

WRITINGS OF ALPHONUS

by Alphonus

A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by Alphonus, compiled for study and devotional reading.

11 Chapters

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01.00 Necessity and Power of Prayer

Necessity and Power of Prayer By St. Alphonsus Ligouri

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01.01 Chapter 1: THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER

Chapter 1: THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER 1 Prayer Is a Means Necessary to Salvation.

One of the errors of Pelagianism was the assertion that prayer is not necessary for salvation. Pelagius, the impious author of that heresy, said that man will only be damned for neglecting to know the truths necessary to be learned. How astonishing! St. Augustine said: 'Pelagius discussed everything except how to pray,' though, as the saint held and taught, prayer is the only means of acquiring the science of the saints; according to the text of St. James: If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all abundantly, and upbraides not (James 1:5). The Scriptures are clear enough in pointing out; how necessary it is to pray, if we would be saved. We ought always to pray, and not to faint (Luke 18:1). Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation (Matthew 26:41). Ask, and it shall be given you (Matthew 7:7). The words 'we ought,' 'pray,' 'ask,' according to the general consent of theologians, impose the precept, and denote the necessity of prayer. Wickliffe said that these texts are to be understood, not precisely of prayer, but only of the necessity of good works, for in his system prayer was only well-doing; but this was his error, and was expressly condemned by the Church. Hence Lessius wrote that it is heresy to deny that prayer is necessary for salvation in adults; as it evidently appears from Scripture that prayer is the means, without which we cannot obtain the help necessary for salvation. The reason of this is evident. Without the assistance of God's grace we can do no good thing: Without me, you can do nothing (John 15:5). St. Augustine remarks on this passage, that our Lord did not say, Without me, you can complete nothing,' but 'without me, you can do nothing'; giving us to understand that without grace we cannot even begin to do a good thing. Nay more, St. Paul writes, that of ourselves we cannot even have the wish to do good. Not that we are sufficient to think anything ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God (2 Corinthians 3:5). If we cannot even think a good thing, much less can we wish it. The same thing is taught in many other passages of Scripture: God works all in all (1 Corinthians 12:6). I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them (Ezekiel 36:27). So that, as St. Leo I says, 'Man does no good thing, except that which God, by his grace, enables him to do,' and hence the Council of Trent says: 'If anyone shall assert that without the previous inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and his assistance, man can believe, hope, love or repent, as he ought, in order to obtain the grace of justification, let him be anathema.' The author of the *Opus Imperfectum* says that God has given to some animals swiftness, to others claws, to others wings, for the preservation of their life; but he has so formed man, that God himself is his only strength. So that man is completely unable to provide for his own safety, since God has willed that whatever he has, or can have, should come entirely from the assistance of his grace. But this grace is not given in God's ordinary Providence, except to those who pray for it; according to the celebrated saying of Gennadius, 'We believe that no one approaches to be saved, except at the invitation of God; that no one who is invited works out his salvation, except by the help of God; that no one merits this help, unless he prays.' From these two premises, on the one hand, that we can do nothing without the assistance of grace; and on the other, that this assistance is only given ordinarily by God to the man that prays, who does

not see that the consequence follows, that prayer is absolutely necessary to us for salvation? And although the first graces that come to us without any cooperation on our part, such as the call to faith or to penance, are, as St. Augustine says, granted by God even to those who do not pray; yet the saint considers it certain that the other graces, and specially the grace of perseverance, are not granted except in answer to prayer: 'God gives us some things, as the beginning of faith, even when we do not pray. Other things, such as perseverance, he has only provided for those who pray.'

Hence it is that the generality of theologians, following St. Basil, St. Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, St. Augustine, and other Fathers, teach that prayer is necessary to adults, not only because of the obligation of the precept (as they say), but because it is necessary as a means of salvation. That is to say, in the ordinary course of Providence, it is impossible that a Christian should be saved without recommending himself to God, and asking for the graces necessary to salvation. St. Thomas teaches the same: 'After baptism, continual prayer is necessary to man, in order that he may enter heaven; for though by baptism our sins are remitted, there still remain concupiscence to assail us from within, and the world and the devil to assail us from without.' The reason then which makes us certain of the necessity of prayer is shortly this, in order to be saved we must contend and conquer: He that strives for the mystery is not crowned except he strive lawfully (2 Timothy 2:5). But without the divine assistance we cannot resist the might of so many and so powerful' enemies: now this assistance is only granted to prayer; therefore without prayer there is no salvation.

Moreover, that prayer is the only ordinary means of receiving the divine gifts is more distinctly proved by St. Thomas in another place, where he says that whatever graces God has from all eternity determined to give us, he will give only if we pray for them. St. Gregory says the same thing: 'Man by prayer merits to receive that which God had from all eternity determined to give him.' Not, says St. Thomas, that prayer is necessary in order that God may know our necessities, but in order that we may know the necessity of having recourse to God to obtain the help necessary for our salvation, and may thus acknowledge him to be the author of all our good. As, therefore, it is God's law that we should provide ourselves with bread by sowing corn, and with wine by planting vines; so has he ordained that we should receive the graces necessary to salvation by means of prayer: Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find (Matthew 7:7).

We, in a word, are merely beggars, who have nothing but what God bestows on us as alms: But I am a beggar and poor (Psalms 39:1-13, Psalms 18:1-50) . The Lord, says St. Augustine, desires and wills to pour forth his graces upon us, but will not give them except to him who prays: 'God wishes to give, but only gives to him who asks.' This is declared in the words, Seek, and it shall be given to you. Whence it follows, says St. Teresa, that he who seeks not, does not receive. As moisture is necessary for the life of plants, to prevent them from drying up, so, says St. Chrysostom, is prayer necessary for our salvation. Or, as he says in another place, prayer vivifies the soul, as the soul vivifies the body: 'As the body without the soul cannot live, so the soul without prayer is dead and emits an offensive odor.' He uses these words, because the man who omits to recommend himself to God, at once begins to be defiled with sins. Prayer is also called the food of the soul, because the body cannot be supported without food; nor can the soul, says St. Augustine, be kept alive without prayer: 'As the flesh is nourished by food, so is man supported by

prayers.' All these comparisons used by the holy Fathers are intended by them to teach the absolute necessity of prayer for the salvation of everyone.

2. Without Prayer It Is Impossible to Resist Temptations and to Keep the Commandments

Moreover, prayer is the most necessary weapon of defense against our enemies; he who does not avail himself of it, says St. Thomas, is lost. He does not doubt that Adam fell because he did not recommend himself to God when he was tempted: 'He sinned because he had not recourse to the divine assistance.' St. Gelasius says the same of the rebel angels: 'Receiving the grace of God in vain, they could not persevere, because they did not pray.' St. Charles Borromeo, in a pastoral letter, observes, that among all the means of salvation recommended by Jesus Christ in the Gospel, the first place is given to prayer; and he has determined that this should distinguish his Church from all false religions, when he calls her 'the house of prayer.' My house is a house of prayer (Matthew 21:13). St. Charles concludes that prayer is 'the beginning and progress and the completion of all virtues.' So that in darkness, distress, and danger, we have no other hope than to raise our eyes to God, and with fervent prayers to beseech his mercy to save us: As we know not, said king Josaphat, what to do, we can only turn our eyes to you (2 Par. 20, 12) . This also was David's practice, who could find no other means of safety from his enemies, than continual prayer to God to deliver him from their snares: My eyes are ever towards the Lord; for he shall pluck my feet out of the snare (Psalms 24:1-10, Psalms 15:1-5) . So he did nothing but pray: Look upon me, and have mercy on me; for I am alone and poor (Psalms 16:1-11). I cried to you, O Lord; save me that I may keep your commandments (Psalms 118:1-29, Psalms 146:1-10). Lord, turn your eyes to me, have pity on me, and save me; for I can do nothing, and beside you there is none that can help me.

And, indeed, how could we ever resist our enemies and observe God's precepts, especially since Adam's sin, which has rendered us so weak and infirm, unless we had prayer as a means whereby we can obtain from God sufficient light and strength to enable us to observe them? It was a blasphemy of Luther's to say that after the sin of Adam the observance of God's law has become absolutely impossible to man. Jansenius also said that there are some precepts which are impossible even to the just, with the power which they actually have, and so far his proposition bears a good sense; but it was justly 'condemned by the Church for the addition he made to it, when he said that they have not the grace to make the precepts possible. It is true, says St. Augustine, that man, in consequence of his weakness, is unable to fulfil some of God's commands with his present strength and the ordinary grace given to all men; but he can easily, by prayer, obtain such further aid as he requires for his salvation: 'God commands not impossibilities, but by commanding he suggests to you to do what you can, to ask for what is beyond your strength; and he helps you, that you may be able.' This is a celebrated text, which was afterwards adopted and made a doctrine of faith by the Council of Trent. The holy Doctor immediately adds, 'Let us see whence?' (i. e., how man is enabled to do that which he cannot). 'By medicine he can do that which his natural weakness renders impossible to him.' That is, by prayer we may obtain a remedy for our weakness; for when we pray, God gives us strength to do that which we cannot do of ourselves.

We cannot believe, continues St. Augustine, that God would have imposed on us the observance of a law, and then made the law impossible. When, therefore, God shows us that of ourselves we

are unable to observe all his commands it is simply to admonish us to do the easier things by means of the ordinary grace which he bestows on us, and then to do the more difficult things by means of the greater help which we can obtain by prayer. 'By the very fact that it is absurd to suppose that God could have commanded us to do impossible things, we are admonished what to do in easy matters, and what to ask for in difficulties.' But why, it will be asked, has God commanded us to do things impossible to our natural strength? Precisely for this, says St. Augustine, that we may be incited to pray for help to do that which of ourselves we cannot do. 'He commands some things which we cannot do, that we may know what we ought to ask of him.' And in another place: 'The law was given, that grace might be sought for; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled.' The law cannot be kept without grace, and God has given the law with this object, that we may always ask him for grace to observe it. In another place he says: 'The law is good, if it be used lawfully; what, then, is the lawful use of the law?' He answers: 'When by the law we perceive our own weakness, and ask of God the grace to heal us.' St. Augustine then says: We ought to use the law; but for what purpose? To learn by means of the law, which we find to be above our strength, our own inability to observe it, in order that we may then obtain by prayer the divine aid to cure our weakness.

St. Bernard's teaching is the same: 'What are we, or what is our strength, that we should be able to resist so many temptations? This certainly it was that God intended; that we, seeing our deficiencies, and that we have no other help, should with all humility have recourse to his mercy.' God knows how useful it is to us to be obliged to pray, in order to keep us humble, and to exercise our confidence; and he therefore permits us to be assaulted by enemies too mighty to be overcome by our own strength, that by prayer we may obtain from his mercy aid to resist them; and it is especially to be remarked that no one can resist the impure temptations of the flesh without recommending himself to God when he is tempted. This foe is so terrible that, when he fights with us, he? as it were, takes away all light; he makes us forget all our meditations, all our good resolutions; he makes us also disregard the truths of faith, and even almost lose the fear of the divine punishments. For he conspires. with our natural inclinations, which drive us with the greatest violence to the indulgence of sensual pleasures. He who in such a moment does not have recourse to God is lost. The only defense against this temptation is prayer, as St. Gregory of Nyssa says: 'Prayer is the bulwark of chastity'; and before him Solomon: And as I knew that I could not otherwise be continent except God gave it, I went to the Lord and besought him (Proverbs 8:1-36, Proverbs 21:1-31). Chastity is a virtue which we have no strength to practice, unless God gives us; and God does not give this strength except to him who asks for it. But whoever prays for it will certainly obtain it.

Hence St. Thomas observes (in contradiction to Jansenius) that we ought not to say that the precept of chastity, or any other; is impossible to us; for though we cannot observe it by our own strength, we can by God's assistance. 'We must say that what we can do with the divine assistance is not altogether impossible to us.' Nor let it be said that it appears an injustice to order a cripple to walk straight. No, says St. Augustine, it is not an injustice, provided always means are given him to find the remedy for his lameness; for after this, if he continues to go crooked, the fault is his own: 'It is most wisely commanded that man should walk uprightly, so that when he sees that he cannot do so of himself, he may seek a remedy to heal the lameness of sin.' Finally, the same holy Doctor says, that he will never know how to live well who does not know how to pray well. 'He

knows how to live aright who knows how to pray aright'; and, on the other hand, St. Francis of Assisi says that without prayer you can never hope to find good fruit in a soul.

Wrongly, therefore, do those sinners excuse themselves who say that they have no strength to resist temptation. But if you have not this strength, why do you not ask for it? is the reproof which St. James gives them: You have it not, because you ask it not. There is no doubt that we are too weak to resist the attacks of our enemies. But, on the other hand, it is certain that God is faithful, as the Apostle says, and will not permit us to be tempted beyond our strength: God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will make also with the temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13). 'He will provide an issue for it,' says Primasius, 'by the protection of his grace, that you may be able to withstand the temptation.' We are weak, but God is strong; when we ask him for aid, he communicates his strength to us, and we shall be able to do all things, as the Apostle reasonably assured himself: I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Php 4:13). He, therefore, who falls has no excuse (says St. Chrysostom), because he has neglected to pray; for if he had prayed, he would not have been overcome by his enemies: 'Nor can anyone be excused who, by ceasing to pray, has shown that he did not wish to overcome his enemy.'

3. Invocation of the Saints: Is it useful to have recourse to the saints?

Here a question arises, whether it is necessary to have recourse also to the intercession of the saints to obtain the grace of God. That it is a lawful and useful thing to invoke the saints, as intercessors, to obtain for us, by the merits of Jesus Christ, that which we, by our demerits, are not worthy to receive, is a doctrine of the Church, declared by the Council of Trent: 'It is good and useful to invoke them by supplication, and to fly to their aid and assistance to obtain benefits from God through his Son Jesus Christ.'

Such invocation was condemned by the impious Calvin, but most illogically. For if it is lawful and profitable to invoke living saints to aid us, and to beseech them to assist us in prayers, as the prophet Baruch did: And pray ye for us to the Lord our God (Bar 1:13) and St. Paul: Brethren, pray for us (1 Thessalonians 5:25); and as God himself commanded the friends of Job to recommend themselves to his prayers, that by the merits of Job he might look favorably on them: Go to my servant Job,...and my servant Job shall pray for you; his face I will accept (Job 42:8); if, then, it is lawful to recommend ourselves to the living, how can it be unlawful to invoke the saints who in heaven enjoy God face to face? This is not derogatory to the honor due to God, but it is doubling it; for it is honoring the king not only in his person but in his servants. Therefore, says St. Thomas, it is good to have recourse to many saints, 'because by the prayers of many we can sometimes obtain that which we cannot by the prayers of one.' And if anyone objects, But why have recourse to the saints to pray for us, when they are already praying for all who are worthy of it? The same Doctor answers, that no one can be said to be worthy that the saints should pray for him; but that 'he becomes worthy by having recourse to the saints with devotion.' Is it good to invoke the souls in purgatory?

Again, it is disputed whether there is any use in recommending one's self to the souls in purgatory. Some say that the souls in that state cannot pray for us; and these rely on the authority of St. Thomas, who says that those souls, while they are being purified by pain, are inferior to us, and therefore 'are not in a state to pray for us, but rather require our prayers.' But many other Doctors,

as Bellarmine, Sylvius, Cardinal Gotti, Lessius, Medina and others affirm with great probability, that we should piously believe that God manifests our prayer to those holy souls in order that they may pray for us; and that so the charitable interchange of mutual prayer may be kept up between them and us. Nor do St. Thomas' words present much difficulty; for, as Sylvius and Gotti say, it is one thing not to be in a state to pray, another not to be able to pray. It is true that those souls are not in a state to pray, because, as St. Thomas says, while suffering they are inferior to us, and rather require our prayers; nevertheless, in this state they are well able to pray, as they are friends of God. If a father keeps a son whom he tenderly loves in confinement for some fault; if the son then is not in a state to pray for himself, is that any reason why he cannot pray for others? and may he not expect to obtain what he asks, knowing, as he does, his father's affection for him? So the souls in purgatory, being beloved by God, and confirmed in grace, have absolutely no impediment to prevent them from praying for us. Still the Church does not invoke them, or implore their intercession, because ordinarily they have no cognizance of our prayers. But we may piously believe that God makes our prayers known to them; and then they, full of charity a. they are, most assuredly do not omit to pray for us. St. Catharine of Bologna, whenever she desired any favor, had recourse to the souls in purgatory, and was immediately heard. She even testified that by the intercession of the souls in purgatory she had obtained many graces which she had not been able to obtain by the intercession of the saints. Our duty to pray for the souls in purgatory

Here let me make a digression in favor of those holy souls. If we desire the aid of their prayers, it is but fair that we should mind to aid them with our prayers and good works. I said it is fair, but I should have said it is a Christian duty; for charity obliges us to succor our neighbor when he requires our aid, and we can help him without grievous inconvenience. Now it is certain that amongst our neighbors are to be reckoned the souls in purgatory, who, although no longer living in this world, yet have not left the communion of saints. 'The souls of the pious dead,' says St. Augustine, 'are not separated from the Church,' and St. Thomas says more to our purpose, that the charity which is due to the dead who died in the grace of God is only an extension of the same charity which we owe to our neighbor while living: 'Charity, which is the bond which unites the members of the Church, extends not only to the living, but also to the dead who die in charity.' Therefore, we ought to succor, according to our ability, those holy souls as our neighbors; and as their necessities are greater than those of our other neighbors, our duty to succor them seems also to be greater. But now, what are the necessities of those holy prisoners? It is certain that their pains are immense. The fire that tortures them, says St. Augustine, is more excruciating than any pain that man can endure in this life: That fire will be more painful than anything that man can suffer in this life.' St. Thomas thinks the same, and supposes it to be identical with the fire of hell: 'The damned are tormented and the elect purified in the same fire.' And this only relates to the pains of sense. But the pain of loss (that is, the privation of the sight of God), which those holy souls suffer, is much greater; because not only their natural affection, but also the supernatural love of God, wherewith they burn, draws them with such violence to be united with their Sovereign Good, that when they see the barrier which their sins have put in the way, they feel a pain so acute, that if they were capable of death, they could not live a moment. So that, as St. Chrysostom says, this pain of the deprivation of God tortures them incomparably more than the pain of sense: 'The flames of a thousand hells together could not inflict such torments as the pain of loss by itself.' So that those holy souls would rather suffer every other possible torture than be deprived for a single instant of the union with God for which they long. So St. Thomas says that the pain of

purgatory exceeds anything that can be endured in this life: 'The pain of purgatory must exceed all pain of this life.' And Dionysius the Carthusian relates, that a dead person, who had been raised to life by the intercession of St. Jerome, told St. Cyril of Jerusalem that all the torments of this earth are refreshing and delightful when compared with the very least pain of purgatory: If all the torments of the world were compared with the least that can be had in purgatory they would appear comfortable.' And he adds, that if a man had once tried those torments, he would rather suffer all the earthly sorrows that man can endure till the Day of Judgment, than suffer for one day the least pain of purgatory. Hence St. Cyril wrote to St. Augustine: 'That as far as regards the infliction of suffering, these pains are the same as those of hell -- their only difference being that they are not eternal.' Hence we see that the pains of these holy souls are excessive, while, on the other hand, they cannot help themselves; because as Job says: They are in chains and are bound with the cords of poverty (Job 36:8). They are destined to reign with Christ; but they are withheld from taking possession of their kingdom till the time of their purgation is accomplished. And they cannot help themselves (at least not sufficiently, even according to those theologians who assert that they can by their prayers gain some relief,) to throw off their chains, until they have entirely satisfied the justice of God. This is precisely what a Cistercian monk said to the sacristan of his monastery: 'Help me, I beseech you, with your prayers; for of myself I can obtain nothing.' And this is consistent with the saying of St. Bonaventure: 'Destitution prevents solvency.' That is, those souls are so poor, that they have no means of making satisfaction. On the other hand, since it is certain, and even of faith, that by our suffrages, and chiefly by our prayers, as particularly recommended and practiced by the Church, we can relieve those holy souls, I do not know how to excuse that man from sin who neglects to give them some assistance, at least by his prayers. If a sense of duty will not persuade us to succor them, let us think of the pleasure it will give Jesus Christ to see us endeavoring to deliver his beloved spouses from prison, in order that he may have them with him in paradise. Let us think of the store of merit which we can lay up by practicing this great act of charity; let us think, too, that those souls are not ungrateful, and will never forget the great benefit we do them in relieving them of their pains, and in obtaining for them, by our prayers, anticipation of their entrance into glory; so that when they are there they will never neglect to pray for us. And if God promises mercy to him who practices mercy towards his neighbor -- Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy (Matthew 5:7) -- he may reasonably expect to be saved who remembers to assist those souls so afflicted, and yet so dear to God. Jonathan, after having saved the Hebrews from ruin by a victory over their enemies, was condemned to death by his father Saul for having tasted some honey against his express commands; but the people came before the king, and said, Shall Jonathan then die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? (1 Samuel 14:45). So may we expect that if any of us ever obtains, by his prayers, the liberation of a soul from purgatory, that soul will say to God: 'Lord, suffer not him who has delivered me from my torments to be lost.' And if Saul spared Jonathan's life at the request of his people, God will not refuse the salvation of a Christian to the prayers of a soul which is his own spouse. Moreover, St. Augustine says that God will cause those who in this life have most succored those holy souls, when they come to purgatory themselves, to be most succored by others. I may here observe that, in practice, one of the best suffrages is to hear Mass for them, and during the Holy Sacrifice to recommend them to God by the merits and passion of Jesus Christ. The following form may be used: 'Eternal Father, I offer you this Sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, with all the pains which he suffered in his life and death; and by his passion I recommend to you the souls in

purgatory, and especially that of...' etc. And it is a very charitable act to recommend, at the same time, the souls of all those who are at the point of death. Is it necessary to invoke the saints?

Whatever doubt there may be whether or not the souls -- in purgatory can pray for us, and therefore whether or not it is of any use to recommend ourselves to their prayers, there can be no doubt whatever with regard to the saints. For it is certain that it is most useful to have recourse to the intercession of the saints canonized by the Church, who are already enjoying the vision of God. To suppose that the Church can err in canonizing, is a sin, or is heresy, according to St. Bonaventure, Bellarmine, and others; or at least next door to heresy, according to Suarez, Azorius, Gotti, etc.; Because the Sovereign Pontiff, according to St. Thomas, is guided by the infallible influence of the Holy Spirit in a special way when canonizing the saints. But to return to the question just proposed: Are we obliged to have recourse to the intercession of the saints? I do not wish to meddle with the decision of this question; but I cannot omit the exposition of a doctrine of St. Thomas. In several places above quoted, and especially in his book of Sentences, he expressly lays it down as certain that everyone is bound to pray; because (as he asserts) in no other way can the graces necessary for salvation be obtained from God, except by prayer: 'Every man is bound to pray, from the fact that he is bound to procure spiritual good for himself, which can only be got from God; so it can only be obtained by asking it of God.' Then, in another place of the same book, he proposes the exact question, 'Whether we are bound to pray to the saints to intercede for us?' And he answers as follows -- in order to catch his real meaning, we will quote the entire passage: 'According to Dionysius, the order which God has instituted for his creatures requires that things which are remote may be brought to God by means of things which are nearer to him. Hence, as the saints in heaven are nearest of all to him, the order of his law requires that we who "remaining in the body are absent from the Lord," should be brought to him by means of the saints; and this is effected by the divine goodness pouring forth his gifts through them. And as the path of our return to God should correspond to the path of the good things which proceed from him to us, it follows that, as the benefits of God come down to us by means of the suffrages of the saints, we ought to be brought to God by the same way, so that a second time we may receive his benefits by the mediation of the saints. Hence it is that we make them our intercessors with God, and as it were our mediators, when we ask them to pray for us.' Note well the words -- 'the order of God's law requires'; and especially note the last words -- 'as the benefits of God come down to ... s by means of the suffrages of the saints, in the same way we must be brought back to God so that a second time we may receive his benefits by the mediation of the saints.' So that, according to St. Thomas, the order of the divine law requires that we mortals should be saved by means of the saints, in that we receive by their intercession the help necessary for our salvation. He then puts the objection, that it appears superfluous to have recourse to the saints, since God -- is infinitely more merciful than they, and more ready to hear us. This he answers by saying: 'God has so ordered, not on account of any want of mercy on his part, but to keep the right order which he has universally established, of working by means of second causes. It is not for want of his mercy, but to preserve the aforesaid order in the creation.' In conformity with this doctrine of St. Thomas, the Continuator of Tourneley and Sylvius write that although God only is to be prayed to as the Author of grace, yet we are bound to have recourse also to the intercession of the saints, so as to observe the order which God has established with regard to our salvation, which is, that the inferior should be saved by imploring the aid of the superior. 'By the law of nature we are bound to observe the order which God has appointed; but God has appointed that the inferior should obtain

salvation by imploring the assistance of his superior.'

4 The Intercession of the Blessed Virgin And if this is true of the saints, much more is it true of the intercession of the Mother of God, whose prayers are certainly of more value in his sight than those of all the rest of the inhabitants of heaven together. For St. Thomas says that the saints, in proportion to the merits by which they have obtained grace for themselves, are able also to save others; but that Jesus Christ, and so also his Mother, have merited so much grace that they can save all men. 'It is a great thing in any saint that he should have grace enough for the salvation of many beside himself; but if he had enough for the salvation of all men, this would be the greatest of all; and this is the case with Christ, and with the Blessed Virgin.' And St. Bernard speaks thus to Mary: 'Through you we have access to your Son, O discoverer of grace and Mother of salvation, that through you he may receive us, who through you was given to us.' These words signify that as we only have access to the Father by means of the Son, who is the Mediator of justice, so we only have access to the Son by means of the Mother, who is mediator of grace, and who obtains for us, by her intercession, the gifts which Jesus Christ has merited for us. And therefore St. Bernard says, in another place, that Mary has received a twofold fullness of grace. The first was the Incarnation of the Word, who was made Man in her most holy womb; the second is that fullness of grace which we receive from God by means of her prayers. Hence the saint adds: 'God has placed the fullness of all good in Mary, that if we have any hope, any grace, any salvation, we may know that it overflows from her who "ascends abounding with delights." She is a garden of delights, whose odors spread abroad and abound; that is, the gifts of graces. So that whatever good we have from God, we receive all by the intercession of Mary. And why so? Because, says St. Bernard, it is God's will: 'Such is his will, who would have us receive everything through Mary.' But the more precise reason is deduced from the expression of St. Augustine that Mary is justly called our Mother, because she cooperated by her charity in the birth of the faithful to the life of grace, by which we become members of Jesus Christ, our head: 'But clearly she is the mother of his members (which we are); because she cooperated by her charity in the birth of the faithful in the Church, and they are members of that Head.' Therefore, as Mary cooperated by her charity in the spiritual birth of the faithful, so also God willed that she should cooperate by her intercession to make them enjoy the life of grace in this world, and the life of glory in the next; and therefore the Church makes us call her and salute her, without any circumlocution, by the names, 'our life, our sweetness and our hope.'

Hence St. Bernard exhorts us to have continual recourse to the Mother of God, because her prayers are certain to be heard by her Son: 'Go to Mary, I say, without hesitation; the Son will hear the Mother.' And then he says: 'My children, she is the ladder of sinners, she is my chief confidence, she is the whole ground of my hope.' He calls her 'ladder,' because, as you cannot mount the third step except you first put your foot on the second, nor can you arrive at the second except by the first, so you cannot come to God except by means of Jesus Christ, nor can you come to Christ except by means of his Mother. Then he calls her his greatest security, and the whole ground of his hope; because, as he affirms, God wills that all the graces which he gives us should pass through the hands of Mary. And he concludes by saying, that we ought to ask all the graces which we desire through Mary; because she obtains whatever she seeks, and her prayers cannot be resisted. 'Let us seek grace, and let us seek it through Mary; because what she seeks she finds and she cannot be disappointed.' The following saints teach the same as St. Bernard: St.

Ephrem, 'We have no other confidence than from you, O purest Virgin!' St. Ildephonsus, 'All the good things that the divine Majesty has determined to give them, he has determined to commit to your hands; for to you are entrusted the treasures and the wardrobes of grace.' St. Germanus, 'If you desert us, what will become of us, O life of Christians?' St. Peter Damian, 'In your hands are all the treasures of the mercies of God.' St. Antoninus, 'Who seeks without her aid, attempts to fly without wings.' St. Bernardine of Sienna, 'You are the dispenser of all graces; our salvation is in your hands.' In another place, he not only says that all graces are transmitted to us by means of Mary, but also asserts that the Blessed Virgin, from the time she became Mother of God, acquired a certain jurisdiction over all the graces that are given to us: 'Through the Virgin the vital graces are transfused from Christ, the head, into his mystical body. From the time when the Virgin Mother conceived in her womb the Word of God, she obtained a certain jurisdiction (if I may so speak) over every temporal procession of the Holy Spirit; so that no creature could obtain any grace from God, except by the dispensation of his sweet Mother.' And he concludes, 'Therefore all gifts, virtues, and graces are dispensed through her hands to whom she wills, and as she wills.' St. Bonaventure says the same: 'Since the whole divine nature was in the womb of the Virgin, I do not fear to teach that she has a certain jurisdiction over all the streams of grace; as her womb was, as it were, an ocean of the divine nature, whence all the streams of grace must emanate.' On the authority of these saints, many theologians have piously and reasonably defended the opinion, that there is no grace given to us except by means of the intercession of Mary; so Mendoza, Vega, Paciucchelli, Segneri, Piore, Crasset and others, as also the learned Alexander Natalis who says: 'It is God's will that we should look to him for all good things, to be procured by the most powerful intercession of the Blessed Virgin, when we invoke her, as it is fit.' And he quotes in confirmation the passage of St. Bernard: 'Such is his will, who has determined that we should receive all through Mary.' Contenson says the same, in a comment on the words addressed by Jesus on the cross to St. John, 'Behold thy Mother' (Jn 19, 27): as though he had said, 'No one shall be partaker of my blood except by the intercession of my Mother. My wounds are fountains of grace; but their streams shall flow to no one, except through the canal of Mary. O my disciple John, I will love you as you love her!' For the rest, it is certain that if God is pleased when we have recourse to the saints, he will be much more pleased when we avail ourselves of the intercession of Mary, that she, by her merits, may compensate for our unworthiness, according to the words of St. Anselm: 'That the dignity of the intercessor may supply for our poverty. So that, to invoke the Virgin is not to distrust God's mercy, but to fear our own unworthiness.' St. Thomas, speaking of her dignity, calls it, as it were, infinite: 'From the fact that she is the Mother of God, she has a certain infinite dignity.' So that it may be said with reason, that the prayers of Mary have more power with God than those of all heaven together.

CONCLUSION - Chapter 1.

Let us conclude this first point by giving the gist of all that has been said hitherto. He who prays is certainly saved. He who prays not is certainly damned. All the blessed (except infants) have been saved by prayer. All the damned have been lost through not praying; if they had prayed, they would not have been lost. And this is, and will be, their greatest torment in hell, to think how easily they might have been saved, only by asking God for his grace; but that now it is too late, -- the time of prayer is over.

01.02 Chapter 2: THE POWER OF PRAYER

Chapter 2: THE POWER OF PRAYER 1. Excellence of Prayer and Its Power With God Our prayers are so dear to God, that he has appointed the angels to present them to him as soon as they come forth from our mouths. 'The angels,' says St. Hilary, 'preside over the prayers of the faithful, and offer them daily to God.' This is that smoke of the incense, which are the prayers of saints, which St. John saw ascending to God from the hands of the angels (Revelation 8:3); and which he saw in another place represented by golden phials full of sweet odors, very acceptable to God. But in order to understand better the value of prayers in God's sight, it is sufficient to read both in the Old and New Testaments the innumerable promises which God makes to the man that prays. Cry to me, and I will hear you (Psalms 49:15). Call upon me, and I will deliver you (Jeremiah 33:3). Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. He shall give good things to them that ask him (Matthew 7:7). Everyone that asks receives, and he that seeks finds (Luke 11:10). Whatsoever they shall ask, it shall be done for them by my Father (John 15:7). All things whatsoever you ask when you pray, believe that you shall receive them, and they shall come to you (Matthew 18:19). If you ask me anything in my name, that will I do (John 14:14). You shall ask whatever you will, and it shall be done to you. Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you (John 16:23). There are a thousand similar texts; but it would take too long to quote them.

God wills us to be saved; but for our greater good, he wills us to be saved as conquerors. While, therefore, we remain here, we have to live in a continual warfare; and if we should be saved, we have to fight and conquer. 'No one can be crowned without victory,' says St. Chrysostom. We are very feeble, and our enemies are many and mighty; how shall we be able to stand against them, or to defeat them? Let us take courage, and say with the Apostle, I can do all things in him who strengthens me (Php 4:13). By prayer we can do all things; for by this means God will give us that strength which we want. Theodoret says, that prayer is omnipotent; it is but one, yet it can do all things: 'Though prayer is one, it can do all things.' And St. Bonaventure asserts that by prayer we obtain every good, and. escape every evil: 'By it is obtained the gain of every good, and liberation from every. evil.' St. Laurence Justinian says, that by means of prayer we build for ourselves a strong tower, where we shall be secure from all the snares and assaults of our enemies: 'By the exercise of prayer man is able to erect a citadel for himself.' 'The powers of hell are mighty,' says St. Bernard; 'but prayer is stronger than all the devils.' Yes; for by prayer the soul obtains God's help, which is stronger than any created power. Thus David encouraged himself in his alarms: Praising I will call upon the Lord, and I shall be saved from my enemies (Psalms 17:3). For, as St. Chrysostom says, 'Prayer is a strong weapon, a defense, a port, and a treasure.' It is a weapon sufficient to overcome every assault of the devil; it is a defense to preserve us in every danger; it is a port where we may be safe in every tempest; and it is at the same time a treasure which provides us with every good.

2 Power of Prayer against Temptation

God knows the great good which it does us to be obliged to pray, and therefore permits us (as we have already shown in the previous chapter) to be assaulted by our enemies, in order that we may ask him for the help which he offers and promises to us. But as he is pleased when we run to him in our dangers, so is he displeased when he sees us neglectful of prayer. 'As the king,' says St. Bonaventure, 'would think it faithlessness in an officer, when his post was attacked, not to ask him for reinforcements, he would be reputed a traitor if he did not request help from the king'; so God thinks himself betrayed by the man who, when he finds himself surrounded by temptations, does not run to him for assistance. For he desires to help us; and only waits to be asked, and then gives abundant succor. This is strikingly shown by Isaias, when, on God's part, he told king Ahaz to ask some sign to assure himself of God's readiness to help him: Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God (Isaiah 7:11). The faithless king answered: I will not ask, and I will not tempt the Lord; for he trusted in his own power to overcome his enemies without God's aid. And for this the prophet reproved him: Hear, therefore, O house of David; is it a small thing for you to be grievous to mere, that you are grievous to my God also? because that man is grievous and offensive to God who will not ask him for the graces which he offers.

Come to me, all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you (Matthew 11:28). 'My poor children,' says our Savior, 'though you find yourselves assailed by enemies, and oppressed with the weight of your sins, do not lose heart but have recourse to me in prayer, and I will give you strength to resist, and I will give you a remedy for all your disasters.' In another place he says, by the mouth of Isaias, Come and accuse me, says the Lord; if your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow (Isaiah 1:18). O men, come to me; though your consciences are horribly defiled, yet come; I even give you leave to reproach me (so to speak), if after you have had recourse to me, I do not give you grace to become white as snow.

What is prayer? It is, as St. Chrysostom says, 'the anchor of those tossed on the sea, the treasure of the poor, the cure of diseases, the safeguard of health.' It is a secure anchor for him who is in peril of shipwreck; it is a treasury of immense wealth for him who is poor; it is a most efficacious medicine for him who is sick; and it is a certain preservative for him who would keep himself well. What does prayer effect? Let us hear St. Laurence Justinian: 'It pleases God, it gets what it asks, it overcomes enemies, it changes men.' It appeases the wrath of God, who pardons all who pray with humility. It obtains every grace that is asked for; it vanquishes all the strength of the tempter, and it changes men from blind into seeing, from weak into strong, from sinners into saints. Let him who wants light ask it of God, and it shall be given. As soon as I had recourse to God says Solomon, he granted me wisdom: I called upon, and the Spirit of wisdom came to me (Proverbs 7:7). Let him who wants fortitude ask it of God, and it shall be given. As soon as I opened my mouth to pray, says David, I received help from God: I opened my mouth, and drew in the Spirit (Psalms 118:1-29, Psalms 131:1-3). And how in the world did the martyrs obtain strength to resist tyrants, except by prayer, which gave them force to overcome dangers and death?

'He who uses this great weapon,' says St. Chrysostom, 'knows not death, leaves the earth, enters heaven, lives with God.' He falls not into sin; he loses affection for the earth; he makes his abode in heaven; and begins, even in this life, to enjoy the conversation of God. How then can you disquiet such a man by saying: 'How do you know that you are written in the book of life?' How do you know whether God will give you efficacious grace and the gift of perseverance? Be not solicitous, says St. Paul, but in everything by prayer and supplicatory, with thanksgiving, let your

petitions be known to God (Php 4:6). What is the use, says the Apostle, of agitating yourselves with these miseries and fears? Drive from you all these cares, which are of no use but to lessen your confidence, and to make you more tepid and slothful in walking along the way of salvation. Pray and seek always, and make your prayers sound in God's ears, and thank him for having promised to give you the gifts which you desire whenever you ask for them, namely efficacious grace, perseverance, salvation, and everything that you desire. The Lord has given us our post in the battle against powerful foes; but he is faithful in his promises, and will never allow us to be assaulted more violently than we can resist: God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which thou are able (1 Corinthians 10:13). He is faithful, since he instantly succors the man who invokes him. The learned Cardinal Gotti writes that God has bound himself not only to give us grace precisely balancing the temptation that assails us, but that he is obliged, when we are tempted, and have recourse to him, to afford us, by means of that grace which is kept ready for and offered to all, sufficient strength for us actually to resist the temptation. 'God is bound, when we are tempted, and fly to his protection, to give us by the grace prepared and offered to all such strength as will not only put us in the way of being able to resist, but will also make us resist; "for we can do all things in him who strengthens us" by his grace, if we humbly ask for it.' We can do all things with God's help, which is granted to everyone who humbly seeks it; so that we have no excuse when we allow ourselves to be overcome by a temptation. We are conquered solely by our own fault, because we would not pray. By prayer all the snares and power of the devil are easily overcome. 'By prayer all hurtful things are chased away,' says St. Augustine.

3. God Is always Ready to Hear Us

St. Bernardine of Sienna says that prayer is a faithful ambassador, well-known to the King of heaven, and having access to his private chamber, and able by his importunity to induce the merciful heart of the King to grant every aid to us his wretched creatures, groaning in the midst of our conflicts and miseries in this valley of tears. 'Prayer is a most faithful messenger, known to the King, who is used to enter his chamber, and by his importunity to influence the merciful mind of the King, and to obtain us assistance in our toils.' Isaias also assures us that as soon as the Lord hears our prayers, he is moved with compassion towards us; and does not leave us to cry long to him, but instantly replies, and grants us what we ask: Weeping, you shall not weep; he will surely have pity upon you: the voice of your cry as soon as he shall hear, he will answer you (Isaiah 30:19). In another place he complains of us by the mouth of Jeremias: Am I become a wilderness to Israel, or a lateward springing land? Why then have my people said, we are revolted, and will come to you no more! (Jeremiah 2:31). Why do you say that you will no more have recourse to me? Has my mercy become to you a barren land, which can yield you no fruits of grace? or a cold soil, which yields its fruit too late So has our loving Lord assured us that he never neglects to hear us, and to hear us instantly when we pray; and so does he reproach those who neglect to pray through distrust of being heard.

If God were to allow us to present our petitions to him once a month, even this would be a great favor. The kings of the earth give audiences a few times in the year, but God gives a continual audience. St. Chrysostom writes that God is always waiting to hear our prayers, and that a case never occurred when he neglected to hear a petition offered to him properly: 'God is always prepared for the voice of his servants, nor did he ever, when called upon as he ought to be, neglect to hear.' And in another place he says that when we pray to God, before we have finished

recounting to him our supplications, he has already heard us: 'It is always obtained, even while we are yet praying.' We even have the promise of God to do this: As they are yet speaking I will hear (Isaiah 65:24). The Lord, says David, stands near to everyone who prays, to console, to hear, and to save him: The Lord is nigh to all, them that call upon him; to all that call upon him in truth (that is, as they ought to call). He will do the will of them that fear him; and he will hear their prayer and will save them (Psa. 144:18-19). This it was in which Moses gloried, when he said: There is not another nation so great, that has gods so nigh them, as our God is present to all our petitions (Deuteronomy 4:7). The gods of the Gentiles were deaf to those who invoked them, for they were wretched fabrications, which could do nothing. But our God, who is Almighty, is not deaf to our prayers, but always stands near the man who prays, ready to grant him all the graces which he asks: In what day soever I shall call upon you, behold I shall know that you are my God (Psalms 55:10). Lord, says the Psalmist, hereby do I know that you, my God, are all goodness and mercy, in that, whenever I have recourse to you, you instantly help me.

4. We Should Not Limit Ourselves to Asking for Little Things To pray is better than to meditate

We are so poor that we have nothing; but if we pray we are no longer poor. If we are poor, God is rich; and God, as the Apostle says, is all liberality to him that calls for his aid: Rich unto all who call upon him (Romans 10:12). Since, therefore (as St. Augustine exhorts us), we have to do with a Lord of infinite power and infinite riches, let us not go to him for little and valueless things, but let us ask some great thing of him: 'You seek from the Almighty -- seek something great.' If a man went to a king to ask some trumpery coin, like a farthing, I think, that man would but insult his king. On the other hand, we honor God, we honor his mercy, and his liberality, when, though we see how miserable we are, and how unworthy of any kindness, we yet ask for great graces, trusting in the goodness of God, and in his faithfulness to his promises of granting to the man who prays whatever grace he asks: Whatsoever you will, ask, and it shall be done unto you (Jn 15:7). St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi said, 'That God feels himself so honored and is so delighted when we ask for his grace, that he is, in a certain sense, grateful to us; because when we do this we seem to open to him a way to do us a kindness, and to satisfy his nature, which is to do good to all.' And let us be sure that, when we seek God's grace, he always gives us more than we ask If any of you want wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all abundantly, and upbraides not (James 1:5). Thus speaks St. James, to show us that God is not like men, parsimonious of his goods; men, though rich and liberal, when they give alms, are always somewhat close-handed, and generally give less than is asked of them, because their wealth, however great it be, is always finite; so that the more they give the less they have. But God, when he is asked, gives his good things 'abundantly,' that is, with a generous hand, always giving more than is asked, because his wealth is infinite, and the more he gives the more he has to give: For you, O Lord, are sweet and mild; and plenteous in mercy to all that call upon you (Psalms 85:5). You, O my God, said David, are but too liberal and kind to him that invokes you; the mercies which you pour upon him are superabundant, above all he asks. On this point, then, we have to fix all our attention, namely, to pray with confidence, feeling sure that by prayer all the treasures of heaven are thrown open to us. 'Let us attend to this,' says St. Chrysostom, 'and we shall open heaven to ourselves.' Prayer is a treasure; he who prays most receives most. St. Bonaventure says that every time a man has recourse to God by fervent prayer, he gains good things that are of more value than the whole world: 'Any day a man gains more by devout prayer than the whole world is worth.' Some devout

souls spend a great deal of time in reading and in meditating, but pay but little attention to prayer. There is no doubt that spiritual reading, and meditation on the eternal truths, are very useful things; 'but,' says St. Augustine, 'it is of much more use to pray.' By reading and meditating we learn our duty; but by prayer we obtain the grace to do it. 'It is better to pray than to read: by reading we know what we ought to do; by prayer we receive what we ask.' What is the use of knowing our duty, and then not doing it, but to make us more guilty in God's sight? Read and meditate as we like, we shall never satisfy our obligations, unless we ask of God the grace to fulfil them.

And, therefore, as St. Isidore observes, the devil is never more busy to distract us with the thoughts of worldly cares than when he perceives us praying and asking God for grace: 'Then mostly does the devil insinuate thoughts, when he sees a man praying.' And why? Because the enemy sees that at no other time do we gain so many treasures of heavenly goods as when we pray. This is the chief fruit of mental prayer, to ask God for the graces which we need for perseverance and for eternal salvation; and chiefly for this reason it is that mental prayer is morally necessary for the soul, to enable it to preserve itself in the grace of God. For if a person does not remember in the time of meditation to ask for the help necessary for perseverance, he will not do so at any other time; for without meditation he will not think of asking for it, and will not even think of the necessity for asking it. On the other hand, he who makes his meditation every day will easily see the needs of his soul, its dangers, and the necessity of his prayer; and so he, will pray, and will obtain the graces which will enable him to persevere and save his soul. Father Segneri said of himself, that when he began to meditate, he aimed rather at exciting affections than at making prayers. But when he came to know the necessity and the immense utility of prayer, he more and more applied himself, in his long mental prayer, to making petitions. As a young swallow so will I cry, said the devout king Hezekias (Isaiah 38:14). The young of the swallow does nothing but cry to its mother for help and for food; so should we all do, if we would preserve our life of grace. We should be always crying to God for aid to avoid the death of sin, and to advance in his holy love. Father Rodriguez relates that the ancient Fathers, who were our first instructors in the spiritual life, held a conference to determine which was the exercise most useful and most necessary for eternal salvation; and that they determined it was to repeat over and over again the short prayer of David, Incline unto my aid, O God! (Psalms 69:1) . 'This,' says Cassian 'is what everyone ought to do who wishes to be saved: he ought to be always saying, My God, help me! my God, help me!' We ought to do this the first thing when we awake in the morning; and then to continue doing it in all our needs, and when attending to our business, whether spiritual or temporal; and most especially when we find ourselves troubled by any temptation or passion. St. Bonaventure says that at times we obtain a grace by a short prayer sooner than by many other good works: 'Sometimes a man can sooner obtain by a short prayer what he would be a long time obtaining by pious works' St. Ambrose says that he who prays, while he is praying obtains what he asks, because the very act of prayer is the same as receiving : 'He who asks of God, while he asks receives; for to ask is to receive.' Hence St. Chrysostom wrote that 'there is nothing more powerful than a man who prays,' because such a one is made partaker of the power of God. To arrive at perfection, says St. Bernard, we must meditate and pray: by meditation we see what we want; by prayer we receive what we want. 'Let us mount by meditation and prayer: the one teaches what is deficient, the other obtains that there should be nothing deficient.'

CONCLUSION - Chapter 2. In conclusion, to save one's soul without prayer is most difficult, and even (as we have seen) impossible, according to the ordinary course of God's providence. But by praying our salvation is made secure, and very easy. It is not necessary in order to save our souls to go among the heathen, and give up our life. It is not necessary to retire into the desert, and eat nothing but herbs. What does it cost us to say, My God, help me! Lord, assist me! have mercy on me! Is there anything more easy than this? and this little will suffice to save us, if we will be diligent in doing it. St. Laurence Justinian specially exhorts us to oblige ourselves to say a prayer at least when we begin any action: 'We must endeavor to offer a prayer at least in the beginning of every work.' Cassian attests that the principal advice of the ancient Fathers was to have recourse to God with short but frequent prayers. Let no one, says St. Bernard, think lightly of prayer, because God values it, and then gives us either what we ask, or what is still more useful to us: 'Let no one undervalue his prayer, for God does not undervalue it . . . he will give either what we ask, or what he knows to be better.' And let us understand, that if we do not pray, we have no excuse, because the grace of prayer is given to everyone. It is in our power to pray whenever we will, as David says of himself: With me is prayer to the God of my life; I will say to God, you are my support (Psalms 41:8-9).

God gives to all the grace of prayer, in order that thereby they may obtain every help, and even more than they need, for keeping the divine law, and for persevering till death. If we are not saved, the whole fault will be ours; and we shall have our own failure to answer for, because we did not pray.

02.00 Uniformity With God's Will

ALPHONUS - UNIFORMITY WITH GOD'S WILL

"Perfection is founded entirely on the love of God: 'Charity is the bond of perfection;' and perfect love of God means the complete union of our will with God's."

St. Alphonsus Translated by Thomas W. Tobin, C.S.S.R.

Preface Chapter 1. Excellence of this Virtue.

Chapter 2. Uniformity in all Things.

Chapter 3. Happiness deriving from perfect Uniformity.

Chapter 4. God wills our Good.

Chapter 5. Special Practices of Uniformity.

Chapter 6. Spiritual Desolation.

Chapter 7. Conclusion.

Preface In Volume 1, *Opere Ascetiche di S. Alfonso M. de Liguori*, Roma, 1933, "Uniformity with God's Will" is included as one of three works under the heading, "Lesser Works on Divine Love." There is no preface in the Italian original. However, it has been thought well to provide one here.

Prof. Candido M. Romano[1] says this brochure was written probably in 1755, as appears from a letter by the Saint, under date of Nov. 2, 1755, to Sister Giannastasio, at Cava. Romano goes on to say:

"This (i.e. God's will) was for Alphonsus a theme of predilection, a theme dearest to his heart. Just as St. Ignatius stressed 'the greater glory of God,' St. Alphonsus in all his works, gave prominence to 'the greater good pleasure of God.' Most likely the occasion that brought forth this treatise was the death, in 1753, of Father Paul Cafaro, C.S.S.R., St. Alphonsus' confessor and director. The death of this worthy priest deeply affected the Saint and he expressed his sentiments in a poem on God's will. The wide acclaim it received may have suggested to him the thought that a tract on the same subject would be helpful to the souls of others. If this be true, his surmise proved correct, for the appearance of his subsequent pamphlet was greeted with instant favor."

Cardinal Villecourt, in his *Life of St. Alphonsus*, quotes long passages from this pamphlet and ends by saying: "Our Saint frequently read it himself and when his sight had failed he arranged to have it read to him by others." This brochure bears the stamp of Alphonsian simplicity of style and solidity of doctrine. Moreover the instances he cites from the lives of the saints have a gentle graciousness and contain a fragrance that is redolent of the Fioretti of St. Francis of Assisi.

Through God's grace and our Lady's prayers may a diligent reading of the book bring us far along the way of perfection by the cultivation of uniformity with God's holy will!

THOMAS W. TOBIN, C.S.S.R.

Oct. 16, 1952.

Feast of St. Gerard Majella, C.S.S.R.

[1] Saggio Storico di Prof. Candido M. Romano, Roma Libreria Salesiano, 1896.

02.01 Excellence of this Virtue.

Excellence of this Virtue.

Perfection is founded entirely on the love of God: "Charity is the bond of perfection[1];" and perfect love of God means the complete union of our will with God's: "The principal effect of love is so to unite the wills of those who love each other as to make them will the same things[2]." It follows then, that the more one unites his will with the divine will, the greater will be his love of God. Mortification, meditation, receiving Holy Communion, acts of fraternal charity are all certainly pleasing to God -- but only when they are in accordance with his will. When they do not accord with God's will, he not only finds no pleasure in them, but he even rejects them utterly and punishes them. To illustrate: -- A man has two servants. One works unremittingly all day long -- but according to his own devices; the other, conceivably, works less, but he does do what he is told. This latter of course is going to find favor in the eyes of his master; the other will not. Now, in applying this example, we may ask: Why should we perform actions for God's glory if they are not going to be acceptable to him? God does not want sacrifices, the prophet Samuel told King Saul, but he does want obedience to his will: "Doth the Lord desire holocausts and victims, and not rather that the voice of the Lord should be obeyed? For obedience is better than sacrifices; and to hearken, rather than to offer the fat of rams. Because it is like the sin of witchcraft to rebel; and like the crime of idolatry to refuse to obey[3]." The man who follows his own will independently of God's, is guilty of a kind of idolatry. Instead of adoring God's will, he, in a certain sense, adores his own. The greatest glory we can give to God is to do his will in everything. Our Redeemer came on earth to glorify his heavenly Father and to teach us by his example how to do the same. St. Paul represents him saying to his eternal Father: "Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldst not: But a body thou hast fitted to me . . . Then said I: Behold I come to do thy will, O God[4]." "Thou hast refused the victims offered thee by man; thou dost will that I sacrifice my body to thee. Behold me ready to do thy will. Our Lord frequently declared that he had come on earth not to do his own will, but solely that of his Father: "I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me[5]." He spoke in the same strain in the garden when he went forth to meet his enemies who had come to seize him and to lead him to death: "But that the world may know that I love the Father: and as the Father hath given me commandment, so do I; arise and let us go hence[6]." Furthermore, he said he would recognize as his brother, him who would do his will: "Whosoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother[7]." To do God's will -- this was the goal upon which the saints constantly fixed their gaze. They were fully persuaded that in this consists the entire perfection of the soul. Blessed Henry Suso used to say: "It is not God's will that we should abound in spiritual delights, but that in all things we should submit to his holy will[8]." "Those who give themselves to prayer," says St. Teresa, "should concentrate solely on this: the conformity of their wills with the divine will. They should be convinced that this constitutes their highest perfection. The more fully they practice this, the greater the gifts they will receive from God, and the greater the progress they will make in the interior life[9]." A certain Dominican nun was vouchsafed a vision of heaven one day. She recognized there some persons

she had known during their mortal life on earth. It was told her these souls were raised to the sublime heights of the seraphs on account of the uniformity of their wills with that of God's during their lifetime here on earth. Blessed Henry Suso, mentioned above, said of himself: "I would rather be the vilest worm on earth by God's will, than be a seraph by my own[10]."

During our sojourn in this world, we should learn from the saints now in heaven, how to love God. The pure and perfect love of God they enjoy there, consists in uniting themselves perfectly to his will. It would be the greatest delight of the seraphs to pile up sand on the seashore or to pull weeds in a garden for all eternity, if they found out such was God's will. Our Lord himself teaches us to ask to do the will of God on earth as the saints do it in heaven: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven[11]."

Because David fulfilled all his wishes, God called him a man after his own heart: "I have found David . . . a man according to my own heart, who shall do all my wills[12]." David was always ready to embrace the divine will, as he frequently protested: "My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready[13]." He asked God for one thing alone -- to teach him to do his will: "Teach me to do thy will[14]." A single act of uniformity with the divine will suffices to make a saint. Behold while Saul was persecuting the Church, God enlightened him and converted him. What does Saul do? What does he say? Nothing else but to offer himself to do God's will: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do[15]?" In return the Lord calls him a vessel of election and an apostle of the gentiles: "This man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the gentiles[16]." Absolutely true -- because he who gives his will to God, gives him everything. He who gives his goods in alms, his blood in scourgings, his food in fasting, gives God what he has. But he who gives God his will, gives himself, gives everything he is. Such a one can say: "Though I am poor, Lord, I give thee all I possess; but when I say I give thee my will, I have nothing left to give thee." This is just what God does require of us: "My son, give me thy heart[17]." St. Augustine's comment is: "There is nothing more pleasing we can offer God than to say to him: 'Possess thyself of us'[18]." We cannot offer God anything more pleasing than to say: Take us, Lord, we give thee our entire will. Only let us know thy will and we will carry it out.

If we would completely rejoice the heart of God, let us strive in all things to conform ourselves to his divine will. Let us not only strive to conform ourselves, but also to unite ourselves to whatever dispositions God makes of us. Conformity signifies that we join our wills to the will of God. Uniformity means more -- it means that we make one will of God's will and ours, so that we will only what God wills; that God's will alone, is our will. This is the summit of perfection and to it we should always aspire; this should be the goal of all our works, desires, meditations and prayers. To this end we should always invoke the aid of our holy patrons, our guardian angels, and above all, of our mother Mary, the most perfect of all the saints because she most perfectly embraced the divine will.

[1] Colossians 3:14.

[2] St. Denis Areop. De Div. Nom. c. 4.

[3] 1 Kings 15:22; 1 Kings 15:23.

[4] Habakkuk 10:5-7.

[5] John 6:38.

[6] John 14:31.

[7] Matthew 12:50.

[8] Bl. H. Suso L 2, c. 4.

[9] St. Teresa, Obras 4:27, 28.

[10] Suso, Serm. 2. (Opera Colon Agrip.) [11] Matthew 6:10.

[12] Acts 13:22.

[13] Psalms 56:8.

[14] Psalms 142:10.

[15] Acts 9:6.

[16] Acts 9:6.

[17] Proverbs 23:26.

[18] St. August. in Psalms 131:3.

02.02 Uniformity in all Things.

Uniformity in all Things. The essence of perfection is to embrace the will of God in all things, prosperous or adverse. In prosperity, even sinners find it easy to unite themselves to the divine will; but it takes saints to unite themselves to God's will when things go wrong and are painful to self-love. Our conduct in such instances is the measure of our love of God. St. John of Avila used to say: "One 'Blessed be God' in times of adversity, is worth more than a thousand acts of gratitude in times of prosperity[1]."

Furthermore, we must unite ourselves to God's will not only in things that come to us directly from his hands, such as sickness, desolation, poverty, death of relatives, but likewise in those we suffer from man -- for example, contempt, injustice, loss of reputation, loss of temporal goods and all kinds of persecution. On these occasions we must remember that whilst God does not will the sin, he does will our humiliation, our poverty, or our mortification, as the case may be. It is certain and of faith, that whatever happens, happens by the will of God: "I am the Lord forming the light and creating the darkness, making peace and creating evil[2]." From God come all things, good as well as evil. We call adversities evil; actually they are good and meritorious, when we receive them as coming from God's hands: "Shall there be evil in a city which the Lord hath not done[3]?" "Good things and evil, life and death, poverty and riches are from God[4]."

It is true, when one offends us unjustly, God does not will his sin, nor does he concur in the sinner's bad will; but God does, in a general way, concur in the material action by which such a one strikes us, robs us or does us an injury, so that God certainly wills the offense we suffer and it comes to us from his hands. Thus the Lord told David he would be the author of those things he would suffer at the hands of Absalom: "I will raise up evils against thee out of thy own house, and I will take thy wives before thy face and give them to thy neighbor[5]." Hence too God told the Jews that in punishment for their sins, he would send the Assyrians to plunder them and spread destruction among them: "The Assyrian is the rod and staff of my anger . . . I will send him to take away the spoils[6]." "Assyrian wickedness served as God's scourge for the Hebrews[7]" is St. Augustine's comment on this text. And our Lord himself told St. Peter that his sacred passion came not so much from man as from his Father: "The chalice which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it[8]?" When the messenger came to announce to Job that the Sabeans had plundered his goods and slain his children, he said: "The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away[9]." He did not say: "The Lord hath given me my children and my possessions, and the Sabeans have taken them away." He realized that adversity had come upon him by the will of God. Therefore he added: "As it hath pleased the Lord, so is it done. Blessed be the name of the Lord[10]." We must not therefore consider the afflictions that come upon us as happening by chance or solely from the malice of men; we should be convinced that what happens, happens by the will of God. Apropos of this it is related that two martyrs, Epictetus and Atho, being put to the torture by having their bodies raked with iron hooks and burnt with flaming torches, kept repeating: "Work thy will upon us, O Lord." Arrived at the place of execution, they exclaimed: "Eternal God, be thou blessed in that thy will has been entirely accomplished in us[11]."

Cesarius points up what we have been saying by offering this incident in the life of a certain monk: Externally his religious observance was the same as that of the other monks, but he had attained such sanctity that the mere touch of his garments healed the sick. Marveling at these deeds, since his life was no more exemplary than the lives of the other monks, the superior asked him one day what was the cause of these miracles.

He replied that he too was mystified and was at a loss how to account for such happenings. "What devotions do you practice?" asked the abbot. He answered that there was little or nothing special that he did beyond making a great deal of willing only what God willed, and that God had given him the grace of abandoning his will totally to the will of God.

"Prosperity does not lift me up, nor adversity cast me down," added the monk. "I direct all my prayers to the end that God's will may be done fully in me and by me." "That raid that our enemies made against the monastery the other day, in which our stores were plundered, our granaries put to the torch and our cattle driven off -- did not this misfortune cause you any resentment?" queried the abbot.

"No, Father," came the reply. "On the contrary, I returned thanks to God -- as is my custom in such circumstances -- fully persuaded that God does all things, or permits all that happens, for his glory and for our greater good; thus I am always at peace, no matter what happens." Seeing such uniformity with the will of God, the abbot no longer wondered why the monk worked so many miracles[12].

[1] St. John Avil. Letters 41.

[2] Isaiah 45:6; Isaiah 45:7.

[3] Amos 3:6.

[4] Ecclesiastes 11:14.

[5] 2 Kings 12:11.

[6] Isaiah 10:5-6.

[7] St. Aug. in Psalms 73:1-28.

[8] St. John, John 18:11.

[9] Job 1:21.

[10] Job 1:21.

[11] ML (Vitae Patrum) 73-402, etc.

[12] Caesarius: Dial. distin. 10: cap. 9.

02.03 Happiness deriving from perfect Uniformity

Happiness deriving from perfect Uniformity.

Acting according to this pattern, one not only becomes holy but also enjoys perpetual serenity in this life. Alphonsus the Great, King of Aragon, being asked one day whom he considered the happiest person in the world, answered: "He who abandons himself to the will of God and accepts all things, prosperous and adverse, as coming from his hands[1]." "To those that love God, all things work together unto good[2]." Those who love God are always happy, because their whole happiness is to fulfill, even in adversity, the will of God. Afflictions do not mar their serenity, because by accepting misfortune, they know they give pleasure to their beloved Lord: "Whatever shall befall the just man, it shall not make him sad[3]." Indeed, what can be more satisfactory to a person than to experience the fulfillment of all his desires? This is the happy lot of the man who wills only what God wills, because everything that happens, save sin, happens through the will of God.

There is a story to this effect in the "Lives of the Fathers" about a farmer whose crops were more plentiful than those of his neighbors. On being asked how this happened with such unvarying regularity, he said he was not surprised because he always had the kind of weather he wanted. He was asked to explain. He said: "It is so because I want whatever kind of weather God wants, and because I do, he gives me the harvests I want[4]." If souls resigned to God's will are humiliated, says Salvian[5], they want to be humiliated; if they are poor, they want to be poor; in short, whatever happens is acceptable to them, hence they are truly at peace in this life. In cold and heat, in rain and wind, the soul united to God says: "I want it to be warm, to be cold, windy, to rain, because God wills it." This is the beautiful freedom of the sons of God, and it is worth vastly more than all the rank and distinction of blood and birth, more than all the kingdoms in the world. This is the abiding peace which, in the experience of the saints, "surpasseth all understanding[6]." It surpasses all pleasures rising from gratification of the senses, from social gatherings, banquets and other worldly amusements; vain and deceiving as they are, they captivate the senses for the time being, but bring no lasting contentment; rather they afflict man in the depth of his soul where alone true peace can reside.

Solomon, who tasted to satiety all the pleasures of the world and found them bitter, voiced his disillusionment thus: "But this also is vanity and vexation of spirit[7]." "A fool," says the Holy Spirit, "is changed as the moon; but a holy man continueth in wisdom as the sun[8]." The fool, that is, the sinner, is as changeable as the moon, which today waxes and tomorrow wanes; today he laughs, tomorrow he cries; today he is meek as a lamb, tomorrow cross as a bear. Why? Because his peace of mind depends on the prosperity or the adversity he meets; he changes with the changes in the things that happen to him. The just man is like the sun, constant in his serenity, no matter what betides him. His calmness of soul is founded on his union with the will of God; hence he enjoys unruffled peace. This is the peace promised by the angel of the Nativity: "And on earth, peace to men of good will[9]." Who are these "men of good will" if not those whose wills are united

to the infinitely good and perfect will of God? "The good, and the acceptable, and the perfect will of God[10]." By uniting themselves to the divine will, the saints have enjoyed paradise by anticipation in this life. Accustoming themselves to receive all things from the hands of God, says St. Dorotheus[11], the men of old maintained continual serenity of soul. St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi derived such consolation at hearing the words "will of God," that she usually fell into an ecstasy of love[12]. The instances of jangling irritation that are bound to arise will not fail to make surface impact on the senses. This however will be experienced only in the inferior part of the soul; in the superior part will reign peace and tranquillity as long as our will remains united with God's. Our Lord assured his apostles: "Your joy no man shall take from you . . . Your joy shall be full[13]." He who unites his will to God's experiences a full and lasting joy: full, because he has what he wants, as was explained above; lasting, because no one can take his joy from him, since no one can prevent what God wills from happening. The devout Father John Tauler[14] relates this personal experience: For years he had prayed God to send him someone who would teach him the real spiritual life. One day, at prayer, he heard a voice saying: "Go to such and such a church and you will have the answer to your prayers." He went and at the door of the church he found a beggar, barefooted and in rags. He greeted the mendicant saying: "Good day, my friend."

"Thank you, sir, for your kind wishes, but I do not recall ever having had a 'bad' day."

"Then God has certainly given you a very happy life."

"That is very true, sir. I have never been unhappy. In saying this I am not making any rash statement either. This is the reason: When I have nothing to eat, I give thanks to God; when it rains or snows, I bless God's providence; when someone insults me, drives me away, or otherwise mistreats me, I give glory to God. I said I've never had an unhappy day, and it's the truth, because I am accustomed to will unreservedly what God wills. Whatever happens to me, sweet or bitter, I gladly receive from his hands as what is best for me. Hence my unvarying happiness."

"Where did you find God?"

"I found him where I left creatures."

"Who are you anyway?"

"I am a king."

"And where is your kingdom?"

"In my soul, where everything is in good order; where the passions obey reason, and reason obeys God."

"How have you come to such a state of perfection?"

"By silence. I practice silence towards men, while I cultivate the habit of speaking with God. Conversing with God is the way I found and maintain my peace of soul."

Union with God brought this poor beggar to the very heights of perfection. In his poverty he was richer than the mightiest monarch; in his sufferings, he was vastly happier than worldlings amid their worldly delights.

- [1] Anton. Panorm. De Dictis Alph. Bk. 4.
- [2] Romans 8:28.
- [3] Proverbs 12:21.
- [4] Vitae Patrum. Exact citation unknown.
- [5] St. Salvian. De Gubern. Dei. Bk 1. no. 2.
- [6] Php 4:7.
- [7] Ecclesiastes 4:16.
- [8] Sir 27:12.
- [9] Luke 2:14.
- [10] Romans 12:2.
- [11] St. Doroth. Doctrina 7:4 & 6.
- [12] Puccine, Vita. Part. 1. chap 59.
- [13] John, John 16:22-24.
- [14] Tauler, Serm. De Fest. page 473 foll.

02.04 God wills our Good.

God wills our Good.

O the supreme folly of those who resist the divine will! In God's providence, no one can escape hardship: "Who resisteth his will[1]?" A person who rails at God in adversity, suffers without merit; moreover by his lack of resignation he adds to his punishment in the next life and experiences greater disquietude of mind in this life: "Who resisteth him and hath had peace[2]?" The screaming rage of the sick man in his pain, the whining complaints of the poor man in his destitution -- what will they avail these people, except increase their unhappiness and bring them no relief? "Little man," says St. Augustine, "grow up. What are you seeking in your search for happiness? Seek the one good that embraces all others[3]." Whom do you seek, friend, if you seek not God? Seek him, find him, cleave to him; bind your will to his with bands of steel and you will live always at peace in this life and in the next.

God wills only our good; God loves us more than anybody else can or does love us. His will is that no one should lose his soul, that everyone should save and sanctify his soul: "Not willing that any should perish, but that all should return to penance[4]." "This is the will of God, your sanctification[5]." God has made the attainment of our happiness, his glory. Since he is by his nature infinite goodness, and since as St. Leo[6] says goodness is diffusive of itself, God has a supreme desire to make us sharers of his goods and of his happiness. If then he sends us suffering in this life, it is for our own good: "All things work together unto good[7]." Even chastisements come to us, not to crush us, but to make us mend our ways and save our souls: "Let us believe that these scourges of the Lord have happened for our amendment and not for our destruction[8]."

God surrounds us with his loving care lest we suffer eternal damnation: "O Lord, thou hast crowned us as with a shield of thy good will[9]." He is most solicitous for our welfare: "The Lord is solicitous for me[10]." What can God deny us when he has given us his own son? "He that spared not even his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how hath he not also, with him, given us all things[11]?" Therefore we should most confidently abandon ourselves to all the dispositions of divine providence, since they are for our own good. In all that happens to us, let us say: "In peace, in the self same I will sleep, and I will rest: Because thou, O Lord, hast singularly settled me in hope[12]."

Let us place ourselves unreservedly in his hands because he will not fail to have care of us: "Casting all your care upon him, for he hath care of you[13]." Let us keep God in our thoughts and carry out his will, and he will think of us and of our welfare. Our Lord said to St. Catherine of Siena, "Daughter, think of me, and I will always think of you." Let us often repeat with the Spouse in the Canticle: "My beloved to me, and I to him[14]."

St. Niles, abbot, used to say that our petitions should be, not that our wishes be done, but that God's holy will should be fulfilled in us and by us. When, therefore, something adverse happens to

us, let us accept it from his hands, not only patiently, but even with gladness, as did the apostles "who went from the presence of the council rejoicing, that they were accounted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus[15]." What greater consolation can come to a soul than to know that by patiently bearing some tribulation, it gives God the greatest pleasure in its power? Spiritual writers tell us that though the desire of certain souls to please God by their sufferings is acceptable to him, still more pleasing to him is the union of certain others with his will, so that their will is neither to rejoice nor to suffer, but to hold themselves completely amenable to his will, and they desire only that his holy will be fulfilled.

If, devout soul, it is your will to please God and live a life of serenity in this world, unite yourself always and in all things to the divine will. Reflect that all the sins of your past wicked life happened because you wandered from the path of God's will. For the future, embrace God's good pleasure and say to him in every happening: "Yea, Father, for so it hath seemed good in thy sight[16]." When anything disagreeable happens, remember it comes from God and say at once, "This comes from God" and be at peace: "I was dumb and opened not my mouth, because thou hast done it." Lord, since thou hast done this, I will be silent and accept it. Direct all your thoughts and prayers to this end, to beg God constantly in meditation, Communion, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament that he help you accomplish his holy will. Form the habit of offering yourself frequently to God by saying, "My God, behold me in thy presence; do with me and all that I have as thou pleasest." This was the constant practice of St. Teresa. At least fifty times a day she offered herself to God, placing herself at his entire disposition and good pleasure.

How fortunate you, kind reader, if you too act thus! You will surely become a saint. Your life will be calm and peaceful; your death will be happy. At death all our hope of salvation will come from the testimony of our conscience as to whether or not we are dying resigned to God's will. If during life we have embraced everything as coming from God's hands, and if at death we embrace death in fulfillment of God's holy will, we shall certainly save our souls and die the death of saints. Let us then abandon everything to God's good pleasure, because being infinitely wise, he knows what is best for us; and being all-good and all-loving -- having given his life for us -- he wills what is best for us. Let us, as St. Basil counsels us, rest secure in the conviction that beyond the possibility of a doubt, God works to effect our welfare, infinitely better than we could ever hope to accomplish or desire it ourselves.

[1] Romans 9:19.

[2] Job 9:4.

[3] St. Aug. Opera. Cap. 34 ML 40-966.

[4] 2 Peter 3:9.

[5] 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

[6] St. Leo. Serm. de Nat. 2. cap. 1.

[7] Romans 8:28.

[8] Jude 1:1.

[9] Psalms 5:13.

[10] Psalms 39:18.

[11] Romans 8:32.

[12] Psalms 4:9; Psalms 4:10.

[13] 1 Peter 5:7.

[14] Song of Solomon 2:6.

[15] Acts 5:41.

[16] Matthew 11:26.

02.05 Special Practices of Uniformity

Special Practices of Uniformity.

Let us now take up in a practical way the consideration of those matters in which we should unite ourselves to God's will.

1. In external matters. In times of great heat, cold or rain; in times of famine, epidemics and similar occasions we should refrain from expressions like these: "What unbearable heat!" "What piercing cold!" "What a tragedy!" In these instances we should avoid expressions indicating opposition to God's will. We should want things to be just as they are, because it is God who thus disposes them. An incident in point would be this one: Late one night St. Francis Borgia arrived unexpectedly at a Jesuit house, in a snowstorm. He knocked and knocked on the door, but all to no purpose because the community being asleep, no one heard him. When morning came all were embarrassed for the discomfort he had experienced by having had to spend the night in the open. The saint, however, said he had enjoyed the greatest consolation during those long hours of the night by imagining that he saw our Lord up in the sky dropping the snowflakes down upon him.

2. In personal matters. In matters that affect us personally, let us acquiesce in God's will. For example, in hunger, thirst, poverty, desolation, loss of reputation, let us always say: "Do thou build up or tear down, O Lord, as seems good in thy sight. I am content. I wish only what thou dost wish." Thus too, says Rodriguez, should we act when the devil proposes certain hypothetical cases to us in order to wrest a sinful consent from us, or at least to cause us to be interiorly disturbed. For example: "What would you say or what would you do if some one were to say or do such and such a thing to you?" Let us dismiss the temptation by saying: "By God's grace, I would say or do what God would want me to say or do." Thus we shall free ourselves from imperfection and harassment.

3. Let us not lament if we suffer from some natural defect of body or mind; from poor memory, slowness of understanding, little ability, lameness or general bad health. What claim have we, or what obligation is God under, to give us a more brilliant mind or a more robust body? Who is ever offered a gift and then lays down the conditions upon which he will accept it? Let us thank God for what, in his pure goodness, he has given us and let us be content too with the manner in which he has given it to us. Who knows? Perhaps if God had given us greater talent, better health, a more personable appearance, we might have lost our souls! Great talent and knowledge have caused many to be puffed up with the idea of their own importance and, in their pride, they have despised others. How easily those who have these gifts fall into grave danger to their salvation! How many on account of physical beauty or robust health have plunged headlong into a life of debauchery! How many, on the contrary, who, by reason of poverty, infirmity or physical deformity, have become saints and have saved their souls, who, given health, wealth or physical attractiveness had else lost their souls! Let us then be content with what God has given us. "But one thing is necessary[1]," and it is not beauty, not health, not talent. It is the salvation of our immortal souls.

4. It is especially necessary that we be resigned in corporal infirmities. We should willingly embrace them in the manner and for the length of time that God wills. We ought to make use of the ordinary remedies in time of sickness -- such is God's will; but if they are not effective, let us unite ourselves to God's will and this will be better for us than would be our restoration to health. Let us say: "Lord, I wish neither to be well nor to remain sick; I want only what thou wilt." Certainly, it is more virtuous not to repine in times of painful illness; still and all, when our sufferings are excessive, it is not wrong to let our friends know what we are enduring, and also to ask God to free us from our sufferings. Let it be understood, however, that the sufferings here referred to are actually excessive. It often happens that some, on the occasion of a slight illness, or even a slight indisposition, want the whole world to stand still and sympathize with them in their illnesses. But where it is a case of real suffering, we have the example of our Lord, who, at the approach of his bitter passion, made known his state of soul to his disciples, saying: "My soul is sorrowful even unto death[2]" and besought his eternal Father to deliver him from it: "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me[3]." But our Lord likewise taught us what we should do when we have made such a petition, when he added: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt[4]."

How childish the pretense of those who protest they wish for health not to escape suffering, but to serve our Lord better by being able to observe their Rule, to serve the community, go to church, receive Communion, do penance, study, work for souls in the confessional and pulpit! Devout soul, tell me, why do you desire to do these things? To please God? Why then search any further to please God when you are sure God does not wish these prayers, Communions, penances or studies, but he does wish that you suffer patiently this sickness he sends you? Unite then your sufferings to those of our Lord.

"But," you say, "I do not want to be sick for then I am useless, a burden to my Order, to my monastery." But if you are united to and resigned to God's will, you will realize that your superiors are likewise resigned to the dispositions of divine providence, and that they recognize the fact that you are a burden, not through indolence, but by the will of God. Ah, how often these desires and these laments are born, not of the love of God, but of the love of self! How many of them are so many pretexts for fleeing the will of God! Do we want to please God? When we find ourselves confined to our sickbed, let us utter this one prayer: "Thy will be done." Let us repeat it time and time again and it will please God more than all our mortifications and devotions. There is no better way to serve God than cheerfully to embrace his holy will.

St. John of Avila once wrote to a sick priest: "My dear friend, -- Do not weary yourself planning what you would do if you were well, but be content to be sick for as long as God wishes. If you are seeking to carry out God's will, what difference should it make to you whether you are sick or well[5]?" The saint was perfectly right, for God is glorified not by our works, but by our resignation to, and by our union with, his holy will. In this respect St. Francis de Sales used to say we serve God better by our sufferings than by our actions.

Many times it will happen that proper medical attention or effective remedies will be lacking, or even that the doctor will not rightly diagnose our case. In such instances we must unite ourselves to the divine will which thus disposes of our physical health. The story is told of a client of St. Thomas of Canterbury, who being sick, went to the saint's tomb to obtain a cure. He returned home cured. But then he thought to himself: "Suppose it would be better for my soul's salvation if I

remained sick, what point then is there in being well?" In this frame of mind he went back and asked the saint to intercede with God that he grant what would be best for his eternal salvation. His illness returned and he was perfectly content with the turn things had taken, being fully persuaded that God had thus disposed of him for his own good.

There is a similar account by Surio to the effect that a certain blind man obtained the restoration of his sight by praying to St. Bedasto, bishop. Thinking the matter over, he prayed again to his heavenly patron, but this time with the purpose that if the possession of his sight were not expedient for his soul, that his blindness should return. And that is exactly what happened -- he was blind again. Therefore, in sickness it is better that we seek neither sickness nor health, but that we abandon ourselves to the will of God so that he may dispose of us as he wishes. However, if we decide to ask for health, let us do so at least always resigned and with the proviso that our bodily health may be conducive to the health of our soul. Otherwise our prayer will be defective and will remain unheard because our Lord does not answer prayers made without resignation to his holy will.

Sickness is the acid test of spirituality, because it discloses whether our virtue is real or sham. If the soul is not agitated, does not break out in lamentations, is not feverishly restless in seeking a cure, but instead is submissive to the doctors and to superiors, is serene and tranquil, completely resigned to God's will, it is a sign that that soul is well-grounded in virtue.

What of the whiner who complains of lack of attention? That his sufferings are beyond endurance? That the doctor does not know his business? What of the faint-hearted soul who laments that the hand of God is too heavy upon him? This story by St. Bonaventure in his "Life of St. Francis" is in point: On a certain occasion when the saint was suffering extraordinary physical pain, one of his religious meaning to sympathize with him, said in his simplicity: "My Father, pray God that he treat you a little more gently, for his hand seems heavy upon you just now." Hearing this, St. Francis strongly resented the unhappy remark of his well-meaning brother, saying: "My good brother, did I not know that what you have just said was spoken in all simplicity, without realizing the implication of your words, I should never see you again because of your rashness in passing judgment on the dispositions of divine providence." Whereupon, weak and wasted as he was by his illness, he got out of bed, knelt down, kissed the floor and prayed thus: "Lord, I thank thee for the sufferings thou art sending me. Send me more, if it be thy good pleasure. My pleasure is that you afflict me and spare me not, for the fulfillment of thy holy will is the greatest consolation of my life."

[1]Luke 10:42.

[2]Matthew 26:38.

[3]Matthew 26:39.

[4]Matthew 26:39.

[5]St. John Avil. Epist. 2.

02.06 Spiritual Desolation.

Spiritual Desolation.

We ought to view in the light of God's holy will, the loss of persons who are helpful to us in a spiritual or material way. Pious souls often fail in this respect by not being resigned to the dispositions of God's holy will. Our sanctification comes fundamentally and essentially from God, not from spiritual directors. When God sends us a spiritual director, he wishes us to use him for our spiritual profit; but if he takes him away, he wants us to remain calm and unperturbed and to increase our confidence in his goodness by saying to him: "Lord, thou hast given me this help and now thou dost take it away. Blessed be thy holy will! I beg thee, teach me what I must do to serve thee." In this manner too, we should receive whatever other crosses God sends us. "But," you reply, "these sufferings are really punishments." The answer to that remark is: Are not the punishments God sends us in this life also graces and benefits? Our offenses against God must be atoned for somehow, either in this life or in the next. Hence we should all make St. Augustine's prayer our own: "Lord, here cut, here burn and spare me not, but spare me in eternity!" Let us say with Job: "Let this be my comfort, that afflicting me with sorrow, he spare not[1]." Having merited hell for our sins, we should be consoled that God chastises us in this life, and animate ourselves to look upon such treatment as a pledge that God wishes to spare us in the next. When God sends us punishments let us say with the high-priest Heli: "It is the Lord, let him do what is good in his sight[2]." The time of spiritual desolation is also a time for being resigned. When a soul begins to cultivate the spiritual life, God usually showers his consolations upon her to wean her away from the world; but when he sees her making solid progress, he withdraws his hand to test her and to see if she will love and serve him without the reward of sensible consolations. "In this life," as St. Teresa used to say, "our lot is not to enjoy God, but to do his holy will." And again, "Love of God does not consist in experiencing his tendernesses, but in serving him with resolution and humility." And in yet another place, "God's true lovers are discovered in times of aridity and temptation."

Let the soul thank God when she experiences his loving endearments, but let her not repine when she finds herself left in desolation. It is important to lay great stress on this point, because some souls, beginners in the spiritual life, finding themselves in spiritual aridity, think God has abandoned them, or that the spiritual life is not for them; thus they give up the practice of prayer and lose what they have previously gained. The time of aridity is the best time to practice resignation to God's holy will. I do not say you will feel no pain in seeing yourself deprived of the sensible presence of God; it is impossible for the soul not to feel it and lament over it, when even our Lord cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me[3]?" In her sufferings, however, the soul should always be resigned to God's will. The saints have all experienced desolations and abandonment of soul. "How impervious to things spiritual, my heart!" cries a St. Bernard. "No savor in pious reading, no pleasure in meditation nor in prayer!" For the most part it has been the common lot of the saints to encounter aridities; sensible consolations were the exceptions. Such things are rare occurrences granted to untried souls so that they may not halt on the road to sanctity; the real delights and happiness that will constitute their reward are

reserved for heaven. This earth is a place of merit which is acquired by suffering; heaven is a place of reward and happiness. Hence, in this life the saints neither desired nor sought the joys of sensible fervor, but rather the fervor of the spirit toughened in the crucible of suffering. "O how much better it is," says St. John of Avila, "to endure aridity and temptation by God's will than to be raised to the heights of contemplation without God's will!" But you say you would gladly endure desolation if you were certain that it comes from God, but you are tortured by the anxiety that your desolation comes by your own fault and is a punishment for your tepidity. Very well, let us suppose you are right; then get rid of your tepidity and exercise more diligence in the affairs of your soul. But because you are possibly experiencing spiritual darkness, are you going to get all wrought up, give up prayer, and thus make things twice as bad as they are?

Let us assume that this aridity is a punishment for your tepidity. Was it not God who sent it? Accept your desolation, as your just desserts and unite yourself to God's holy will. Did you not say that you merited hell? And now you are complaining? Perhaps you think God should send you consolations! Away with such ideas and be patient under God's hand. Take up your prayers again and continue to walk in the way you have entered upon; for the future, fear lest such laments come from too little humility and too little resignation to the will of God. Therefore be resigned and say: "Lord, I accept this punishment from thy hands, and I accept it for as long as it pleases thee; if it be thy will that I should be thus afflicted for all eternity, I am satisfied." Such a prayer, though hard to make, will be far more advantageous to you than the sweetest sensible consolations.

It is well to remember, however, that aridity is not always a chastisement; at times it is a disposition of divine providence for our greater spiritual profit and to keep us humble. Lest St. Paul become vain on account of the spiritual gifts he had received, the Lord permitted him to be tempted to impurity: "And lest the greatness of the revelations should exalt me, there was given me a sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan to buffet me[4]."

Prayer made amid sensible devotion is not much of an achievement: "There is a friend, a companion at the table, and he will not abide in the day of distress[5]." You would not consider the casual guest at your table a friend, but only him who assists you in your need without thought of benefit to himself. When God sends spiritual darkness and desolation, his true friends are known.

Palladius, the author of the "Lives of the Fathers of the Desert," experiencing great disgust in prayer, went seeking advice from the abbot Macarius. The saintly abbot gave him this counsel: "When you are tempted in times of dryness to give up praying because you seem to be wasting your time, say: 'Since I cannot pray, I will be satisfied just to remain on watch here in my cell for the love of Jesus Christ!' "Devout soul, you do the same when you are tempted to give up prayer just because you seem to be getting nowhere. Say: "I am going to stay here just to please God." St. Francis de Sales used to say that if we do nothing else but banish distractions and temptations in our prayers, the prayer is well made. Tauler states that persevering prayer in time of dryness will receive greater grace than prayer made amid great sensible devotion.

Rodriguez cites the case of a person who persevered forty years in prayer despite aridity, and experienced great spiritual strength as a result of it; on occasion, when through aridity he would omit meditation he felt spiritually weak and incapable of good deeds. St. Bonaventure and Gerson both say that persons who do not experience the recollection they would like to have in their meditations, often serve God better than they would do if they did have it; the reason is that lack of

recollection keeps them more diligent and humble; otherwise they would become puffed up with spiritual pride and grow tepid, vainly believing they had reached the summit of sanctity.

What has been said of dryness holds true of temptations also. Certainly we should strive to avoid temptations; but if God wishes that we be tempted against faith, purity, or any other virtue, we should not give in to discouraging lamentations, but submit ourselves with resignation to God's holy will. St. Paul asked to be freed from temptations to impurity and our Lord answered him, saying: "My grace is sufficient for thee[6]." So should we act when we find ourselves victims of unrelenting temptations and God seemingly deaf to our prayers. Let us then say: "Lord, do with me, let happen to me what thou wilt; thy grace is sufficient for me. Only never let me lose this grace." Consent to temptation, not temptation of itself, can make us lose the grace of God. Temptation resisted keeps us humble, brings us greater merit, makes us have frequent recourse to God, thus preserving us from offending him and unites us more closely to him in the bonds of his holy love.

Finally, we should be united to God's will in regard to the time and manner of our death. One day St. Gertrude, while climbing up a small hill, lost her footing and fell into a ravine below. After her companions had come to her assistance, they asked her if while falling she had any fear of dying without the sacraments. "I earnestly hope and desire to have the benefit of the sacraments when death is at hand; still, to my way of thinking, the will of God is more important. I believe that the best disposition I could have to die a happy death would be to submit myself to whatever God would wish in my regard. For this reason I desire whatever kind of death God will be pleased to send me." In his "Dialogues", St. Gregory[7] tells of a certain priest, Santolo by name, who was captured by the Vandals and condemned to death. The barbarians told him to choose the manner of his death. He refused, saying: "I am in God's hands and I gladly accept whatever kind of death he wishes me to suffer at your hands; I wish no other." This reply was so pleasing to God that he miraculously stayed the hand of the executioner ready to behead him. The barbarians were so impressed by the miracle that they freed their prisoner. As regards the manner of our death, therefore, we should esteem that the best kind of death for us which God has designed for us. When therefore we think of our death, let our prayer be: "O Lord, only let me save my soul and I leave the manner of my death to thee!"

We should likewise unite ourselves to God's will when the moment of death is near. What else is this earth but a prison where we suffer and where we are in constant danger of losing God? Hence David prayed: "Bring my soul out of prison[8]." St. Teresa too feared to lose God and when she would hear the striking of the clock, she would find consolation in the thought that the passing of the hour was an hour less of the danger of losing God.

St. John of Avila was convinced that every right-minded person should desire death on account of living in peril of losing divine grace. What can be more pleasant or desirable than by dying a good death, to have the assurance of no longer being able to lose the grace of God? Perhaps you will answer that you have as yet done nothing to deserve this reward. If it were God's will that your life should end now, what would you be doing, living on here against his will? Who knows, you might fall into sin and be lost! Even if you escaped mortal sin, you could not live free from all sin. "Why are we so tenacious of life," exclaims St. Bernard, "when the longer we live, the more we sin[9]?" A single venial sin is more displeasing to God than all the good works we can perform.

Moreover, the person who has little desire for heaven shows he has little love for God. The true lover desires to be with his beloved. We cannot see God while we remain here on earth; hence the saints have yearned for death so that they might go and behold their beloved Lord, face to face. "Oh, that I might die and behold thy beautiful face!" sighed St. Augustine. And St. Paul: "Having a desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ[10]." "When shall I come and appear before the face of God[11]?" exclaimed the psalmist. A hunter one day heard the voice of a man singing most sweetly in the forest. Following the sound, he came upon a leper horribly disfigured by the ravages of his disease. Addressing him he said: "How can you sing when you are so terribly afflicted and your death is so near at hand?" And the leper: "Friend, my poor body is a crumbling wall and it is the only thing that separates me from my God. When it falls I shall go forth to God. Time for me is indeed fast running out, so every day I show my happiness by lifting my voice in song."

Lastly, we should unite ourselves to the will of God as regards our degree of grace and glory. True, we should esteem the things that make for the glory of God, but we should show the greatest esteem for those that concern the will of God. We should desire to love God more than the seraphs, but not to a degree higher than God has destined for us. St. John of Avila[12] says: "I believe every saint has had the desire to be higher in grace than he actually was. However, despite this, their serenity of soul always remained unruffled. Their desire for a greater degree of grace sprang not from a consideration of their own good, but of God's. They were content with the degree of grace God had meted out for them, though actually God had given them less. They considered it a greater sign of true love of God to be content with what God had given them, than to desire to have received more." This means, as Rodriguez explains it, we should be diligent in striving to become perfect, so that tepidity and laziness may not serve as excuses for some to say: "God must help me; I can do only so much for myself." Nevertheless, when we do fall into some fault, we should not lose our peace of soul and union with the will of God, which permits our fall; nor should we lose our courage. Let us rise at once from this fall, penitently humbling ourselves and by seeking greater help from God, let us continue to march resolutely on the highway of the spiritual life. Likewise, we may well desire to be among the seraphs in heaven, not for our own glory, but for God's, and to love him more; still we should be resigned to his will and be content with that degree of glory which in his mercy he has set for us.

It would be a serious defect to desire the gifts of supernatural prayer -- specifically, ecstasies, visions and revelations. The masters of the spiritual life say that souls thus favored by God, should ask him to take them away so that they may love him out of pure faith -- a way of greater security. Many have come to perfection without these supernatural gifts; the only virtues worth-while are those that draw the soul to holiness of life, namely, the virtue of uniformity with God's holy will. If God does not wish to raise us to the heights of perfection and glory, let us unite ourselves in all things to his holy will, asking him in his mercy, to grant us our soul's salvation. If we act in this manner, the reward will not be slight which we shall receive from the hands of God who loves above all others, souls resigned to his holy will.

[1] Job 6:10.

[2] 1 Kings 3:18.

[3] Matthew 27:46.

- [4] 2 Corinthians 12:7.
- [5] Ecclesiastes 6:10.
- [6] 2 Corinthians 12:9.
- [7] St. Greg. Dial. Bk. 3, chap. 37.
- [8] Psalms 141:8.
- [9] St. Bernard, Med. chap. 8.
- [10] Php 1:23.
- [11] Psalms 41:3.
- [12] St. John Avila. Audi fil. c. 13.

02.07 Conclusion

Conclusion.

Finally we should consider the events which are happening to us now and which will happen to us in the future, as coming from the hands of God. Everything we do should be directed to this one end: to do the will of God and to do it solely for the reason that God wills it. To walk more securely on this road we must depend on the guidance of our superiors in external matters, and on our directors in internal matters, to learn from them God's will in our regard, having great faith in the words of our Lord: "He that heareth you, heareth me[1]."

Above all, let us bend all our energies to serve God in the way he wishes. This remark is made so that we may avoid the mistake of him who wastes his time in idle day-dreaming. Such a one says, "If I were to become a hermit, I would become a saint" or "If I were to enter a monastery, I would practice penance" or "If I were to go away from here, leaving friends and companions, I would devote long hours to prayer." If, If, If -- all these if's! In the meantime such a person goes from bad to worse. These idle fancies are often temptations of the devil, because they are not in accord with God's will. Hence we should dismiss them summarily and rouse ourselves to serve God only in that way which he has marked out for us. Doing his holy will, we shall certainly become holy in those surroundings in which he has placed us.

Let us will always and ever only what God wills; for so doing, he will press us to his heart. To this end let us familiarize ourselves with certain texts of sacred scripture that invite us to unite ourselves constantly with the divine will: "Lord, what wilt thou have me do[2]?" "Tell me, my God, what thou wilt have me do, that I may will it also, with all my heart. "I am thine, save thou me[3]." "I am no longer my own, I am thine, O Lord, do with me as thou wilt.

If some particularly crashing misfortune comes upon us, for example, the death of a relative, loss of goods, let us say: "Yea, Father, for so it hath seemed good in thy sight[4]." "Yes, my God and my Father, so be it, for such is thy good pleasure. Above all, let us cherish that prayer of our Lord, which he himself taught us: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven[5]." Our Lord bade St. Catherine of Genoa to make a notable pause at these words whenever she said the Our Father, praying that God's holy will be fulfilled on earth with the same perfection with which the saints do it in heaven. Let this be our practice also, and we shall certainly become saints. May the divine will be loved and praised! May the Immaculate Virgin be also praised!

[1] Luke 10:16.

[2] Acts 9:16.

[3] Psalms 119:94.

[4] Matthew 11:26.

[5] Matthew 6:10.

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