

HOW TO CONTROL YOUR PASSIONS

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Perhaps you know a man who is given to uncontrollable fits of anger. Under ordinary circumstances, he may be the best fellow in the world, generous to a fault, and a hard worker in every good cause. But given the occasion for one of his displays of temper, all his good qualities fly out the window. He speaks with a different voice; he acts rashly and imprudently, sometimes even attempting physical violence. Or he seethes in silence like a volcano on the point of exploding.

Friends and relatives who happen to be present cower before his rage, or are ill-at-ease in the face of his dangerous silence. From an intelligent human being, he is transformed into something less than human, whose actions are totally unpredictable.

Again, there is the man who drinks too much. A million jokes have flourished and grown stale about drunks, but millions can testify that it is no joke to have to live with or depend upon an alcoholic. As in the former case, such a man becomes something less than human. You may laugh at his antics one moment, but the next he may blindly run you down with his car.

These are classic cases of what happens when a human passion gets out of control. Selfish and blind in themselves, the passions badly need direction. Without direction and left to choose its own course, a passion can easily become like an insane driver at the wheel of a high-powered automobile, proceeding at breakneck speed, making casualties of whatever decencies of life happen to be in his path.

We might compare a human being, with his faculties and passions and emotions and senses, to a houseful of servants, under the employment of a good master, and administered by the master's steward or overseer.

God, of course, is the master of the house. But God acts for the most part through a steward, corresponding to the faculty of intelligence, enlightened by faith, with which man has been gifted. Under the control of and subject to the steward are a host of lesser servants, constituting the feelings and emotions and passions which go into the make-up of every human being.

Now in a household where many servants are employed, discipline is essential if the affairs of the home are to run smoothly. If the maid and the butler and the cook begin to put on airs, to make their own schedule, and to issue commands to their overseer and their employer, one of two things happens. Either they are corrected and sternly put in their proper place; or else there arises a state of anarchy and chaos in the household which, if it continues long enough, brings everything to wreck and ruin.

Reason Must Control

Just in the same way our passions and emotions are meant to be under the control of our reason, and our reason and intelligence under the control of God. If one of the passions gets out of line, it is the duty of the thinking faculty, operating through the power of the will aided by grace, to put it in its proper place. Otherwise the lesser servant, who in his own sphere has fulfilled a very necessary function, now that he has gotten out of hand, proceeds to turn everything upside down, bringing the human personality to the verge of disaster.

It cannot be too strongly stressed that the passions and feelings and emotions in themselves are good and worthwhile servants. It is when they are allowed to get out of line that they are capable of evil. And of course the greatest evil of all results when the steward or overseer, the human intelligence, rebels against the master of the house, God. In this instance we have the sin of pride.

To sum up, in a well-ordered household, the lesser servants follow perfectly the orders of their overseer, and the overseer takes his orders gratefully and gracefully from the master. In a well-ordered human personality, the emotions and passions submit always to reason, and reason in turn submits to God. It is this attitude and this state of affairs that we characterize by the phrase, self-control.

The Capital Sins

Now in achieving this self-control there are many areas and aspects of human conduct which might be considered. We have chosen to discuss the matter from the standpoint of the capital sins. Each of these is a focal point, and represents a localized area of the general defense line. If each of these sectors is properly defended, we are well on the way to exercising perfect self-control.

It should be noted that in selecting this line of approach, we are extending the meaning of the word passion beyond its strict philosophical sense. We feel justified in this because popularly the word is used with a wide variety of meaning. Pride, for instance, is not a passion in the strict sense, yet we speak of a person as being "passionately proud." The word has come to have a meaning of excess, of going beyond reasonable limits. And self-control, with which we are concerned in these pages, consists primarily in avoiding excess of any kind.

One other point may be mentioned here before we get to the heart of our discussion. Every human being, according to his temperament, has an inclination to one particular kind of excess more than any other. One person, for instance, may by nature be quick-tempered. Another has to deal with strong temptations to sensuality, while another finds his special difficulty in avoiding vanity and idle boasting.

To this special tendency, whatever it may be, spiritual writers have given the name of predominant fault. An important part of the business of achieving perfect self-control consists in ascertaining and admitting one's predominant fault. Once a person has done this, his efforts will be concentrated, and he stands a much better chance of success against the enemy in his own heart.

For example, it would be quite futile to make a general resolution such as this: "I will be perfect in every way." It is very practical, on the other hand, to particularize the promise: "I resolve not to get angry with my wife in the morning when she burns the toast." Not everything in the following pages applies to everybody in just the same way. Our purpose is to offer you a means of looking objectively at the facts, and then making proper individual application, and lastly to suggest some methods by which you may hope for some measure of success in the life-long battle with yourself.

Gluttony

We begin with gluttony, which may be described specifically as an animal sin, and we end with pride, which is the excess, or sin, and the only sin, which could be committed by spiritual beings such as the angels. Between these two extremes we touch on lust, envy, covetousness, anger and sloth.

The word gluttony has a much wider connotation than we ordinarily ascribe to it. If you call a man a glutton, you usually mean that he is in the habit of stuffing himself with food to the point where he can scarcely stagger away from the table. This is, indeed, one form of excess, and a very gross manifestation at that. Yet, while we have many people who doubtless eat far more than is good for them, at least our civilization does not condone, as did the ancient Romans, the custom of having in the home a room called the *vomitorium*, the function of which is sufficiently described by the word itself.

In this matter of gluttony, which means any kind of excess in eating or drinking, let us establish the fact first of all that there is and can be nothing wrong or sinful with the pleasure of eating and drinking in itself. Almighty God created us in such a way that if we are to preserve life in the body, we must properly nourish the body with food and drink. In order that we may be drawn to take this nourishment when and as we need it, God attached a feeling of satisfaction to the act of eating and drinking. It is a perfectly normal thing that a man should look with pleasure upon a T-bone steak, done to his taste, and that, when he has consumed it, along with whatever trimmings he may regard as suitable, he should feel a healthy sense of well-being.

This is an important point which at first sight seems so obvious as scarcely to need comment. Yet there have been and there are those who contradict it. Long ago a sect called the Manicheans in all seriousness taught that the T-bone steak (or their equivalent for it in the fifth century) was evil and sinful in itself, since it was a part of physical matter, and all physical matter had its origin from the devil.

And we have our modern Manicheans who hold the same thing in regard to wine or any alcoholic beverage. There are in fact certain sects which, it almost appears, take this to be the chief and most necessary commandment: "Thou shalt never under any circumstances drink anything in any way alcoholic."

Excessive Drinking

What has happened, of course, to produce this attitude is that many people do drink to excess. There are undoubtedly some who should not drink at all, because they have learned by bitter experience that it is impossible for them to exercise any kind of restraint or moderation. For such as these, according to the old saying, one drink is too many, and ten drinks are not enough, and the only ultimate solution of their problem is total abstinence.

But to condemn the drinking of alcoholic beverages always and everywhere because of the excesses of some is an illogical and dangerous procedure. It is even to cast a reproach at the Founder of Christianity Himself, for it is quite clear from the gospel accounts of our Lord's life that He blessed wine, and partook of it at the last supper with His apostles.

That there should be a million or more alcoholics in our country is a tragedy, but they will not be reclaimed merely by declaring alcohol an evil thing in itself. Surely we learned that during our disastrous experiment with national prohibition during the twenties.

What is called for, in reality, is self-control, and self-control in this matter of drinking means in simple language knowing when to stop, and in some cases, having sense enough not even to begin.

For the confirmed alcoholic, let him take a long look at himself and realize what a heavy burden he inflicts on those who have to try to live with him or do business with him. Let him attack his problem with the confidence that, difficult as his reclamation may be, it can be effected just as it has been effected in the case of many others, by the persevering use of the means at his disposal. For a Catholic this will entail frequent reception of the sacraments, with the powerful graces which they bring. For all it will mean unremitting recourse to prayer, for prayer is a necessary condition of God's continuing help, and for the confirmed alcoholic, the help of God is absolutely essential. Those with a strong inclination to alcoholism can derive much assistance also from membership in the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, or the non-sectarian Alcoholics Anonymous. Both of these organizations have accomplished wonders in leading men out of the tragic depths into which they had sunk.

Moderation in Drinking

But apart from the special danger of alcoholism, and the drastic remedies which its cure requires, common sense and the common moral law call for moderation at all times and under all circumstances in drinking. The man who, although not ordinarily an excessive drinker, feels that he owes it to himself and to the world to get thoroughly inebriated on New Year's eve manifests a flaw in his character, and the fact that there are five million like him does not make him any the less a fool.

Intoxication, at least partial, can conceivably happen by accident, as in the case of Noah long ago, who failed to assess properly the strength of the new grapes. But after it happens repeatedly, it becomes a more or less planned accident, and in such a case surely more than an ordinary resolution is called for if there is to be no suspicion of hypocrisy. The line indeed is thinly drawn between moderation and excess in this matter of drinking. For many it represents the most difficult and dangerous area of conduct. The final word might therefore be: control means caution!

Eating Too Much

Stuffing oneself with food to the point of nausea, and drunkenness: these are the gross manifestations of gluttony, as we understand it here. But there are other and more insidious manifestations of the vice which should likewise be considered.

There is, for instance, an attitude of mind which might be characterized as epicureanism. The genuine epicure is not so gross as to overeat; he realizes well enough that this would be to take the edge off his enjoyment and defeat his purpose altogether. Nevertheless, he makes eating and drinking the end-all and be-all of his existence.

He gives exaggerated attention to the quality of the food, he eats; his whole life centers around the preparation and consumption of fine and exotic viands. Nothing upsets him so much as to be deprived of certain dishes upon which he dotes, or to have his carefully thought out plan for a fine meal disrupted. To act thus denotes lack of self-control because it is to allow one department of life, and an inferior one at that, to assume an importance out of all proportion to its real significance.

We might note, however, that epicureanism in this sense is quite different from the healthy pride that a good housewife takes in preparing a fine dinner. To the housewife, the dinner is a means to an end: keeping her family healthy and contented. To the epicure, the food is an end in itself.

Constant munching between meals can certainly partake of the vice of gluttony; after all one can eat to excess over a twenty-four hour period as well as during an hour at the dinner table.

Indeed, as munchers in all our waking hours and consumers of infinite quantities of candy, nuts and sweets of various kinds, it may be that, far more than we realize, we Americans will have to answer for our excess. I am not suggesting to my readers that they go on a perpetual black fast, or eat only what is necessary to sustain life. Eat well; enjoy your food; lunch between meals (except on fast days) if you feel hungry. But in all of this have an eye for moderation. Your physical health will be more sound, and your soul will be healthier too.

The laws of fast and abstinence imposed by the Catholic church on her members are designed as a check and balance on the human tendency to overindulge the enjoyment of eating and drinking. By obeying these laws intelligently, by additional prudent self-denial, one gains and keeps the mastery over an important area of human conduct.

Lust

Whereas gluttony concerns over-indulgence in food and drink, the capital sin of lust has to do with the second fundamental human instinct, namely, the drive and urge to hand down human life and thus propagate the human race through the use of sex.

Here again, the word has suffered somewhat by usage. Lust, as popularly understood, refers only to impure desires, whereas this is only one manifestation of lack of self-control in this very vital battle for the human soul.

The sex urge or drive, as created by Almighty God, cannot, it is obvious, be considered evil or sinful in itself. Used by human creatures according to God's plan, sex, and the pleasure attached to its use, have God's full blessing upon them. With Adam and Eve, our first parents, there was, indeed, and could be no revolt on the part of sex against God's plan.

It was only after their disobedience to the command of God that human nature was, as it were, turned upside down. Sex, while remaining holy in itself, showed a strong inclination to overthrow the rule of reason and blindly chart its own course, without reference to laws or rules of any kind. This is St. Paul's "law in my body fighting against the law in my mind." Every human being experiences that conflict, and to achieve perfect self-control in this field is to be well on the road to perfection.

Sex and Marriage

By perfect self-control, we mean one thing for those who are married, and another for the unmarried. For the unmarried the right order of things requires that not in any way, whether alone or with someone else, whether by touch or by merely nursing in the mind thoughts of sex, may the passion connected with sex be deliberately aroused. The point needs emphasizing, because people sometimes try to rationalize and justify an opposite course of conduct. Thus, for instance, a young man and woman keeping company may try to argue that expressing their affection for each other, even though their caresses are warm and prolonged, cannot be very wrong. Yet in their consciences they must realize full well that such actions carry with them in the very nature of things an increasing indulgence of the sex-passion. Thus they indicate a serious lack of self-control which must rightly be called a mortal sin.

For those who are married, it is to be taken for granted that the use of sex within their marriage is not only a legitimate but even a holy thing. But human intelligence, in accordance with the wishes of God, suggests certain measures of self-control in marriage. We need not detail these measures; it will be sufficient to say that they are dictated by such motives of mutual consideration and tenderness between husband and wife as will occur to all men and women of good will.

Most certainly the vice of lust is served by those husbands and wives who misuse their marriage privileges by the practice of contraception. We have said that the use of sex is meant to be governed by the faculty of intelligence, and the reasoning faculty is meant to be under the control of God. Both the human reason and the God who created human

reason testify to the unlawfulness of contraception. To break God's law in this matter is to give over the control of sex to the blind faculty itself; to use sex for the sake of sex, thrusting aside God's fundamental purpose in creating the faculty. This is a fundamental perversion, and indicates a gross lack of proper self-discipline and self-control.

It goes without saying, of course, that self-control in marriage precludes any slightest shadow of infidelity to one's married partner. To practice perfect self-control by unsullied fidelity in the face of life's temptation brings with it a special happiness and a special crown for any married couple.

For anyone to exercise continued self-control in the field of purity, where the most powerful of human passions must be kept within proper bounds, a three point program has traditionally been suggested.

Aids to Purity

In the first place, it is necessary to avoid, as far as possible, the occasions which in their very nature are likely to stimulate the sex passion. Such an occasion would be, for instance, the reading of extremely realistic books, or attending "sexy" movies, or, for young people keeping company, to allow such situations to arise as would make it extremely difficult to exercise proper self-control.

The second means of preserving purity is continued prayer, and prayer especially in the time of temptation. Only by continual prayer can we obtain the grace that we need from day to day. Only by prayer in temptation can the temptation be duly repelled. With prayer must be joined a sincere effort to sidetrack the impure thought and fix the mind on some other innocent subject. In these temptations he is wise who plays the part of a coward, running away from his enemy.

Last but not least, Catholics have at their finger-tips in this battle the power and strength which flow from frequent Holy Communion. Indeed, there seems to be a most special grace which the sacrament brings for this purpose. Not many years ago a religious poll at Notre Dame University asked this question of the students: "What profit do you feel you have derived from daily Communion?" In a surprising number of instances, the answer was somewhat the following: "When I came to Notre Dame, I had a very bad habit of impurity. Then I began going to Communion every day and to confession as often as necessary. Inside of six months what I thought was impossible had happened: I had broken completely with my bad habit."

For some, perhaps for many, frequent and sincere reception of Holy Communion may be an essential condition of their establishing self control in this field.

Covetousness and Envy

We have stated that gluttony and lust represent the abuse of natural instincts that in themselves are good. There is a third instinct which has been planted in the human heart by the Creator, namely, the natural impulse of man to own his own home, to work for a living, to possess a share of the material goods of the world. Throughout the centuries this basic instinct has been crushed and thwarted at various times by tyrants and overlords and economic barons. But it remains basic, and history has sufficiently attested that those who attempt to crush it are in the end themselves crushed by the blind, unreasoning violence of revolution.

But once we have established the instinct to own property as good in itself, we must again face the unfortunate fact that it can be abused, in which case one of two capital sins will be in evidence, covetousness or envy.

To be covetous is to desire material possessions as an end in themselves, to aspire to riches for the sake of riches, to fix the eye on a neighbor's possessions and to be consumed with the inordinate ambition to make them one's own. The natural law and the tenth commandment of God both stand against this tendency of human nature: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." The vice of envy is similar to covetousness. It is sadness over the good fortune of another because that good fortune stands in the way of something that one desires for oneself. A person can be sad, not only because another person is richer than himself, but also because another holds some job, or enjoys popularity, or is possessed of some great talent, that he desires for himself.

That these vices are common to human beings needs no proof. In every department of life, for example, we find traces of envy. The high school girl who fails in her aspiration to be cheer-leader, the boy whose lack of talent keeps him off the football team, the matron who must resign herself to a low rung on the social ladder, the man who sees a

younger rival win a desired promotion—all these are guilty of envy if they permit their disappointment to make them bitter and unkind, and to induce them to scheme against the persons who have got ahead of them.

The process is similar in regard to covetousness. It is easy to deceive oneself into translating the axiom, “A person is bound by the natural law to make a living,” into the principle that gives covetousness full reign. A person must try to become richer and richer.” One can cultivate an inordinate desire for money either for the sake of itself, or for the sake of the luxuries it can buy, or for the sake of the sense of power it gives, but it all amounts to the same vice of covetousness. In the world of today it is a vice that is hard to avoid for the reason that it has been given a place of honor in a large part of society. The rules of this half-pagan part of society demand that the young couple in moderate circumstances make it their ambition to climb ever higher and higher on the social and economic ladder; that the rich man be dissatisfied without ever richer and richer investments; that nobody ever permits himself voluntarily to become poorer as time goes on. Those who succumb to the mode lose all contentment in the ordinary pleasures of life. Even when their material prosperity increases, they find that covetousness has a boundless appetite and is never satisfied, but is always asking for more.

The bank clerk who embezzles and the cop who takes hush-money and the butcher who weighs his hand with the meat are all examples of covetousness, and it is safe to say that the way was prepared for their breaking of the seventh commandment by their previous breaking of the tenth. In the climate of covetousness and envy, all sorts of ugly weeds grow. “There is not a more wicked thing than to love money,” the wise man of Holy Scripture writes, “for such a one setteth even his own soul to sale.”

It is very obvious, therefore, that the instinct for acquiring possessions must be brought under the rule of reason and faith. This can be done only by one who has cultivated a deep conviction that a man’s first purpose in life is to save his soul for heaven, and that material things are to be used as means to that end, never to be permitted to stand in the way of attaining it. Christ put it simply when He said: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all other things needful will be granted to you.”

Joined with the remembrance of one’s first purpose in life must be an humble submission to God’s will. In the distribution of talents and of the material goods of life, God’s wisdom and His will play an important role. It is His general will that all men share adequately in the good things of earth, and He has imposed His laws of justice and charity on mankind that all may work together to bring this about. But in particular instances He permits inequalities, injustices, even persecution to befall some men, while He allows others, sometimes even the wicked, to prosper beyond all bounds. To avoid covetousness and envy, one must see God’s permissive will in these things, which is ruled by His wisdom and His love. It must always be remembered that, while God permits some individuals to become rich in material goods, this is by no means necessarily a sign of His favor. In the Calvinist theology, material prosperity and respectability and sanctity were regarded as almost synonymous, and in some quarters are so considered today. In reality, however, the exact opposite may be closer to the truth, in view of what Our Lord said about the dangers of riches.

Right convictions about these things flourish in the human heart only to the extent in which it is watered by God’s grace. The normal way to receive that grace is through continued prayer and the frequent reception of the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion. He who does not remain close to God will find himself gradually becoming more and more attached to the things of the world, and that means more a victim of the vices of covetousness and envy.

Anger

Like most other vices, anger is the abuse of something that in itself is good. St. Thomas Aquinas defines it as an inordinate desire to correct, punish and hurt others. Sometimes it is necessary to correct and punish those who are subject to one’s authority, and in so doing to hurt them, but for their own good and for the good of others. Anger is the inordinate desire to do these things: inordinate either because one’s motive is bad, or the means used are wrong, or because one is in no position to administer correction and punishment.

Thus, for example, one person may lash out in fiery language against another occasioned by some slight incident, not in order to correct or help the person, but solely in order to hurt that person for the sake of taking revenge. This is the common form that anger takes: one person tells another off in order to take revenge by hurting him.

Or one who has the obligation of correcting and punishing others becomes guilty of the sin of anger through the manner in which he carries out this task. Fathers and mothers sin when they use profanity in correcting their children; when they inflict punishment far beyond reasonable limits; when they shout at their children at the top of their voices and thereby attempt to make them quiver with fear.

Or anger may be a form of defense mechanism, as when a person who has been guilty of serious faults or sins blasts out against others in an attempt to distract attention from his own misdemeanors.

For some who are of a choleric temperament, the tendency to become violently angry when they are crossed or thwarted will have to be fought against throughout their lives. But every victory they win in this regard helps to harness the strong forces within their hearts so that, thus disciplined, they may accomplish great things. Every great leader of men had first to conquer himself before he could successfully rule others.

With most people, however, it is not a tendency to violent anger so much as the small and petty manifestations of this unlovely vice that are in need of curbing and control. There is the tendency in most people to express impatience over the small faults of those around them; to say harsh and rude things to those who, they think, have slighted or injured them in some small way; to become peevish and to bear grudges in an effort to “get back at somebody.”

Quarreling

Anger, and especially violent anger, breeds a family of offspring even more ugly and misshapen than their parent. Senseless quarreling follows close upon anger. Who is there who has not had the misfortune of witnessing such quarreling, perhaps between two erstwhile friends? There are mutual recriminations, ugly accusations, all drawn largely from thin air. The past is raked over for half-forgotten and presumably long forgiven lapses. Voices rise to a high pitch, but the participants seem totally oblivious of the spectacle they are presenting. Harsh words lead naturally to unpleasant epithets and cursing and even attempted physical violence. The worst case of all is that in which such quarrels take place between a husband and wife in the presence of their children. Here, to the sin of anger, is added the sin of scandal.

How to Control Anger

The passion of anger is most difficult to bring under perfect control, particularly for those who are predisposed to it by temperament. But while ‘on the one hand there should be no concession to discouragement at repeated setbacks, on the other there must be unremitting effort to reach the ideal of self-mastery. This self-mastery means silence in moments of provocation; it means postponement of action when one is emotionally upset. Such conquests will be impossible unless a person accustoms himself to saying a prayer for patience in his temptations.

Sloth

While anger tends to violence, sloth, the next vice to be considered, tends in an opposite direction, toward inaction, neglect of duty, omission. St. Thomas defines sloth as a sluggishness of soul that neglects to undertake good and even necessary spiritual actions. By spiritual actions is here meant any action that is a part of one’s duty, or an important means of salvation, even though it be concerned primarily with material things. Thus the father of a family who does not bestir himself to get a job and to support his family is failing in his duty through sloth. The person who stays in his comfortable bed all through Sunday morning instead of going to Mass is guilty of a mortal sin through sloth. The habitual sinner who neglects daily prayer and the frequent reception of the sacraments, the ordinary spiritual means through which sins can be overcome, remains a sinner through sloth. Too often the end product of sloth is a decided distaste for spiritual things, together with a downward gravitation toward unlawful satisfaction of the lower nature. It is easy to be sensual, and sloth always inclines to the easy things of life.

Lukewarmness in matters of religion is an especially damaging form of sloth. It is significant that in the entire New Testament there are no more terrible words than those addressed by God to the soul who, in the Apocalypse, is pictured as the victim of this spiritual malady: “I would that thou wert cold or hot, but because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth because thou sayest, ‘I am rich and have grown wealthy and have need of nothing,’ and dost not know that thou art the wretched and miserable and poor and naked

one.”

Lukewarmness in spiritual matters in the very nature of things leads the soul into the sin against hope that goes by the name of presumption. To be infected with presumption is to suppose that God will take special steps to save my soul, when I am far from putting forth the necessary effort to correspond with His grace and to observe His laws.

Presumption is common among Americans today and, unfortunately, not rare among Catholics. It is typified in the case of the so-called nominal Catholic. Quite frequently he misses Mass on Sunday for some trivial reason, and, to avoid responsibility or self-denial, he practices contraception in his married life. When he receives the sacraments once or twice a year, it is largely a token gesture. Yet with all this he quiets the occasional twinges of his conscience by promising himself: “Before I die, which will be a long time from now, I’ll straighten out my affairs with God.”

Since God has given fair warning of the unexpectedness with which death may come to any man, it is rash in the extreme to gamble on the future. God is not bound to help us unless we indicate a sincere desire to help ourselves; to think and act otherwise is to indicate a fatal sloth in His service. Nor need it be considered surprising if this same sloth, having made a man presumptuous throughout life, on his deathbed plunges him into the opposite sin of despair at the thought of the little he has done for God, before Whom he is about to be judged.

The Battle against Sloth

For all men in general, and for the phlegmatic by temperament in particular, a battle must constantly be waged against the tendency to forget the spiritual goals of life and to neglect spiritual duties. An irreducible minimum of religious practices must be set up as a schedule and adhered to unflinchingly, despite all the objections raised by slothful human nature.

Pride

“While all vices flee from God,” writes the philosopher Boethius, “pride withstands Him to His face.” Herein may be seen the great evil of this first and last of the capital sins. It is to be found, in some form, in every sin by which a man offends God.

Like all vices, pride is an excess or abuse of something that is good. In every human being there is a strong desire, one may call it a passion, to be esteemed, to be honored, to be recognized at his true worth, to protect his good name. That this is not evil in itself is evident from the fact that detraction, slander, destroying the good name of another, are among the grave sins forbidden by the natural law. Pride is the vice whereby a man considers himself in some respects or in all respects as greater than God, and whereby he desires to be esteemed and honored and served by others far beyond his just merits.

Pride is to be found in every deliberate sin, because sin means making a choice of something that God has forbidden, in which choice a man is implicitly deciding that he knows better than God what is good for him, or that he may replace God’s authority with his own. Those who disobey one of the ten commandments, or act contrary to the clear teachings of Christ, or refuse to submit to a command of Christ’s Church, are in effect making themselves superior to God. That is the pride that caused the fall of the angels, brought about the sin of Adam and Eve in Paradise, and nailed Jesus Christ to His cross.

In a lesser form, pride appears among human beings as vanity, in which case it means an inordinate love of one’s gifts of body or mind, and an exaggerated desire for the admiration and acclaim of others. In a school-girl, this may appear as putting on airs; in the adolescent (even of mature years), as idle boasting; in the budding artist, as exaggerated sensitiveness; in the old, as stubbornness of opinion; in the newly rich, as ostentation; in misguided parents, as “mumism;” in those who exercise authority, as arrogance; in society folk, as patronizing superciliousness; in the talented, as self-conceit.

The Cure for Pride

All such faults represent lack of self-control; there is no one who will not recognize in them a source of annoyance to others and, if he be honest, grounds for self-reproach and obstacles to be overcome on the road to heaven. Humility is the only real antidote for pride. St. Augustine expressed a deep spiritual and psychological truth when he stated that

the first step toward perfection is humility, that the second step is humility, and that the third and last step is humility. Humility means recognizing and acting upon the full truth concerning one's relationship to God and to other human beings. In respect to God the humble man remembers that he is a dependent creature, bound to submit to every expression of God's will and, without God's grace, capable of nothing but evil. In respect to his fellow human beings, the humble man seeks for no honors that are not his due, and for all the honor that he does receive he gives the thanks and glory to God.

Temptations to pride and vanity continue to arise throughout life; so also must continue the effort to learn and practice true humility. In fact, one short answer can be given to the important problem: "How to control your passions." You control your passions by cultivating that humility which recognizes the good in your passions and utilizes it, the bad in your passions and suppresses it, the express will of God for your passions and follows it, the goal of victory over your unruly passions (which is heaven) and wins it.

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