

On Union with God

by Blessed Albert The Great, O.P

Nihil Obsist.

F. THOS. BERGH, O.S.B., CENSOR DEPUTATDS.

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Table of Contents

PREFACE.....	1
CHAPTER I – The Highest Perfection.....	2
CHAPTER II – The Search after God.....	3
CHAPTER III – Law of Man’s Perfection.....	4
CHAPTER IV – Our Labor.....	4
CHAPTER V – Purity of Heart.....	6
CHAPTER IX – The Contemplation of God.....	7
CHAPTER X - Devotion.....	9
CHAPTER XI - Temptation.....	10
CHAPTER XII – The Love of God.....	11
CHAPTER XIII – True Prayer.....	12
CHAPTER XIV – Testimony of Conscience.....	13
CHAPTER XV – The Contempt of Self.....	14
CHAPTER XVI – The Providence of God.....	16

PREFACE

SURELY the most deeply rooted need of the human soul, its purest aspiration, is for the closest possible union with God. As one turns over the pages of this little work, written by Blessed Albert the Great to wards the end of his life, when that great soul had ripened and matured, one feels that here indeed is the ideal of one's hopes.

Simply and clearly the great principles are laid down, the way is made plain which leads to the highest spiritual life. It seems as though, while one reads, the mists of earth vanish and the snowy summits appear of the mountains of God, We breathe only the pure atmosphere of prayer, peace,

and love, and the one great fact of the universe, the Divine Presence, is felt and realized without effort.

But is such a life possible amid the whirl of the twentieth century? To faith and love all things are possible, and our author shows us the loving Father, ever ready to give as much and more than we can ask. The spirit of such a work is ever true; the application may vary with circumstances, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit will never be wanting to those souls who crave for closer union with their Divine Master.

This little treatise has been very aptly called the "Metaphysics of the Imitation", and it is in the hope that it may be of use to souls that it has been translated into English.

Blessed Albert the Great is too well known for it to be necessary for us to give more than the briefest outline of his life.

The eldest son of the Count of Bollstadt, he was born at Lauingen in Swabia in 1205 or 1206, though some historians give it as 1193. As a youth he was sent to the University of Padua, where he had special facilities for the study of the liberal arts.

Drawn by the persuasive teaching of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, he joined the Order of St. Dominic in 1223, and after completing his studies, received the Doctor's degree at the University of Paris.

His brilliant genius quickly brought him into the most prominent positions. Far-famed for his learning, he attracted scholars from all parts of Europe to Paris, Cologne, Ratisbon, etc., where he successively taught. It was during his years of teaching at Paris and Cologne that he counted among his disciples St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatness of whose future he foretold, and whose lifelong friendship with him then began.

In 1254 Albert was elected Provincial of his Order in Germany. In 1260 he was appointed Bishop of Ratisbon, but resigned his see in 1262. He then continued unweariedly until a few years before his death, when his great powers, especially his memory, failed him, but the fervor of his soul remained ever the same. In 1280, at Cologne, he sank, at last worn out by his manifold labors.

"Whether we consider him as a theologian or as a philosopher, Albert was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary men of his age; I might say, one of the most wonderful men of genius who appeared in past times". (Jourdain).

Note: Following the general tradition, we attribute this work to Albert the Great, but not all critics are agreed as to its authenticity.

CHAPTER I – The Highest Perfection

OF THE HIGHEST
PERFECTION WHICH MAN
CAN ATTAIN UNTO IN
THIS LIFE

I HAVE felt moved to write a few last thoughts describing, as far as one may in this waiting time of our exile and pilgrimage, the entire separation of the soul from all earthly things and its close, unfettered union with God. I have been the more urged to this, because Christian perfection has no other end but charity, which unites us to God.

This union of charity is essential for salvation, since it consists in the practice of the precepts and in conformity to the Divine will. Hence it separates us from what ever would war against the essence and habit of charity, such as mortal sin.

But religious, the more easily to attain to God, their last end, have gone beyond this, and have bound themselves by vow to evangelical perfection, to that which is voluntary and of counsel.² With the help of these vows they cut off all that might impede the fervor of their love or hinder them in their flight to God. They have, therefore, by the vow of their religious profession, renounced all things, whether pertaining to soul or body. God is in truth a Spirit, and "they that adore Him must adore Him in spirit and in truth", that is, with a knowledge and love, an intelligence and will purified from every phantom of earth.

Hence it is written: "When thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber " — i.e. into the inmost abode of thy heart — and, "having shut the door" of thy senses, with a pure heart, a free conscience and an unfeigned faith, "pray to thy Father" in spirit and in truth, in the "secret" of thy soul.

Then only will a man attain to this ideal, when he has despoiled and stripped himself of all else ; when, wholly recollected within himself, he has hidden from and forgotten the whole world, that he may abide in silence in the presence of Jesus Christ. There, in solitude of soul, with loving confidence he makes known his desires to God. With all the intensity of his love he pours forth his heart before Him, in sincerity and truth, until he loses himself in God. Then is his heart enlarged, inflamed, and melted in him, yea, even in its inmost depths.

CHAPTER II – The Search after God

HOW A MAN MAY DESPISE ALL THINGS AND CLEAVE TO CHRIST ALONE

WHOSOEVER thou art who longest to enter upon this happy state or seekest to direct thither thy steps, thus it behoveth thee to act.

First, close, as it were, thine eyes, and bar the doors of thy senses. Suffer not anything to entangle thy soul, nor permit any care or trouble to penetrate within it.

Shake off all earthly things, counting them useless, noxious, and hurtful to thee.

When thou hast done this, enter wholly within thyself, and fix thy gaze upon thy wounded Jesus, and upon Him alone. Strive with all thy powers, unwearyingly, to reach God through Himself, that is, through God made Man, that thou mayest attain to the knowledge of His Divinity through the wounds of His Sacred Humanity.

In all simplicity and confidence abandon thyself and whatever concerns thee without reserve to God's unfailing Providence, according to the teaching of St. Peter: "Casting all your care upon

Him,"¹ Who can do all things. And again it is written : "Be nothing solicitous "; "Cast thy care upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee"; "It is good for me to adhere to my God"; "I set the Lord always in my sight" ; "I found Him Whom my soul loveth"; and "Now all good things came to me" together with Him. This is the hidden and heavenly treasure, the precious pearl, which is to be preferred before all. This it is that we must seek with humble confidence and untiring effort, yet in silence and peace.

It must be sought with a brave heart, even though its price be the loss of bodily comfort, of esteem, and of honor.

Lacking this, what doth it profit a religious if he "gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?"⁶ Of what value are the religious state, the holiness of our profession, the shaven head, the outward signs of a life of abnegation, if we lack the spirit of humility and truth, in which Christ dwells by faith and love? St. Luke says : "The kingdom of God, "that is, Christ, "is within you."

CHAPTER III – Law of Man's Perfection

THE LAW OF MAN'S PERFECTION IN THIS LIFE

IN proportion as the mind is absorbed in the thought and care of the things of this world do we lose the fervor of our devotion, and drift away from the things of Heaven.

The greater, on the other hand, our diligence in withdrawing our powers from the memory, love and thought of that which is inferior in order to fix them upon that which is above, the more perfect will be our prayer, the purer our contemplation. The soul cannot give itself perfectly at the same time to two objects as contrary one to another as light to darkness ; for he who lives united to God dwells in the light, he who clings to this world lives in darkness.

The highest perfection, there fore, of man in this life lies in this: that he is so united to God that his soul with all its powers and faculties becomes recollected in Him and is one spirit with Him. Then it remembers naught save God, nor does it relish or understand anything but Him. Then all its affections, united in the delights of love, repose sweetly in the enjoyment of their Creator.

The image of God which is imprinted upon the soul is found in the three powers of the reason, memory, and will. But since these do not perfectly bear the Divine likeness, they have not the same resemblance to God as in the first days of man's creation.¹

God is the "form" of the soul upon which He must impress His own image, as the seal on the wax or the stamp on the object it marks.

This can only be fully accomplished when the reason is wholly illuminated according to its capacity, by the knowledge of God, the Sovereign Truth; the will entirely devoted to the love of the Supreme Good; the memory absorbed in the contemplation and enjoyment of eternal felicity, and in the sweet repose of so great a happiness.

As the perfect possession of this state constitutes the glory of the Blessed in Heaven, it is clear that in its commencement consists the perfection of this life.

CHAPTER IV – Our Labor

THAT OUR LABOR MUST
BE WITH THE UNDERSTANDING AND NOT WITH
THE SENSES

BLESSED is he who by continually cleansing his soul from the images and phantoms of earth draws its powers inward, and thence lifts them up to God.

At length he in a manner for gets all images, and by a simple and direct act of pure intellect and will contemplates God, Who is absolutely simple.

Cast from thee, therefore, all phantoms, images, and forms, and whatsoever is not God, that all thy intercourse with Him may proceed from an understanding, affection, and will, alike purified. This is, in truth, the end of all thy labors, that thou mayest draw nigh unto God and repose in Him within thy soul, solely by thy understanding and by a fervent love, free from entanglement or earthly image.

Not by his bodily organs or outward senses does a man attain to this, but by the intelligence and will, which constitute him man.¹ So long as he lingers, trifling with the objects of the imagination and senses, he has not yet passed beyond the limits and instincts of his animal nature, which he possesses in common with the brute beasts. They know and feel through images and by their senses, nor can it be otherwise, for they have no higher powers. Not so is it with man, who, by his intelligence, affections, and will, is created in the image and likeness of God. Hence it is by these powers that he ought, without intermediary, purely and directly to commune with God, be united to Him, and cleave to Him.

The Devil does his very utmost to hinder us from this exercise, for he beholds in it a beginning and a foretaste of eternal life, and he is envious of man. Therefore he strives, now by one temptation or passion, now by another, to turn away our thoughts from God.

At one time he assails us by arousing in us unnecessary anxiety, foolish cares or troubles, or by drawing us to irregular conversations and vain curiosity. At another he ensnares us by subtle books, by the words of others, by rumors and novelties. Then, again, he has recourse to trials, contradictions, etc.

Although these things may sometimes seem but very trifling faults, if faults at all, yet do they greatly hinder our progress in this holy exercise. Therefore, whether great or small, they must be resisted and driven from us as evil and harmful, though they may seem useful and even necessary. It is of great importance that what we have heard, or seen, or done, or said, should not leave their traces or fill our imagination.

Neither before nor after, nor at the time, should we foster these memories or allow their images to be formed. For when the mind is free from these thoughts, we are not hindered in our prayer, in meditation, or the psalmody, or in any other of our spiritual exercises, nor do these distractions return to trouble us.

Then shouldst thou readily and trustfully commit thyself and all that concerns thee to the unfailing and most sure Providence of God, in silence and peace. He Himself will fight for thee, and will

grant thee a liberty and consolation better, nobler, and sweeter than would be possible if thou gave thyself up day and night to thy fancies, to vain and wandering thoughts, which hold captive the mind, as they toss it hither and thither, wearying soul and body, and wasting uselessly alike thy time and strength.¹

Accept all things, whatsoever their cause, silently and with a tranquil mind, as coming to thee from the fatherly hand of Divine Providence.

Free thyself, therefore, from all the impressions of earthly things, in so far as thy state and profession require, so that with a purified mind and sincere affection thou mayest cleave to Him to Whom thou hast so often and so entirely vowed thyself.

Let nothing remain which could come between thy soul and God, that so thou mayest be able to pass surely and directly from the wounds of the Sacred Humanity to the brightness of the Divinity.

CHAPTER V – Purity of Heart

OF PURITY OF HEART,
WHICH IS TO BE SOUGHT
ABOVE ALL ELSE

WOULDST thou journey by the shortest road, the straight and safe way unto eternal bliss, unto thy true country, to grace and glory? Strive with all thy might to obtain habitual cleanliness of heart, purity of mind, quiet of the senses. Gather up thy affections, and with thy whole heart cleave unto God.

Withdraw as much as thou canst from thy acquaintance and from all men, and abstain from such affairs as would hinder thy purpose.

Seek out with jealous care the place, time, and means most suited to quiet and contemplation, and lovingly embrace silence and solitude.

Beware the dangers of which the times are full; fly the agitation of a world never at rest, never still.

Let thy chief study be to gain purity, freedom, and peace of heart. Close the doors of thy senses and dwell within, shutting thy heart as diligently as thou canst against the shapes and images of earthly things.

Of all the practices of the spiritual life purity of heart stands highest, and rightly, for it is the end and reward of all our labors, and is found only with those who live truly according to the spirit and as good religious.

Wherefore thou shouldst employ all thy diligence and skill in order to free thy heart, senses, and affections from whatever could trammel their liberty, or could fetter or ensnare thy soul. Strive earnestly to gather in the wandering affections of thy heart and fix them on the love of the sole and pure Truth, the Sovereign Good; then keep them, as it were, en chained within thee.

Fix thy gaze unwaveringly upon God and Divine things; spurn the follies of earth and seek to be wholly transformed in Jesus Christ, yea, even to the heart's core.

When thou hast begun to cleanse and purify thy soul of earthly images, and to unify and tranquilize thy heart and mind in God with loving confidence, to the end that thou mayest taste and enjoy in all thy powers the torrents of His good pleasure, and mayest fix thy will and intelligence in Him, then thou wilt no longer need to study and read the Holy Scriptures to learn the love of God and of thy neighbor, for the Holy Spirit Himself will teach thee.¹

Spare no pains, no labor, to purify thy heart and to establish it in unbroken peace.

Abide in God in the secret place of thy soul as tranquilly as though there had already risen upon thee the dawn of Eternity, the unending Day of God.

Strong in the love of Jesus, go forth from thyself, with a heart pure, a conscience at peace, a faith unfeigned ; and in every trial, every event, commit thyself unreservedly to God, having nothing so much at heart as perfect obedience to His will and good pleasure.

If thou wouldst arrive thus far, it is needful for thee often to enter within thy soul and to abide therein, disengaging thyself as much as thou canst from all things.

Keep the eye of thy soul ever in purity and peace; suffer not the form and images of this world to defile thy mind ; preserve thy will from every earthly care, and let every fiber of thy heart be rooted in the love of the Sovereign Good. Thus will thy whole soul, with all its powers, be recollected in God and form but one spirit with Him.

It is in this that the highest perfection possible to man here below consists.

This union of the spirit and of love, by which a man conforms himself in everything to the supreme and eternal will, enables us to become by grace what God is by His nature.¹

Let us not forget this truth : the moment a man, by the help of God, succeeds in overcoming his own will, that is, in freeing him self from every inordinate affection and care, to cast himself and all his miseries unreservedly into the bosom of God, that moment he becomes so pleasing to God that he receives the gift of grace. Grace brings charity, and charity drives out all fear and hesitation, and fills the soul with confidence and hope. What is more blessed than to cast all our care on Him Who cannot fail ? As long as thou leanest upon thyself thou wilt totter. Cast thyself fearlessly into the arms of God. He will embrace thee, He will heal and save thee.¹ If thou wouldst ponder often upon these truths they would bring to thee more happiness than all the riches, delights, honors, of this false world, and would make thee more blessed than all the wisdom and knowledge of this corruptible life, even though thou shouldst surpass all the wise men who have gone before thee.

CHAPTER IX – The Contemplation of God

THE CONTEMPLATION OF
GOD IS TO BE PREFERRED
ABOVE ALL OTHER
EXERCISES

WHATEVER exists outside of God is the work of His hands. Every creature is, therefore, a blending together of the actual and the possible, and as such is in its nature limited. Born of nothing, it is surrounded by nothingness, and tends to nothingness.

Of necessity the creature depends each moment upon God, the supreme Artist, for its existence, preservation, power of action, and all that it possesses.

It is utterly unable to accomplish its own work, either for itself or for another, and is impotent as a thing which is not before that which is, the finite before the infinite. It follows, therefore, that our life, thoughts, and works should be in Him, of Him, for Him, and directed to Him, Who by the least sign of His will could produce creatures unspeakably more perfect than any which now exist.

It is impossible that there should be in the mind or heart a thought or a love more profitable, more perfect or more blessed than those which rest upon God, the Almighty Creator, of Whom, in Whom, by Whom, towards Whom all tend.

He suffices infinitely for Him self and for others, since from all eternity He contains within Him self the perfections of all things. There is nothing within Him which is not Himself. In Him and by Him exist the causes of all transitory things; in Him are the immutable origins of all things that change, whether rational or irrational.

All that happens in time has in Him its eternal principle.

He fills all; He is in all things by His essence, by which He is more present and more near to them than they are to them selves.

In Him all things are united and live eternally. It is true that the weakness of our understanding or our want of experience may oblige us to make use of creatures in our contemplation, yet there is a kind of contemplation which is very fruitful, good, and real, which seems possible to all. Whether he meditates on the creature or the Creator, every man may reach the point at which he finds all his joy in His Creator, God, One in Trinity, and kindles the fire of Divine love in himself or in others, so as to merit eternal life.

We should notice here the difference which exists between the contemplation of Christians and that of pagan philosophers. The latter sought only their own perfection, and hence their contemplation affected their intellect only; they desired only to enrich their minds with knowledge. But the contemplation of Saints, which is that of Christians, seeks as its end the love of the God Whom they contemplate. Hence it is not content to find fruit for the intelligence, but penetrates beyond to the will that it may there enkindle love.

The Saints desired above all in their contemplation the increase of charity.

It is better to know Jesus Christ and possess Him spiritually by grace, than, without grace, to have Him in the body, or even in His essence.

The more pure a soul becomes and the deeper her recollection, the clearer will be her inward vision. She now prepares, as it were, a ladder upon which she may ascend to the contemplation of God.

This contemplation will set her on fire with love for all that is heavenly, Divine, eternal, and will cause her to despise as utter nothing all that is of time.

When we seek to arrive at the knowledge of God by the method of negation, we first remove from our conception of Him all that pertains to the body, the senses, the imagination. Then we reject even that which belongs to the reason, and the idea of being as it is found in creatures.¹ This, according to St. Denis, is the best means of attaining to the knowledge of God,² as far as it is possible in this world.

This is the darkness in which God dwells and into which Moses entered that he might reach the light inaccessible.

But we must begin, not with the mind, but with the body. We must observe the accustomed order, and pass from the labor of action to the repose of contemplation, from the moral virtues to those of sublime contemplation.

Why, O my soul, dost thou vainly wear thyself out in such multiplicity of things? Thou findest in them but poverty.

Seek and love only that perfect good which includes in itself all good, and it will suffice thee. Unhappy art thou if thou knowest and possessest all, and art ignorant of this. If thou knewest at the same time both this good and all other things, this alone would render thee the happier. Therefore St. John has written: "This is eternal life : that they may know thee," and the Prophet : "I shall be satisfied when thy glory shall appear."

CHAPTER X - Devotion

THAT WE SHOULD NOT BE
TOO SOLICITOUS FOR ACTUAL AND SENSIBLE
DEVOTION, BUT DESIRE
RATHER THE UNION OF
OUR WILL WITH GOD

SEEK not too eagerly after the grace of devotion, sensible sweetness and tears, but let thy chief care be to remain inwardly united to God by good will in the intellectual part of the soul.

Of a truth nothing is so pleasing to God as a soul freed from all trace and image of created things. A true religious should be at liberty from every creature that he may be wholly free to devote himself to God alone and cleave to Him. Deny thyself, therefore, that thou mayest follow Christ, thy Lord and God, Who was truly poor, obedient, chaste, humble, and suffering, and Whose life and death were a scandal to many, as the Gospel clearly shows.

The soul, when separated from the body, troubles not as to what becomes of the shell it has abandoned — it may be burnt, hanged, spoken evil of; and the soul is not afflicted by these outrages, but thinks only of eternity and of the one thing necessary, of which the Lord speaks in the Gospel.¹

So shouldst thou regard thy body, as though the soul were already freed from it. Set ever before thine eyes the eternal life in God, which awaits thee, and think on that only good of which the Lord said : "One thing is necessary." A great grace will then descend upon thy soul, which will aid thee in acquiring purity of mind and simplicity of heart.

And, indeed, this treasure is close at thy doors. Turn from the images and distractions of earth, and quickly shalt thou find it with thee and learn what it is to be united to God without hindrance or impediment.

Then wilt thou gain an unshaken constancy, which will strengthen thee to endure all that may befall thee.

Thus was it with the martyrs, the Fathers, the elect, and all the blessed. They despised all and thought only of possessing in God eternal security for their souls.

Thus armed within and united to God by a good will, they despised all that is of this world, as though their soul had already departed from the body.

Learn from them how great is the power of a good will united to God.

By that union of the soul with God it becomes, as it were, cut off from the flesh by a spiritual separation, and regards the outward man from afar as something alien to it.

Then, whatever may happen inwardly or in the body will be as little regarded as though it had befallen another person or a creature without reason.

He who is united to God is but one mind with Him.

Out of regard, therefore, for His sovereign honor, never be so bold as to think or imagine in His presence what thou wouldst blush to hear or see before men.

Thou ought, moreover, to raise all thy thoughts to God alone, and set Him before thine inward gaze, as though He alone existed. So wilt thou experience the sweetness of Divine union and even now make a true beginning of the life to come.

CHAPTER XI - Temptation

IN WHAT MANNER WE
SHOULD RESIST
TEMPTATION AND ENDURE
TRIALS

HE who with his whole heart draws nigh unto God must of necessity be proved by temptation and trial.

When the sting of temptation is felt, by no means give thy consent, but bear all with patience, sweetness, humility, and courage.

If thou art tempted to blasphemy or any shameful sin, be well assured thou canst do nothing better than to utterly despise and condemn such thoughts. Blasphemy is indeed sinful, scandalous, and abominable, yet be not anxious about such temptations, but rather despise them, and do not let thy conscience be troubled by them. The enemy will most certainly be put to flight if thou wilt thus condemn both him and his suggestions. He is too proud to endure scorn or contempt. The best remedy is, therefore, to trouble no more about these thoughts than we do about the flies which, against our will, dance before our eyes. Let not the servant of Christ thus easily and needlessly lose sight of his Master's presence, nor let him grow impatient, murmur, or complain of these flies; I mean these light temptations, suspicions, sadness, depression, pusillanimity — mere nothings which a good will can put to flight by an elevation of the soul to God.

By a good will man makes God his Master, and the holy Angels his guardians and protectors.

Good will drives away temptation as the hand brushes away a fly.

"Peace," therefore, "to men of good will."

In truth no better gift than this can be offered to God.

Good will in the soul is the source of all good, the mother of all virtues. He who possesses it, possesses without fear of loss all he needs to live a good life.

If thou desire what is good and art not able to accomplish it, God will reward thee for it as though thou hadst performed it.

He has established as an eternal and unchangeable law that merit should lie in the will, and that upon the will should depend our future of Heaven or hell, reward or punishment.

Charity itself consists in nothing else but a strong will to serve God, a loving desire to please Him, and a fervent longing to enjoy Him.

Forget not, therefore, temptation is not sin, but rather the means of proving virtue. By it man may gain great profit,³ and this the more inasmuch as "the life of man upon earth is a warfare."

CHAPTER XII – The Love of God

THE POWER OF THE LOVE OF GOD

ALL that we have hitherto described, all that is necessary for salvation, can find in love alone its highest, completest, most beneficent perfection.

Love supplies all that is wanting for our salvation ; it contains abundantly every good thing, and lacks not even the presence of the supreme object of our desires.

It is by love alone that we turn to God, are transformed into His likeness, and are united to Him, so that we become one spirit with Him, and receive by and from Him all our happiness : here in grace,

hereafter in glory. Love can find no rest till she reposes in the full and perfect possession of the Beloved.

It is by the path of love, which is charity, that God draws nigh to man, and man to God, but where charity is not found God cannot dwell. If, then, we possess charity we possess God, for "God is charity."

There is nothing keener than love, nothing more subtle, nothing more penetrating. Love cannot rest till it has sounded all the depths and learned the perfections of its Beloved. It desires to be one with Him, and, if it could, would form but one being with the Beloved. It is for this reason that it cannot suffer anything to intervene between it and the object loved, which is God, but springs forward towards Him, and finds no peace till it has overcome every obstacle, and reached even unto the Beloved.

Love has the power of uniting and transforming; it transforms the one who loves into him who is loved, and him who is loved into him who loves. Each passes into the other, as far as it is possible.

And first consider the intelligence. How completely love transports the loved one into him who loves ! With what sweetness and delight the one lives in the memory of the other, and how earnestly the lover tries to know, not superficially but intimately, all that concerns the object of his love, and strives to enter as far as possible into his inner life !

Think next of the will, by which also the loved one lives in him who loves. Does he not dwell in him by that tender affection, that sweet and deeply-rooted joy which he feels ? On the other hand, the lover lives in the beloved by the sympathy of his desires, by sharing his likes and dislikes, his joys and sorrows, until the two seem to form but one. Since "love is strong as death,"¹ it carries the lover out of himself into the heart of the beloved, and holds him prisoner there.

The soul is more truly where it loves than where it gives life, since it exists in the object loved by its own nature, by reason and will ; whilst it is in the body it animates only by bestowing on it an existence which it shares with the animal creation.

There is, therefore, but one thing which has power to draw us from outward objects into the depths of our own souls, there to form an intimate friendship with Jesus. Nothing but the love of Christ and the desire of His sweetness can lead us thus to feel, to comprehend and experience the presence of His Divinity.

The power of love alone is able to lift up the soul from earth to the heights of Heaven, nor is it possible to ascend to eternal beatitude except on the wings of love and desire.

Love is the life of the soul, its nuptial garment, its perfection.

Upon charity are based the law, the prophets, and the precepts of the Lord. Hence the Apostle wrote to the Romans: "Love is therefore the fulfilling of the law," and in the first Epistle to Timothy: "The end of the commandment is charity."

CHAPTER XIII – True Prayer

OF THE NATURE
AND ADVANTAGES OF
PRAYER— OF INTERIOR
RECOLLECTION

OF ourselves we are utterly unable to attain to charity or any other good thing. We have naught to offer to the Lord, the Author of all, which was not His already.

One thing alone remains to us : that in every occurrence we should turn to Him in prayer, as He Himself taught us by word and example. Let us go to Him as guilty, poor, and miserable, as beggars, weak and needy, as subjects and slaves, yet as His children.

Of ourselves we are utterly destitute. What can we do but cast ourselves at His feet in deepest humility, holy fear mingling in our souls with love, peace, and recollection ?

And while we are fain to draw nigh with all lowliness and modesty, with minds sincere and simple, let our hearts burn with great desires, with ardor and heartfelt longings. And so let us supplicate our God, and lay before Him with entire confidence the perils which menace us on every side. Let us freely, unhesitatingly, and in all simplicity, confide ourselves to Him, and offer Him our whole being, even to the last fiber, for are we not in truth absolutely His ?

Let us keep nothing for our selves, and then will be fulfilled in us the saying of Blessed Isaac, one of the Fathers of the Desert, who, speaking of this kind of prayer, said : "We shall be one being with God, and He will be all in all to us, when that perfect charity by which He loved us first has entered into our inmost hearts."

This will be accomplished when God alone becomes the object of all our love, our desires, our striving, of all our efforts and thoughts, of all that we hold, speak of, hope for ; when that union which exists between the Father and the Son, and between the Son and the Father shall be found also in our mind and soul.

Since His love for us is so pure, sincere, and unchanging, ought not we in return to give Him a love constant and uninterrupted?

So intimate should be our union with Him that our hopes, thoughts, prayers breathe only God. The truly spiritual man should set before him, as the goal of all his efforts and desires, the possession even in a mortal body, of an image of the happiness to come, and the enjoyment even here below of some foretaste of the delights, the life, and glory of Heaven.

This, I say, is the end of all perfection — that the soul may become so purified from every earthly longing, and so raised to spiritual things, that at last the whole life and the desires of the heart form one unbroken prayer.

When the soul has thus shaken off the dust of earth and aspires unto her God, to Whom the true religious ever directs his intention, dreading the least separation from Him as a most cruel death ; when peace reigns within and she is delivered from the bondage of her passions and cleaves with firmest purpose to the one Sovereign Good, then will be fulfilled in her the words of the Apostle: " Pray with out ceasing," and "in everyplace, lifting up pure hands, without anger and contention."

When once this purity of soul has gained the victory over man's natural inclination for the things of sense, when all earthly longings are quenched and the soul is, as it were, transformed into the likeness of pure spirits or Angels, then all she receives, all she undertakes, all she does, will be a pure and true prayer.

Only persevere faithfully in thy efforts and, as I have shown from the beginning, it will become as simple and easy for thee to contemplate God and rejoice in Him in thy recollection as to live a purely natural life.

CHAPTER XIV – Testimony of Conscience

THAT EVERYTHING SHOULD
BE JUDGED ACCORDING
TO THE TESTIMONY OF
OUR CONSCIENCE

THERE is also another practice which will tend greatly to thy progress in spiritual perfection, and will aid thee to gain purity of soul and tranquil rest in God. Whatever men say or think of thee, bring it before the tribunal of thine own conscience. Enter within thyself, and there, turning a deaf ear to all else, set thyself to learn the truth. Then wilt thou see clearly that the praise and honor of men bring thee no profit, but rather loss, if thou know that thou art guilty and worthy of condemnation in the sight of truth. And, just as it is useless to be honored outwardly by men if thy conscience accuse thee within, so in like manner is it no loss to thee if men despise, blame, or persecute thee without, if within thou art innocent and free from reproach or blame. Nay, rather, thou hast then great reason to rejoice in the Lord in patience, silence, and peace.

Adversity is powerless to harm where sin has no dominion; and just as there is no evil which goes unpunished, so is there no good without recompense.

Seek not with the hypocrites thy reward and crown from men, but rather from the hand of God, not now, but hereafter; not for a passing moment, but for eternity.

Thou canst, therefore, do nothing higher nor better in every tribulation or occurrence than enter into the sanctuary of thy soul, and there call upon the Lord Jesus Christ, thy helper in temptation and affliction. There shouldst thou humble thyself, confessing thy sins, and praising thy God and Father, Who both chastises and consoles.

There dispose thyself to accept with unruffled peace, readiness, and confidence from the hands of God's unfailing Providence and marvelous wisdom all that is sent thee of prosperity or adversity, whether touching thyself or others. Then wilt thou obtain remission of thy sins; bitterness will be driven from thy soul, sweetness and confidence will penetrate it, grace and mercy will descend upon it. Then a sweet familiarity will draw thee on and strengthen thee, abundant consolation will flow to thee from the bosom of God. Then thou wilt adhere to Him and form an indissoluble union with Him.

But beware of imitating hypocrites who, like the Pharisees, try to appear outwardly before men more holy than they know them selves in truth to be. Is it not utter folly to seek or desire human praise and glory for oneself or others, while within we are filled with shameful and grievous sins ?

Assuredly he who pursues such vanities can hope for no share in the good things of which we spoke just now, but shame will infallibly be his lot.

Keep thy worthlessness and thy sins ever before thine eyes, and learn to know thyself that thou mayest grow in humility.

Shrink not from being regarded by all the world as filthy mud, vile and abject, on account of thy grievous sins and defects. Esteem thyself among others as dross in the midst of gold, as tares in the wheat, straw among the grain, as a wolf among the sheep, as Satan among the children of God.

Neither shouldst thou desire to be respected by others, or preferred to anyone whatsoever. Fly rather with all thy strength of heart and soul from that pestilential poison, the venom of praise, from a reputation founded on boasting and ostentation, lest, as the Prophet says, "The sinner is praised in the desires of his soul."¹

Again, in Isaias, we read : "They that call thee blessed, the same deceive thee, and destroy the way of thy steps."¹ Also the Lord says: "Woe to you when men shall bless you!"

CHAPTER XV – The Contempt of Self

ON THE CONTEMPT OF SELF
HOW IT IS ACQUIRED
ITS PROFIT TO THE SOUL

THE more truly a man knows his own misery, the more fully and clearly does he behold the majesty of God. The more vile he is in his own eyes for the sake of God, of truth, and of justice, the more worthy of esteem is he in the eyes of God.

Strive earnestly, therefore, to look on thyself as utterly contemptible, to think thyself unworthy of any benefit, to be displeasing in thine own eyes, but pleasing to God. Desire that others should regard thee as vile and mean.

Learn not to be troubled in tribulations, afflictions, injuries; not to be incensed against those that inflict them, nor to entertain thoughts of resentment against them. Try, on the contrary, sincerely to believe thyself worthy of all injuries, contempt, ill-treatment and scorn.

In truth, he who for God's sake is filled with sorrow and compunction dreads to be honored and loved by another. He does not refuse to be an object of hatred, or shrink from being trodden under foot and despised as long as he lives, in order that he may practice real humility and cleave in purity of heart to God alone.

It does not require exterior labor or bodily health to love God only, to hate oneself more than all, to desire to seem little in the eyes of others : what is needed is rather repose of the senses, the effort of the heart, silence of the mind.

It is by laboring with the heart, by the inward aspiration of the soul, that thou wilt learn to forsake the base things of earth and to rise to what is heavenly and Divine.

Thus wilt thou become transformed in God, and this the more speedily if, in all sincerity, without condemning or despising thy neighbor, thou desire to be regarded by all as a reproach and scandal — nay, even to be abhorred as filthy mire, rather than possess the delights of earth, or be honored and exalted by men, or enjoy any advantage or happiness in this fleeting world.

Have no other desire in this perishable life of the body, no other consolation than unceasingly to weep over, regret and detest thy offenses and faults.

Learn utterly to despise thyself, to annihilate thyself and to appear daily more contemptible in the eyes of others.

Strive to become even more unworthy in thine own eyes, in order to please God alone, to love Him only and cling to Him.

Concern not thyself with any thing except thy Lord Jesus Christ, Who ought to reign alone in thy affections. Have no solicitude or care save for Him Whose power and Providence give movement and being to all things.

It is not now the time to rejoice but rather to lament with all the sincerity of thy heart.

If thou canst not weep, sorrow at least that thou hast no tears to shed ; if thou canst, grieve the more because by the gravity of thy offenses and number of thy sins thou art thyself the cause of thy grief. A man under sentence of death does not trouble himself as to the dispositions of his executioners ; so he who truly mourns and sheds the tears of repentance, refrains from delight, anger, vain-glory, indignation, and every like passion.

Citizens and criminals are not lodged in like abodes; so also the life and conduct of those whose faults call for sighs and tears should not resemble those of men who have remained innocent and have nothing to expiate.

Were it otherwise, how would the guilty, great though their crimes may have been, differ in their punishment and expiation from the innocent? Iniquity would then be more free than innocence. Renounce all, therefore, condemn all, separate thyself from all, that thou mayest lay deep the foundations of sincere penance.

He who truly loves Jesus Christ, and sorrows for Him, who bears Him in his heart and in his body, will have no thought, or care, or solicitude for aught else. Such a one will sincerely mourn over his sins and offenses, will long after eternal happiness, will remember the Judgment and will think diligently on his last end in lowly fear. He, then, who wishes to arrive speedily at a blessed impassibility and to reach God, counts that day lost on which he has not been ill-spoken of and despised.

What is this impassibility but freedom from the vices and passions, purity of heart, the adornment of virtue?

Count thyself as already dead, since thou must needs die some day.

And now, but one word more. Let this be the test of thy thoughts, words, and deeds. If they render thee more humble, more recollected in God, more strong, then they are according to God. But if

thou find it otherwise, then fear lest all is not according to God, acceptable to Him, or profitable to thyself.

CHAPTER XVI – The Providence of God

OF THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD, WHICH WATCHES OVER ALL THINGS

WOULDST thou draw nigh unto God without let or hindrance, freely and in peace, as we have described? Desire thou to be united and drawn to Him in a union so close that it will endure in prosperity and adversity, in life and in death? Delay not to commit all things with trustful confidence into the hands of His sure and infallible Providence.

Is it not most fitting that thou shouldst trust Him Who gives to all creatures, in the first place, their existence, power, and movement, and, secondly, their species and nature, ordering in all their number, weight, and measure?

Just as Art presupposes the operations of Nature, so Nature presupposes the work of God, the Creator, Preserver, Organizer, and Administrator.

To Him alone belong infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, essential mercy, justice, truth, and charity, immutable eternity, and immensity. Nothing can exist and act of its own power, but every creature acts of necessity by the power of God, the first moving cause, the first principle and origin of every action, Who acts in every active being.

If we consider the ordered harmony of the universe, it is the Providence of God which must arrange all things, even to the smallest details.

From the infinitely great to the infinitely small nothing can escape His eternal Providence; nothing has been drawn from His control, either in the acts of free-will, in events we ascribe to chance or fate, or in what has been designed by Him. We may go further: it is as impossible for God to make anything which does not fall within the dominion of His Providence as it is for Him to create anything which is not subject to His action. Divine Providence, therefore, extends over all things, even the thoughts of man.

This is the teaching of Holy Scripture, for in the Epistle of St. Peter it is written: "Casting all your care upon Him, for He hath care of you."

And, again, the Prophet says: "Cast thy care upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee." Also in Ecclesiasticus we read: "My children, behold the generations of men; and know ye that no one hath hoped in the Lord, and hath been confounded. For who hath continued in His commandment, and hath been forsaken?" And the Lord says: "Be not solicitous, therefore, saying, What shall we eat?" All that thou canst hope for from God, however great it may be, thou shalt without doubt receive, according to the promise in Deuteronomy: "Every place that your foot shall tread upon shall be yours." As much as thou canst desire thou shalt receive, and as far as the foot of thy confidence reaches, so far thou shalt possess.

Hence St. Bernard says : "God, the Creator of all things, is so full of mercy and compassion that whatever may be the grace for which we stretch out our hands, we shall not fail to receive it."

It is written in St. Mark : "Whatsoever ye shall ask when ye pray, believe that you shall receive, and they shall come unto you."

The greater and more persistent thy confidence in God, and the more earnestly thou turn to Him in lowly reverence, the more abundantly and certainly shalt thou receive all thou dost hope and ask.

But if, on account of the number and magnitude of his sins, the confidence of any should languish, let him who feels this torpor remember that all is possible to God, that what He wills must infallibly happen, and what He wills not cannot come to pass, and, finally, that it is as easy for Him to forgive and blot out innumerable and heinous sins as to forgive one.

On the other hand, it is just as impossible for a sinner to deliver himself from a single sin as it would be for him to raise and cleanse himself from many sins; for, not only are we unable to accomplish this, but of ourselves we cannot even think what is right. All comes to us from God. It is, however, far more dangerous, other things being equal, to be entangled in many sins than to be held only by one.

In truth, no evil remains unpunished, and for every mortal sin is due, in strict justice, an infinite punishment, because a mortal sin is committed against God, to Whom belong infinite greatness, dignity, and glory.

Moreover, according to the Apostle, "the Lord knows who are His," and it is impossible that one of them should perish, no matter how violently the tempests and waves of error rage, how great the scandal, schisms and persecutions, how grievous the adversities, discords, heresies, tribulations, or temptations of every kind.

The number of the elect and the measure of their merit is eternally and unalterably predestined. So true is this that all the good and evil which can happen to them or to others, all prosperity and adversity, serve only to their advantage.

Nay more, adversity does but render them more glorious, and proves their fidelity more surely. Delay not, therefore, to commit all things without fear to the Providence of God, by Whose permission all evil of whatever kind happens, and ever for some good end. It could not be except He permitted it ; its form and measure are allowed by Him Who can and will by His wisdom turn all to good.

Just as it is by His action that all good is wrought, so is it by His permission that all evil happens.

But from the evil He draws good, and thus marvelously shows forth His power, wisdom, and clemency by our Lord Jesus Christ. So also He manifests His mercy and His justice, the power of grace, the weakness of nature, and the beauty of the universe. So He shows by the force of contrast the glory of the good, and the malice and punishment of the wicked.

In like manner, in the conversion of a sinner we behold contrition, confession, and penance; and, on the other hand, the tenderness of God, His mercy and charity, His glory and His goodness.

Yet sin does not always turn to the good of those who commit it; but it is usually the greatest of perils and worst of ills, for it causes the loss of grace and glory. It stains the soul and provokes chastisement and even eternal punishment. From so great an evil may our Lord Jesus vouchsafe to preserve us! Amen