you afraid of? Of becoming too humble, too detached, too pure, too true, too reasonable, too grateful to your Father who is in heaven? I implore you, be afraid of nothing so much as of this false fear—this foolish, worldly wisdom that hesitates between God and self, between vice and virtue, between gratitude and ingratitude, between life and death.

☞ 3

### WHAT DOES GOD ASK OF YOU?

God has not forgotten you.

What does he ask of you, but to be happy? Have you not realized that we are happy in loving him? Have you not felt that there is no other real happiness, whatever excitement may be found in sensual pleasures, apart from him? Since you know where to find the Fountain of Life, and have once drunk of it, why would you seek foul, earthly cisterns? When will those days return, those bright, happy days, lighted up by the soft rays of loving mercy?

Do whatever you will, only love God, and let his love, revived in your heart, be your guide. Your ears are not yet closed to the sublime language of truth; your heart is made to feel its charms. “Taste and see” the pleasant bread daily spread for us at our Father’s table. With such support, who can fear that anything else will be lacking?

I know what it is to be weak; I am a thousand times weaker than you. It is very profitable to have realized what we are; but to that weakness, which is inseparable from our human nature, do not add an estrangement from the very means of strength. Only hearken inwardly to him and despise boldly that which is despicable.

☞ 4

### FEAR OF BEING WRONG

Your spiritual progress is more hindered by your excessive fear of giving way to enjoyment in ordinary, innocent things, than it ever could be by that enjoyment itself. Of course, self-indulgence is always to be avoided, especially when we need self-restraint; but you seriously injure yourself by keeping up a perpetual effort to resist even the smallest involuntary pleasure in the details of a well-regulated life. I would have you steadily resist such a tendency. I do not approve of your efforts to reject the enjoyment inevitably attending upon simple food and needed rest.

Speak honestly about your concerns about your health to your doctor, then leave him to decide and give no heed to your own fancies. But obey quietly; that should be the aim of your courage and steadfastness. Without this, you will not acquire the peace that God's children possess, nor will you deserve it. Bear all annoyances of your present condition, which is full of inconveniences and discomfort, in a penitential spirit; these are the penances God assigns you, and they are far more useful than those you may choose for yourself. There is no spot in the world where you would not find yourself beset with your natural taste for enjoyment. Even the strictest solitude would have its thorns.

The best state to be in is the one in which God's hand holds you: do not look beyond it, and be content to accept his will from one moment to another in the spirit of mortification and renunciation. But this acquiescence must be full of trust in God, who loves you even more for not sparing you. You ought to be scrupulous about your scruples rather than about your enjoyment of innocent, ordinary things.

## 5 FALSE AND REAL HUMILITY

It is false humility to believe ourselves unworthy of God's goodness and to not dare to look to him with trust. True humility lies in seeing our own unworthiness and giving ourselves up to God, never doubting that he can work out the greatest results for and in us. If God's success depends on finding our foundations already laid, we might well fear that our sins had destroyed our chances. But God needs nothing that is in us. He can never find anything there except what he himself has given us. No, we may go further and say that the absolute nothingness of the creature, bound up as it is with sin in a faithless soul, is the fittest of all subjects for the reception of his grace. He delights to pour it out on such souls, for sinful souls who have never experienced anything but their own weakness cannot claim any of God's gifts as their own possession. It is just as St. Paul says: "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise."<sup>1</sup>

Do not fear then, that your past faithlessness must make you unworthy of God's mercy. Nothing is so worthy of mercy as utter weakness. He came from heaven to earth to seek sinners, not the righteous; to seek that which was lost—as indeed all were lost if it were not for him. The physician seeks the sick, not the healthy. Oh, how God loves those who come boldly to him in their foul, ragged garments, and ask, as of a father, for some garment worthy of him!

You wait to be familiar till God shows a smiling face. But I tell you that if you will open your heart thoroughly to him, you will cease to trouble yourself about the particular appearance of his face. Let him turn a severe and displeased countenance upon you as much as he will, he never loves you more than when he threatens. For he threatens only to test, to humble, to detach souls from themselves.

Do you want the consolation God can give, or do you want God himself? If it is the first, then you do not love God for his own sake, but for yours; and in that case, you deserve nothing from him. But if you seek him alone, you will find him even more truly when he tests you than when he comforts you. When he comforts you, you have cause to fear that you might care more for his gifts than for himself; but when he deals roughly with you and you hold on fast, it is to him alone that you cling. The real time for progress is not when we delight in a conscious sweetness, but when faith is dry and cold—if we do not yield to discouragement.

Leave it all to God. It is not your business to judge how he should deal with you, because he knows far better than you do what is good for you. You deserve a certain amount of trial and dryness. Bear it patiently! God does his part when he pushes you away. Try to do yours too, and that is to love him without waiting for him to assure you of his love for you. Your love is a guarantee of his; your confidence will disarm him, and turn all his severity into tenderness. Even if he were not to grow tender, you ought to give yourself up to his just dealings, and accept his intention of nailing you to the cross in union with his beloved Son, Jesus.

Such is the solid food of pure faith and generous love with which you should sustain your soul. I pray that God may make you strong under your troubles.

Expect all, and all will be given you: God and his peace will be with you!

6

THE DECEITFULNESS  
OF SELF-LOVE

Generally speaking, I should fear that reading about extraordinary spiritual matters tends to harm weak imaginations. Self-love easily flatters itself that it has attained the altitudes that it has admired in books. It seems to me that the only course in such a case is to take no notice of such things. I advise you never to dwell voluntarily on extraordinary experiences. This is the real way to discover how much self-conceit has to do with these supposed gifts. Nothing tends so much to wound the vanity of self-conceit and bring illusions to light as a simple direction to set aside the marvelous, and to require a person who aspires to the marvelous to act as though nothing of the sort existed. Without such a test, I do not think the genuineness of a person can be proven thoroughly, and without it, I do not think due caution has been taken against delusion.

The blessed John of the Cross advises souls to look beyond such light, and to abide in the twilight of simple faith. If the gifts are real, such detachment will not hinder them from leaving their marks upon the soul; if not, such uncompromising faith will be a sure guarantee against delusion. Moreover, such a line will not keep a soul back from God's true leadings, for there is no opposition. It can only distress self-conceit, which finds a hidden self-satisfaction in such unusual gifts; and that self-conceit is the very thing that needs pruning.

Even if such gifts are unquestionably real and good, it is most important to learn detachment from them, and live by simple faith. However excellent the gifts may be, detachment from them is better still. "And now I will show you the most excellent way"—the way of faith and love; not clinging either to sight, feeling, or taste—only to obedience to the beloved One. Such a way is simple, real, straightforward, free from the snares of pride.



## 7

## CRITICIZING OTHERS

You need greater liberality as to the faults of others. I grant you that you cannot help seeing them when they are forced upon you, or avoid your inevitable conclusions as to the principles on which some seem to act. Neither can you avert a certain annoyance that such things cause. Suffice it if you try to bear with obvious faults, avoiding judging those that are doubtful, and resist the dislike that estranges you from people.

Perfection finds it easy to bear with the imperfections of others, and to be all things to all people. We ought to learn to put up with the most obvious faults in worthy souls, and to leave them alone until God gives the sign for a gradual weeding; otherwise, we are likely to tear up the good grain with the weeds. God often leaves certain infirmities besetting the most advanced souls, such as seem quite out of character with their excellence, just as in reclaimed ground some leave tokens to show how extensive the work of clearance has been. God leaves such tokens to show from where he has brought them.

All such souls must labor at self-amendment at their own rate, and you must labor to endure their imperfections. Your own experience will teach you that correction is a bitter thing; and since you know this, give heed to soften it to others. It is not your great zeal to correct others for their own sake as much as it is your perfectionism that shuts your heart to them.

8

FALSE NOTIONS  
OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

Almost all who aim at serving God do so more or less for their own sake. They want to win, not to lose. They want to be comforted, not to suffer. They want to possess, not to be deprived. They want to increase, not to diminish. Yet all the while our whole interior progress consists in losing, sacrificing, decreasing, humbling, and stripping self even of God's own gifts, so as to be more completely his. We are often like an invalid who feels his pulse fifty times in the day, and wants the doctor to be perpetually ordering some fresh treatment, or telling him how much better he is.

Some people treat their spiritual director or pastor in this way. They move round and round in a petty circle of easy virtues, never stepping beyond it heartily and generously, while they expect the director (like the physician) to soothe, comfort, encourage, and foster perfectionism, only ordering little sedative treatments that drop into mere habit and routine. As soon as they are deprived of conscious grace—grace that they can feel inwardly, grace that is like the milk of babes—such people fancy that all is lost. But this is a plain proof that they cling too much to the means and overlook the end, and that self is their main object.

Privations are the food of strong minds: They invigorate the soul, take it out of itself, and offer it as a living sacrifice to God. But weak people are in despair at the first touch of privation. They fancy that all their work is being overthrown just when it is really beginning to be solidly fixed and thoroughly purified. They are willing to let God do what he will with them, *provided always* it be something great and perfect. But they have no notion of being cast down and crushed, or of being offered as a sacrifice to be consumed by the divine flames. They seek to live by pure faith, yet want to retain all their worldly wisdom, to be as children, yet great in their own eyes. But what a spiritual mirage this is!

 9  
THE RIGHT USE  
OF TRIALS

People find it very hard to believe that God heaps crosses on those he loves out of loving-kindness. “Why should he take pleasure in causing us to suffer?” they ask. “Could he not make us good without making us so miserable?” Yes, doubtless God could do so, for to him all things are possible. His all-powerful hands hold the human heart and turn it as he pleases, just as people who command the source of a reservoir turn the stream in whatever direction they desire. But though God could save us without crosses, he has not willed to do so, just as he has willed that people should grow up through the weakness and troubles of childhood, instead of being born fully developed. He is the Master; we can only be silent and adore his infinite wisdom without understanding it. The one thing we do see plainly is that we cannot become really good except in so far as we become humble, unselfish, in all things turning from self to God.

But as that grace operates, it cannot (except through a miracle of the same grace) be other than painful, and God does not perform continual miracles in the order of grace any more than in the order of nature. It would be as great a miracle to see a person full of self die suddenly to self-consciousness and self-interest as it would be to see a child go to bed a mere child and rise up the next morning thirty years old! God hides his work beneath a series of imperceptible events, both in grace and nature, and in this way he subjects us to the mysteries of faith. Not only does he accomplish his work gradually, but also he does it by the most simple and likely means, so that its success appears natural. Otherwise, all that God does would be like a perpetual miracle, and this would overthrow the life of faith by which he would have us exist.

Such a life of faith is necessary, not only to mold the good, by causing us to sacrifice our own reason amid a world of darkness, but also to blind those whose presumption misleads them. Such people see God’s

works without comprehending them, and take them to be simply natural. They are without true understanding, since understanding is given only to those who mistrust their own judgment and the proud wisdom of humanity.

So it is to ensure that the operation of grace may remain a mystery of faith that God permits it to be slow and painful. He makes use of human inconstancy and ingratitude, and the disappointments and failures that attend human prosperity, to detach us from the created world and its good things. He opens our eyes by letting us realize our own weakness and evil through countless falls. All this seems to go on in the natural course of events, and this series of apparently natural causes consumes us like a slow fire. We would much rather be consumed at once by the flames of pure love, but so speedy a process would cost us nothing. It is utter selfishness that we desire to attain perfection so cheaply and so quickly.

## 10 PROLONGED TRIALS

Why do we rebel against our prolonged trials? Because of self-love; and it is that very self-love that God purposes to destroy. As long as we cling to self, his work is not achieved.

What right have we to complain? We suffer from an excessive attachment to the world—above all to self. God orders a series of events that detach us gradually from the world first, and finally from the self also. The operation is painful, but our corruption makes it needful. If the flesh were healthy, the surgeon would not need to probe it. He uses the knife only in proportion to the depth of the wound and the extent of proud flesh. If we feel his operation too keenly, it is because the disease is active. Is it cruelty that makes the surgeon probe us so quick? No, far otherwise—it is skill and kindness; he would do the same with his only child.

This is how God treats us. He never willingly puts us to any pain. His fatherly heart does not desire to grieve us, but he cuts to the quick so

that he may heal the ulcers of our spiritual being. He must tear from us what we love wrongly, unreasonably, or excessively, the thing that hinders his love. In so doing, he causes us to cry out like a child from whom one takes away a knife with which it could injure or kill itself. We cry loudly in our despair, and murmur against God, just as the petulant child murmurs against its mother. But he lets us cry, and saves us nevertheless!

God afflicts us only for our correction. Even when he seems to overwhelm us, it is for our own good, to spare us the greater evil we would do to ourselves. The things for which we weep would have caused us eternal distress. That which we count as loss was then indeed most lost when we fancied that it belonged to us. God has stored it up safely, to be returned to us in eternity. He deprives us of the things we prize only because he wants to teach us to love them purely, truly, and properly in order to enjoy them forever in his presence, and because he wants to do a hundred times better for us than we can even desire for ourselves.

Nothing can happen in the world except by God's permissive will.<sup>2</sup> He does everything, arranges everything, makes everything to be as it is. He counts the hairs of our head, the leaves of every tree, the sand on the seashore, the drops of water from the mighty ocean. When he made the world, his wisdom weighed and measured every atom. Every moment he renews and sustains the breath of life. He knows the number of our days; he holds the cords of life or death. What seems to us weightiest is as nothing in the eyes of God; a little longer or shorter life becomes an imperceptible difference before him. What does it matter whether this frail vessel, this poor clay, should be thrown aside a little sooner or later? How shortsighted and erring we are!

We are aghast at the death of one in the flower of his age. "What a sad loss!" we cry out. But to whom is the loss? What does the one who dies lose?—a few years of vanity, delusion, and peril. God takes that person away from the evil and saves that one from his own weakness and the world's wickedness. What do they lose who love God?—the danger of earthly happiness, a treacherous delight, a snare that caused

them to forget God and their own welfare. But in truth they gain the blessing of detachment through the cross. That same blow by which the one who dies is saved prepares those who are left to work out their salvation in hope. Surely, then, it is true that God is very good, very loving, very full of pity with regard to our real needs, even when he seems to overwhelm us and we are most tempted to call him hard.

The sensitiveness of self-love makes us keenly alive to our own condition. The sick person who cannot sleep thinks the night is endless, yet it is no longer than any other night. In our cowardice, we exaggerate all we suffer. Our pain may be severe, but we make it worse by shrinking under it. The real way to get relief is to give ourselves up heartily to God, to accept suffering because God sends it to purify us and make us worthier of him.

The world smiled upon you, and was as a poison to your soul. Would you wish to go on, right up to the hour of death, in ease and pleasure, in the pride of life and soul-destroying luxury, clinging to the world—which is Christ's enemy, and rejecting the cross—which alone can make you holy? The world will turn away and forget, despise, and ignore you. Are you surprised at that, since the world is worldly, unjust, deceitful, and treacherous? Yet you are not ashamed to love this world, from which God snatches you to deliver you from its bondage and make you free.

You complain of your very deliverance. You are your own enemy when you are so alive to the world's indifference, and you cannot endure what is for your real good when you so keenly regret the loss of what is fatal to you. This is the source of all your grief and pain.

## 11 ANXIETY ABOUT THE FUTURE

The future is in God's hands, not yours. God will rule it according to your need. But if you seek to forecast it in your own wisdom, you will gain nothing but anxiety and anticipation of inevitable trouble. Try only to make use of each day. Each day brings its own good and evil, and sometimes what seems evil becomes good if we leave it to God and do not forestall him with our impatience.

Be sure that God will grant you whatever time you need to reach him. Perhaps he may not give you as much as you would like for your own plans, or to please yourself under the pretext of seeking spiritual perfection, but you will find that neither time nor opportunity for renunciation of self and self-pleasing will be lacking. All other time is lost, however well spent it may seem. Be assured that you will find all such circumstances adapted to your real needs. In proportion as God upsets your own inclinations he will uphold your weakness. Do not be afraid; leave everything to him.

You will always find freedom in God so long as you do not give way to the false idea that you have lost your freedom.

## 12 THE STRUGGLE OF SELF-WILL

The Spirit of God never inspires us with self-conceit; and far from creating disturbance, the Spirit always fills the heart with peace. What could be a more certain proof of temptation than to be in a kind of despair, rebelling against everything that God gives you to lead you to himself? Such rebellion is not natural, but God allows temptation to drive us to such an extremity in order that we may more easily recognize that it is temptation.

In the same way, he allows us in the presence of others to fall into certain faults, which are altogether contrary to our excessive sensitivity and discretion, in order to mortify the sensitivity and discretion that we cherish so jealously. He causes the ground under us to give way, in order that we may not find any conscious support, either in ourselves or in anyone else. Further, he allows us to imagine that our neighbor judges us quite other than he really does, in order that our self-conceit may lose any flattering prop in that direction.

The remedy is severe, but it needed nothing less to free us from ourselves and to storm the defensive walls of our pride. We want to die, but to die without any pain and in full health. We want to be tested, but only while looking on with conscious superiority to the trial. It is a saying of the old lawyers with respect to donations: You cannot both give and keep. We must give all or nothing when God asks it. If we do not have courage to give, at least we can let him take.

## 13 SELF-DECEIT

Nothing so feeds self-conceit as believing that you are completely devoted to others and never self-seeking, that you are quite free from self-love and always generously devoted to your neighbors.

But all this devotion that seems to be for others is really for yourself. Your self-love reaches the point of perpetual self-congratulation in the mistaken belief that you are free from self-love itself. All your anxiety is fear that you might not be fully satisfied with yourself, and this is the root of your scruples.

If you thought of nothing but God and his glory, you would be as keen and sensitive to the losses of others as to your own. But it is the self that makes you so keen and sensitive. You want God as well as other people to be always satisfied with you, and you want to be satisfied with yourself in all your dealings with God.

You are not used to being content with a simple good will. Your self-love wants a lively feeling, a reassuring pleasure, some kind of charm or excitement. You are guided too much by imagination, and you suppose that your mind and will are inactive unless you are conscious of their workings. So you depend on a kind of excitement similar to that which the passions or the theater arouse.

Because of your excessive refinement, you fall into the opposite extreme—a real coarseness of imagination. Nothing is more opposed to the life of faith and to true wisdom.

There is no more dangerous opening to delusion than the false ways by which people try to avoid delusion. It is imagination that leads us astray. The certainty we seek through imagination, feeling, and taste is one of the most dangerous sources from which fanaticism springs.

This is the chasm of vanity and corruption that God would have us discover in our own heart: we must look on it with the calm and simplicity that belong to true humility. It is self-love that makes us so inconsolable at seeing our own imperfections. To stand face to face with them, however, not flattering or tolerating them, seeking to correct ourselves without becoming peevish—this is to desire what is good for its own sake and for God's sake, rather than merely treating it as a self-satisfying decoration.

So turn against this useless search of yours for the self-satisfaction you find in doing right.