

## **Duty of Tending to Perfection**

*The Spiritual Life:*

*A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*

Adolphe Tanquerey, S.S., D.D.

§. 352–366

### **Chapter IV**

#### **The Duty of Tending to Perfection**

352. Having already explained the *nature* of the Christian life and its *perfection*, we are now to examine whether there is for us a real *obligation* to advance in it or whether it suffices to keep it as we keep a treasure. To answer with greater exactness we shall examine this question with regard to three categories of persons: 1 the laity; 2 the religious; 3 the priests.

#### **Art. I. the Duty Incumbent upon All Christians In General to Tend Toward Perfection**

We shall explain: 1 The obligation itself. 2 The motives that make this duty more easy to perform.

##### **I. The Obligation Itself**

353. In a matter so delicate as the one now under consideration, we cannot be too precise. It is certain that one must die in the state of grace in order to be saved, and that this suffices. It would appear then that for the *faithful* in the world there is no other obligation than that of preserving the state of grace. However, the question is precisely whether they can preserve the state of grace for a long time without striving to grow in holiness. To this, *authority* and *reason* enlightened by *faith* answer that, in the state of fallen nature, one cannot for long remain in the state of grace without *striving* at the same time to make progress in the spiritual life and to exercise oneself from *time to time* in the practice of some of the evangelical counsels. It is only in this restricted sense that we maintain the obligation of perfection for ordinary Christians.

##### *I. The Argument from Authority*

354. 1 *Holy Writ* does not deal with this question *directly*. It does indeed furnish us with the distinction between precept and counsel (cf. n. 335), but it does not as a rule tell us which of the exhortations of Our Lord are obligatory and which are not. However, Holy Scripture lays so much stress upon the holiness that becomes a Christian, it proposes such an ideal of perfection, it proclaims so emphatically to all Christians the necessity of renouncement and of love — the essentials of perfection — that any impartial mind will draw the conclusion that in order to save our souls, we must, at least at times, do more than is strictly commanded and, therefore, strive after holiness.

355. A) It is evident that one who would merely aim at avoiding mortal sin would not be living according to the standard of moral conduct outlined in the Gospel. Our Lord proposes to us as the *ideal* of holiness the very perfection of Our Heavenly Father: “*Be ye therefore perfect as also your heavenly Father is perfect.*”<sup>1</sup> Hence, *all* having *God for their Father* must approach

this divine perfection — which evidently cannot be accomplished without progress. Fundamentally, the whole Sermon on the Mount is nothing but a commentary on and the development of this ideal. The path to follow is the path of renunciation, the path of imitation of Christ and of the love of God: *“If any man come to me, and hate not”* (that is to say does not renounce) *“his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”*<sup>2</sup> We are bound, then, on certain occasions to choose God and His will rather than the love of parents, of wife, of children, of self, and to sacrifice all to follow Christ. This suppose *heroic* courage, which will be found wanting in the time of need, unless God in His mercy give a special grace and unless one be prepared by sacrifices that are not of strict obligation. True, this a straight and narrow path and few there are that follow it, but Jesus Christ wills that we make *earnest efforts* to walk this path: *“Strive to enter by the narrow gate.”*<sup>3</sup> Does He not thereby ask us to strive after perfection?

356. B) The apostles speak the same language. St. Paul often reminds the faithful that they have been elected to be saints: *“That we should be holy and unspotted in His sight in charity.”*<sup>1</sup> This cannot be accomplished without putting off the Old Adam and putting on the New, that is to say, without mortifying the tendencies of fallen nature and striving to reproduce the virtues of Christ. But St. Paul adds that this cannot be done without endeavoring to reach *“unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.”*<sup>2</sup> This means that being made into one body with Christ, we are His complement and that it is we who are to effect His completeness and the fulness of His growth by our own progress in the reproduction of His virtues. St. Peter likewise wants all his disciples to be saints, like Him Who has called them unto salvation: *“According to Him that hath called you, Who is holy, be you also in all manner of conversation holy.”*<sup>3</sup> Could they be so, should they make no progress in the exercise of Christian virtues? St. John in the last chapter of the Apocalypse asks the just to cease not in the working of justice and invites the holy to become holier still: *“He that is just, let him be justified still; and he that is holy, let him be sanctified still.”*<sup>4</sup>

357. C) The same doctrine follows from the nature of the Christian life. This life Our Lord and His disciples describe as a warfare, wherein watchfulness and prayer, mortification and positive exercise of the virtues are the necessary conditions for victory: *“Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation.”*<sup>5</sup> Having to struggle not only against flesh and blood, that is, the threefold concupiscence, but also against the evil spirits that excite our passions, we stand in need of arming ourselves spiritually and fighting fearlessly. But in a protracted struggle, if one remains always on the defensive, defeat is almost inevitable. Recourse, therefore, must be had to counter-attacks, to the positive practice of the virtues, watchfulness, mortification, and the spirit of faith and of trust. This is, in fact, the conclusion drawn by St. Paul after a description of the fight we are to sustain. He declares that we must be armed from head to foot after the fashion of the Roman soldier: *“Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth and having on the breast-plate of justice: and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. In: all things taking the shield of faith....and take unto you the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit...”*<sup>1</sup> In this way St. Paul shows us that we must do more than is strictly commanded in order to triumph over our enemies.

358. <sup>2</sup> This doctrine is confirmed by *Tradition*. When the Fathers wish to insist upon the necessity of perfection for all, they assert that we cannot remain stationary on the way that leads to God and to salvation, that we must advance or fall back: *“In the way to God, not to advance is to retreat.”* Thus St. Augustine, noting that action is characteristic of charity, remarks that we must not halt on the way, precisely because to halt is to recede: *“He turns back who reverts whence he had once departed.”*<sup>2</sup> This principle is so evident that even Pelagius,

his antagonist, admitted it. St. Bernard, the last of the Fathers, explains this doctrine in a most telling way: "Dost thou wish to advance? No. Then dost thou wish to turn back? By no means. What, then, wishest thou? I wish to live in such away as to remain where I have arrived....This is impossible, for nothing in this world does remain in the same condition."<sup>3</sup> In another place he adds that: "Of necessity one must rise or else fall: if one tries to stop, one falls of a certainty."<sup>4</sup> No wonder then that Our Holy Father, Pius XI, in his Encyclical of January 26, 1923, on St. Francis de Sales, clearly states that all Christians without exception must tend toward sanctity.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Argument from Reason

The fundamental reason that obliges us to tend to perfection is the one given by the Fathers.

359. 1 Life is movement, hence it is essentially progressive; no sooner does it cease to grow than it begins to decline. The reason for this is that there are in all living beings disintegrating forces which, if not counteracted, end by causing disease and death. The same holds true of our spiritual life. Side by side with those tendencies that incline us toward good, there are other forces that incline us strongly toward evil. The one effective means of combating them is to strengthen within us the living forces of the love of God and the Christian virtues. Then the evil forces abate. If we stop trying to advance, our vices reawaken, gather strength, and assail us with added vigor and frequency; and unless we awake from our torpor, the moment will come when from surrender' to surrender we fall into mortal sin.<sup>1</sup> Such is, alas ! the story of many a soul, and the experience of spiritual directors is witness to it.

A comparison will make us understand this. To work out our salvation we have to go counter to the current, more or less violent, of our own disordered passions bearing us on toward evil. So long as we make the effort to go against the current, we advance or at least we hold our own. The moment we stop we are carried along and driven seaward, there to meet the ocean storms, that is, grave temptations and perhaps lamentable falls.

360. 2 There are grave precepts that cannot at certain times be observed except by heroic acts. If we take into account psychological laws, we are not ordinarily capable of heroic acts, unless we have prepared for them in advance by sacrifice or, in other words, by the practice of mortification. A few examples will render this truth more concrete. Let us take, for instance, the precept of *chastity* and see the generous, at times heroic efforts required to keep it throughout life. Up to marriage (and many young men do not marry before their twenty-fifth or thirtieth year), this precept exacts *absolute continence* under the pain of mortal sin. Now, serious temptations make themselves felt in almost all of us at the age of puberty, at times even before. To resist, them successfully, we must pray; we must avoid dangerous associations, readings, and shows; we must reproach ourselves with the slightest failings and profit by them in order to rise without delay and with added generosity, all this throughout a considerable part of life. Does not all this presuppose more than ordinary effort? Does it not demand at least some works of supererogation? Nor does marriage protect us against all grave temptations. There' are periods when conjugal continence is imperative. To practice it, a heroic courage is required, a courage acquired only by habitual mortification of sensual pleasure and the unwearied practice of prayer.

361. Again, let us consider the laws of *justice* in financial, commercial and industrial transactions. Do we not at once think of the thousand and one ways there are of violating

justice, of the difficulties of dealing with perfect honesty in an atmosphere where competition and greed cause prices to rise beyond just limits? We shall soon see that in order to remain simply honest, extraordinary efforts and self-denial are required. Will a man be ready for such efforts if he has been accustomed to observe only the precepts that bind under pain of mortal sin? In order to shun this danger one must do at least a little more that is strictly commanded, so that the will, schooled by acts of generosity, may have the strength to resist temptations to commit acts of grave injustice.

On all sides this moral law is verified — in order not to fall into sin, we must stave off the danger by the performance of generous acts which are not directly prescribed by law. To strike the target we must aim above it; not to lose grace, we must fortify our will against temptation by works of supererogation; in other words, we must aim at some measure 'of perfection.

## II. Motives that Make This Duty Easier

The numerous motives that may draw the faithful on to perfection can be reduced to three principal ones: 1 the welfare of our soul, 2 the glory of God, 3 the edification of one's neighbor.

362. 1 *The welfare of our soul* means security of salvation, increase of merit, and joy of a good conscience.

A) The great work we are to accomplish here on earth, truly the one thing necessary, is *the salvation of our soul*. If we save our soul, even should we lose all the goods of earth: parents, friends, good name, wealth, all is saved; we shall find again in Heaven all we have lost, increased one hundredfold and that for all eternity. The most effective means, however, of securing our salvation is to aim at perfection, each one according to his state of life. The higher we aim, with due discretion and with constancy, the greater is the distance we put between ourselves and mortal sin, which alone can prevent our salvation. It is evident that when one sincerely strives to grow in perfection one thereby removes the occasions of sin, strengthens the will against surprises, so that when the moment of temptation arrives, the will, disciplined by effort toward perfection, accustomed to pray in order to obtain the grace of God, repels with horror the very thought of grave sin: "*Rather die than be defiled.*" On the other hand, those who allow themselves whatever falls short of grave sin, run the risk of falling the moment a prolonged and violent temptation presents itself; for, accustomed to yielding to pleasure in lesser things, there is reason to fear that carried away by passion they will end by falling, just as the man who constantly walks on the edge of the abyss finally falls into it. In order, then, to make sure that we shall not offend God grievously, the best means is to keep at a safe distance from evil by doing more than is strictly commanded and by striving to advance toward perfection; for the more we strive, with due prudence and humility, the surer we are of our eternal salvation.

363. B) In this way we likewise increase daily *habitual grace* and acquire a title to a higher degree of glory in heaven. We have seen that every supernatural act alone for God by a soul in the state of grace results in an increase of merit. Whoever is unmindful of perfection and is more or less remiss in the performance of his duty, acquires but little merit, as we have said above, n. 243. On the contrary, he who tends to perfection and strives to make progress, secures merit in large measure; he augments daily his store of grace and glory; each of his efforts is rewarded by additional grace here on earth and of happiness in heaven: "*An eternal weight of glory.*"<sup>1</sup>

364. C) If we desire to have *true happiness* on earth, there is no better way than to cultivate piety (godliness) which, as St. Paul says, “*is profitable to all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.*”<sup>2</sup> Peace of soul, the joy of a good conscience, the happiness of union with God, of growing in His love, of effecting a closer intimacy with Christ, such are a few of the rewards which, along with the comforting hope of life eternal, God dispenses even now to His faithful servants in the midst of their trials.

365. 2 *The Glory of God.* There is nothing more noble than to procure the glory of God, nothing more just when we recall all that God has done and ever does for us. Now, a perfect man gives more glory to God than a thousand ordinary souls. For he multiplies day by day his acts of love, of gratitude, of reparation; he directs toward God his whole life by the oft-renewed offering of ordinary actions, thus giving glory to Him from morning until night.

366. 3 *The Edification of our Neighbor.* There is no better way to do good to others, to bring to God sinners or unbelievers and to strengthen the wavering, than the earnest effort to live a thoroughly Christian life. Just as a common-place life on the part of Christians invites the critical and the unbelieving to scoff at Christianity; so true sanctity calls forth their admiration for a religion that produces such effects: “*By their fruits you shall know them.*”<sup>1</sup> The best *apologetics* are those of example coupled with the fulfilment of all our social duties. This is likewise the best stimulus to careless Christians who would remain in their, spiritual indolence if the earnest efforts of fervent souls did not stir them up.

This motive appeals today to many a soul. This is an age of proselytism, and lay people realize better than ever the necessity of defending and spreading the faith by word and example. It devolves upon priests to further this movement by creating round about them a choice body of resolute Christian men and women determined to become daily more and more faithful to all their duties, civic and social, and above all religious. These will be valuable co-workers, who going into places inaccessible to the priest and the religious, will successfully second their efforts in the exercise of zeal.