

Advice and Practices Required to Lead
the Soul from its First Desire
for the Devout Life to a
Wholehearted Commitment

1

Description of True Devotion

YOU ASPIRE TO DEVOTION, dearest Philothea,¹¹ because as a Christian you know it to be a virtue extremely pleasing to His Divine Majesty. But since small faults committed in the beginning of an undertaking grow in its progress infinitely greater and become in the end almost irreparable, you must first know what the virtue of devotion is. There is only one true devotion and many that are false and deceitful. If you cannot distinguish true devotion, you may easily deceive and distract yourself by following an irrelevant and superstitious devotion.

Aurelius painted all the faces in the pictures he made to resemble women he loved. In the same way, each of us paints devotion according to his own passions and imagination. He who is addicted to fasting thinks himself very devout if he fasts, even though his heart is at the same time filled with rancor. And while he scruples to moisten his tongue with wine, or even through sobriety with water, he finds no difficulty in drinking deeply of his neighbor's blood by detraction and slander. Another considers himself devout because every day he recites a multiplicity of prayers, though immediately afterwards he utters the most disagreeable, arrogant, and injurious words among his domestics and neighbors. Another cheerfully draws alms out of his purse to relieve the poor, but cannot draw meekness out of his heart to forgive his enemies. And another readily forgives his enemies but never satisfies his creditors except when forced. These are considered

11. "Lover of God"—see Preface, page 12.

devout by some, even though in reality they are by no means so.

Saul's men were looking for David in his house. But Michal laid a statue in his bed and covered it with David's clothes to make them believe it was David himself.¹² Similarly many people, by covering themselves with the external actions appropriate to devotion, make the world believe they are truly devout, while in reality they are nothing but statues and phantoms of devotion.

True and living devotion, Philothea, presupposes not a partial but a complete love of God. When divine love adorns the soul, it is called grace and makes us pleasing to His Divine Majesty. When it gives us the strength to do good, it is called charity. But when it arrives at that degree of perfection by which it not only makes us do good, but also work diligently, frequently, and readily, then it is called devotion.

Ostriches never fly; hens fly low, heavily, but seldom; eagles, doves, and swallows fly aloft, swiftly and frequently. In the same way, sinners do not fly at all toward God, but lie grovelling on the earth with only earthly objects in view; good people who have not yet attained devotion fly toward God by their good works, but rarely, slowly, and heavily; but devout souls ascend to Him by frequent, prompt, and lofty flights.

In short, devotion is nothing other than a spiritual agility and liveliness by which love works in us, or we work by her, with alacrity and affection. Just as it is the business of love to make us observe all God's commandments, always and without exception, so it is the part of devotion to make us observe them more fully and with more diligence. This is why he who does not observe all God's commandments cannot be held to be either good or devout, since to be good he must be possessed of love, and to be devout, besides love, he must show cheerfulness and alacrity in the performance of loving actions.

Devotion being, then, a certain excellent degree of love, it makes us not only active and diligent in the observance of God's commandments, but also rouses us to perform every good work with affectionate alacrity, even though it is not a commandment but merely commendable.

Just as a man newly recovered from infirmity walks as much as is necessary for him, yet slowly and at his leisure, so a sinner recently healed of his iniquity walks as far as God commands him, yet slowly and heavily until such time as he attains devotion. At that point, like a man in sound health, he not only walks but runs and springs forward

12. 1 Samuel 19:13.

in the way of God's commandments. Moreover, he advances rapidly in the paths of his heavenly counsels and inspiration.

Finally, love and devotion differ from each other no more than fire does from flame. Love is a spiritual fire that when inflamed is called devotion. Hence it seems that devotion adds nothing to the fire of love except the flame, which makes it ready, active, and diligent—not only in the observance of the commandments of God, but also in the execution of his heavenly counsels and inspirations.

2

Nature and Excellence of Devotion

THOSE WHO DISCOURAGED THE ISRAELITES from going into the promised land told them it was a country that consumed its inhabitants. In other words, they said it was impossible to withstand the pestilential infection of its air and, moreover, that the natives were such monsters that they consumed men like locusts.¹³

It is in this manner, my dear Philothea, that the world defames holy devotion, representing devout people as a peevish, gloomy, and sullen race of men, pretending that devotion begets melancholy and intolerable moods. But just as Joshua and Caleb protested that the promised land was not only good and fair but also that the possession of it would be sweet and agreeable,¹⁴ so the Holy Spirit by the mouths of all the saints and our Saviour by his own mouth assure us that a devout life is a life that is the sweetest, happiest, and most likeable of all.

The world sees devout people fasting, praying, suffering injuries, serving the sick, and giving alms to the poor. It sees them watch over themselves, restrain their anger, stifle their passions, deprive themselves of sensual pleasures, and perform other actions that are in themselves painful and rigorous. But the world does not discern the inward, heartfelt devotion that renders all these actions pleasant, sweet, and easy.

Look at the bees. They find on the thyme a very bitter juice. Yet in sucking it in, they convert it into honey because such is their nature. O worldlings! Devout souls, it is true, find much bitterness in their exer-

13. Numbers 13:32.

14. Numbers 14:7.

cises of mortification, but in performing them they convert it into the most delicious sweetness. The fires, flames, wheels, and swords seemed to be flowers and perfumes to the martyrs because they were devout. If, then, devotion can confer a sweetness on the most cruel torments, and even on death itself, what can it not do for virtuous actions?

Sugar sweetens green fruits and corrects whatever rawness or unwholesomeness may be in those that are ripe. Devotion is that true spiritual sugar that corrects the bitterness of mortification by the sweetness of its consolations. It removes discontent from the poor, solicitude from the rich, sadness from the oppressed, insolence from the exalted, melancholy from the solitary, and dissipation from him that is in company. It serves as well for warmth in winter as for dew in summer. It knows how to use abundance as well as how to suffer want, and how to render honor and contempt equally profitable. In a word, it entertains pleasure and pain with equanimity, and replenishes the soul with an admirable sweetness.

Consider Jacob's ladder,¹⁵ for in it you have a true picture of a devout life. The two parallel sides between which we ascend, and in which the rungs are fixed, represent prayer, which obtains the love of God, and the sacraments, which confer it. The rungs are the several degrees of love by which we advance from virtue to virtue, either descending by action to the help and support of our neighbor, or ascending by contemplation to a loving union with God.

Look attentively, I beg you, on those who are on this ladder. They are either men who have angelic hearts, or angels clothed in human bodies. They are not young, although they seem so because they are full of vigor and spiritual activity. They have wings to soar up to God by holy prayer. But they also have feet to walk with men by a holy and edifying conversation. Their countenances are fair and cheerful because they receive all things with sweetness and content. Their legs, arms, and heads are bare because in all their thoughts, affections, and actions they have no design or motive other than that of pleasing God. The rest of their body has no covering other than a fair and light robe to show that, although they make use of the world and worldly things, yet they use them in a most pure and moderate manner, not taking more of them than is necessary for their condition. Such are devout people.

Believe me, dear Philothea, devotion is the quintessence of pleasures, the queen of virtues, and the perfection of love. If love is milk,

15. Genesis 28:12.

devotion is the cream. If love is a plant, devotion is its flower. If love is a precious stone, devotion is its luster. If love is a rich balm, devotion is its odor—yes, the odor of sweetness, which comforts men and makes angels rejoice.

3

Devotion is Compatible with Every Vocation and Profession

IN THE CREATION, God commanded the plants to bring forth their fruits, each one according to its kind. In the same way, he commands all Christians, who are the living plants of his Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his quality and vocation. Devotion ought, then, to be not only practiced differently by the gentleman, the tradesman, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maid, and the married woman, but its practice should also be adapted to the strength, employments, and obligations of each particular one.

I ask you, Philothea, is it right that a bishop should lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? Or that married people should lay up no greater store than a Capuchin? If a tradesman were to remain the whole day in church, like the religious, or if the religious man were continually exposed to difficulties in the service of his neighbor, as the bishop is, would not such devotion be ridiculous, preposterous, and unsupportable? This fault is, nevertheless, very common. And hence the world, which does not distinguish between true devotion and the errors of those who imagine themselves to be devout, grumbles that devotion cannot prevent these disorders.

No, Philothea, true devotion does no harm whatsoever but rather gives perfection to all things. But when it is not compatible with our lawful vocation, then without doubt it is false. “The bee,” says Aristotle, “extracts honey from flowers without injuring them, and leaves them as whole and fresh as she found them.”¹⁶ True devotion goes still further, for it not only does no injury to any vocation or employment, but on the contrary adorns and beautifies it. Just as all sorts of precious stones, when cast into honey, receive a greater luster, each according to its color, so also everyone’s vocation becomes more pleasant when

16. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 5.22.