

On Virtue and Sin

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I. - ON VIRTUE IN GENERAL.

418. Decision in Favour of Virtue. - Virtue is the most precious of all treasures, and this has been recognized, children, even by pagans. A charming story on this subject is related by Crantor, a Greek philosopher, who lived more than three hundred years before Christ. "One day," says he, "the divinities who preside over riches, voluptuousness, health, and virtue, suddenly appeared amongst the various nations of Greece assembled to celebrate the Olympic Games. They desired, in their wisdom, that the judges of the Areopagus should assign to each of them the rank they occupy, according to their several degrees of influence on the happiness of men. Riches displayed its magnificence, and already began to dazzle the eyes of the judges, when Voluptuousness brought down its merit by showing that the only end of Riches was to conduct to pleasure. Voluptuousness was applauded, but then Health rose, and easily proved that without it the greatest pleasures, the sweetest enjoyments, are bitter, and that, without Health, grief soon takes the place of joy. Then the Areopagites appeared decided in favour of the latter; but Virtue terminated the dispute, for she made all the Greeks admit that riches, pleasure, and health do not last long, and that if they be not accompanied by virtue, they become evils for those who do not know how to use them with discretion. At this discourse, so simple and so true, every one clapped their hands, and the first rank was accorded to Virtue, the second to Health." - NOEL, *Cat. de Rodez*, III., 342.

419. St. John's Partridge. - True virtue, my dear friends, is not ferocious; on the contrary, it knows how to take, when requisite, a little rest and harmless recreation, in order to apply itself afterwards more courageously to its duties. In this connection Cassian relates the following of St. John the Evangelist. One day that holy Apostle had a partridge in his hand and was amusing himself caressing it, when he was met by a man dressed in the garb of a hunter. This man, astonished that an Apostle, so high and so holy, who had filled the earth with his fame, should amuse himself with sports so childish in appearance, said to him: "Tell, me, then, are you that Apostle John who is spoken of everywhere, and whose reputation made me wish to see him? If so, how does it happen that you divert yourself with a bird like children."

"My friend," answered the holy Apostle, "what is that you hold in your hand?"

"It is a bow," replied the hunter.

"Why is it not bent and the string taught and an arrow in its place? It seems to me that it should be always ready?"

"That could not be, because if it were always bent, when I came to use it, it would no longer be strong enough to dart an arrow on the game."

"If that be so," replied St. John, "you need not be surprised at what I am doing. Our mind, too, requires to relax at times, because if we kept it always bent, it would be enfeebled by that restraint, and we could no longer make use of it when we would apply it again with strength and vigour." - D. GENEVAUX, *Hist. Choix.*, 465.

420. St. Nicholas and His Three Purses. - Virtue is ingenious, my dear friends, it knows how to find out our needs and wants to relieve; but it is no less skilful in concealing itself, because it remembers that Our Lord said "Do not do your good works that they may be seen of men." St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra, in Asia Minor, had heard that a man of noble race, named Petura, had become so wretchedly poor that he had resolved to let his three daughters take to evil courses, because he had no means of settling them for life. Thereupon, taking advantage of a dark night, the holy bishop glided softly to this poor man's house, and threw into the window a purse filled with gold pieces. Having learned, very soon after, that Petura had profited by his gifts to obtain an honourable position for the eldest of his three daughters, he was so well pleased that he threw a second purse in at the same window, the following night. He did the same a third time, taking good care to hide himself so as not to be seen. But his stratagem was discovered by the father, who had stationed himself where he could get a sight of his unknown benefactor. Then St. Nicholas, unwilling to have the affair made public, besought him on his knees not to tell any one. That generous disciple of Jesus Christ was mindful of the words of Our Lord: "When you give an alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does; so that your alms shall remain hidden, and your heavenly Father, who sees in secret, will one day reward you before all men." The gentleman promised St. Nicholas to say nothing of it for that time, but the affair did not fail to become known, for St. Nicholas was in the habit of doing good works of the kind. - Life of St. Nicholas.

421. A Physician who could not cure Himself. - People of the world so little understand true virtue that they often confound it with egotism or interest. It is not so, children, with true Christians; they are as harsh to themselves as they are good to others. The history of the Fathers of the Desert relates that, amongst several great personages who flourished in Egypt, in the fourth century, there was a solitary named Benjamin, who had received from God the gift of curing the sick merely by laying hands on them, or by saying some short prayers to their intention, or rubbing them with a little blessed oil. The gift he had of curing others did not prevent him from falling sick himself of a fearful dropsy. His body swelled so, and became so unwieldy, that he could no longer go through the door of his cell. He lived eight months in this state, and then died. Well! during all that time he continued to cure others of all sorts of diseases, without complaining that he could find no remedy for his own. He even tried to console those whom he saw touched with compassion for his sad state, and told them: "Pray to God for my soul, and do not trouble yourselves about my body, for even when I was in perfect health, it was little use to me." He died some time after in these sentiments of humility and resignation. - PERE MARIN, Vies des Peres des Deserts. (Lives of the Fathers of the Deserts.)

422. One, Two, Three, Four, Five... - When we do our actions for God, dear friends, we must never be afraid of doing too much, because He is rich enough to reward us. There is a charming story on this subject related in the book entitled "The Spiritual Meadow" (le Pre Spirituel), composed, according to some authors, by St. Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem, who lived in the seventh century. A solitary, who had his cell in a desert, a long way from the fountain to which he went for water, found himself so fatigued with the journey, one day when he went to draw some, that he was obliged to sit down to rest himself. He began to reflect: "Is it necessary " said he to himself, "that I should give myself so much trouble? It is better for me to go and live near the water, and build my cell there." The next time he had to go to the fountain with his pitcher, he examined where he could place his cell more conveniently, in what way he would build it, and the life he would lead therein. Whilst he was walking, absorbed in these reflections he thought he heard a man's voice behind him counting: One, two, three, four, and so on. Astonished that, in the desert there was any who

measured distance, or calculated anything, he turned his head and saw no one. He continues his way, thinking still of what he purposed doing, and hears again the same voice, continuing to count. He turns round a second time and still sees nothing. But the same thing having happened a third time, and having again turned his head, he sees a young man radiant with light, who says to him: "Be not alarmed, I am an angel of God counting all the steps you take, so that none may go unrewarded." Saying that, he disappeared. Then the solitary entering into himself pondered: "What!" said he, "could I have lost my senses, when I wished to give up so great an advantage, and to deprive myself of such certain gain, by bringing my cell nearer the water? On the contrary, I will go farther yet from the spring, so that I may, for the future, have more trouble, and consequently more merit. - RODRIGUEZ, Chris. Perf., III., 128.

423. The Monk's Rough Habit. - Do you remember, dear friends, having read in the Gospel these words: "He who will come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me"? That means that we must suffer, if we would work out our salvation in this world. Denis, the Carthusian, relates that a certain novice, having much fervour in the beginning came afterwards, as sometimes happens, to fall into laxity and tepidity. All seemed easy to him at first, but a little while after, the exercises of mortification and humility became irksome to him. Amongst other things, he could not bear a certain rough, coarse garment, worn by the novices of his order. One night, when he was asleep, he saw in a dream Jesus Christ bearing a very heavy cross, trying to go up a steep, narrow flight of steps, which increased his trouble much more. The novice, touched with compassion, immediately offered to help him to carry his cross; but the Saviour, regarding him with an angry countenance, said: "How do you dare offer to carry my cross, which is so heavy, when you find it a trouble to wear, for my sake, your habit, that weighs so little in comparison?" At the same moment the vision disappeared, and the novice awoke, remaining so confused by this reproach, and at the same time so resolved to suffer all for Christ, that ever after that habit, so rough and coarse, which he had found it so hard to bear, became for him a source of joy and contentment. Let us make the same reflection, dear friends, and we shall find nothing too difficult in the Christian life. - RODRIGUEZ, Chris Perf., VI., 164.

II. - ON SIN IN GENERAL.

424. Physiognomy of Socrates. - We are all born, dear friends, with inclinations rather bad than good, because of the unhappy consequences of original sin; but we may and should labour to correct ourselves: in that it is that virtue properly consists. The Pagan philosophers themselves understood this. Plutarch positively relates it of Socrates, a famous philosopher who lived more than four hundred years before Christ. He says that an excellent physiognomist, whose opinions were held in high regard at that time, having considered him with attention, could not help saying to whoever would hear him that Socrates was a man inclined to lewdness, to anger, to drunkenness and many other vices. The disciples and friends of the philosopher were indignant at this accusation; they were much excited against this man and would even have laid violent hands on him. But Socrates stopped them, saying with much candour: "Be still; this man is right, for I would actually be what he describes me, if I had not applied myself to the study of philosophy and the practice of virtue; it is by that I have succeeded in correcting myself of all those faults and many others besides." If a philosopher, who was aided by natural lights alone, could so overcome his evil inclinations, what may we not do, dear friends, we who are Christians, and who have the assistance of divine grace, a thousand times more powerful than nature? - RODRIGUEZ, Chris. Perf., III., 108.

425. The Two Horses' Tails. - There is a proverb that says: "He that takes in too much binds badly," that is to say, he who would do too many things at once, or correct himself of all his faults, or acquire every virtue at once, will never succeed. Hear the famous Sertorius, one of the most valiant foes of the Romans in Spain. Having remarked that his soldiers were all discouraged by the loss of a battle, he had them drawn up, and ordered two horses to be brought out before them, one, old, emaciated, and worn out; the other, young, strong, handsome, and especially remarkable for the beauty of his tail and the quantity of hair with which it was furnished. Near the weak horse he placed a tall, powerful man, and near the vigorous horse, a weak, insignificant little man. The signal being given, the strong man took hold with both hands of the weak horse's tail, and began to pull it with all his might, as if to pull it off; but the little weak man commenced plucking out one by one the hairs of the strong horse's tail. After the former had taken much useless trouble, and had set all the spectators laughing, he gave up his undertaking; whilst the little man, without any trouble, soon showed the tail of his vigorous horse stripped of all its hairs. Then Sertorius rising said: "My friends, you see that patience is more effectual than strength, and that many things which cannot be brought to an end all at once, whatever efforts are made, are easily accomplished little by little. Do not allow yourselves, then, to be cast down by one failure; be sure that returning often to the charge your perseverance will at length make you succeed." A wise lesson, my friends, especially for those amongst you who are discouraged by the slightest check they encounter. - FILASSIER, Dict. d'Educ., II., 323.

426. The Four Cypresses to Pull Up. - The surest means of succeeding in the war we ought to make on our passions, my friends, is to resist them in their very first assaults. An ancient poet, Ovid, justly said:

"Oppose the malady before it takes root,
If it remain, it defies the art of medicine."

A holy hermit lived with his disciple in the neighbourhood of a cypress wood. He one day ordered this young man, who asked him what was the surest and easiest means of preserving oneself pure and spotless to pull up four cypresses which he himself pointed out. The first was yet quite small, and it was only play for the young man to pull it up; the second, which, doubtless, had already stronger roots, offered but little more resistance; but coming to the third, he found it necessary to make several attempts and pull with all his strength before he could succeed in rooting it up. When it came the fourth's turn, the young novice vainly employed the whole strength of his sinewy arm; he could make nothing of it, and he was forced to say so, and give up the attempt. His spiritual father seeing him exhausted with fatigue and covered with sweat, then said to him: You have there an example, my son, of how it is with us and our evil passions: the less time we give to the impure thoughts and images that assail our minds, the less root they shall take in our heart, and the easier it will be to combat and extirpate them. - SCHMID et BELET, Cat. Hist., II., 475.

427. How St. John Chrysostom Feared Sin. - No thing equals the hatred and horror which the Saints had for sin; their history is full of facts which prove it; I will choose but one amongst a thousand. The Emperor of Constantinople was mortally exasperated against St. John Chrysostom, patriarch of the same city. One day, inflamed with anger, he said in presence of his officers: "I wish I could be revenged on this bishop." Four or five of his courtiers, who were present, gave their opinion. The first said. "Send him so far away into exile that you will never see him again." The second: "Confiscate all his goods." The third: "Cast him into prison, loaded with chains." The fourth: "Are you not master? Get rid of him, sire, by a death he has so well deserved." A fifth, more intelligent,

and who knew the holy patriarch better: "You are mistaken, gentlemen," said he, "none of those is the way to be avenged on the bishop or to punish him. If you send him into exile, the whole earth is his country; if you confiscate his goods, you take them from the poor, and not from him, because he gives them away in charity; if you put him in a dungeon he will kiss his chains, and deem himself happy; finally, if you condemn him to death, you will open heaven to him. Prince, would you be revenged on John, force him to commit a sin; I know him; that man fears but one thing in the world, sin. No, he fears neither exile nor the loss of his goods, nor iron, nor fire, nor torments, he fears nothing but sin." Admirable sentiments, are they not, dear children? Oh! how happy we should be, could it be said of us as of him. "That boy, that young man, fears nothing in the world but sin!" - GUILLOIS, *Nouv. Explic. du Cat.*, 301.

428. A FASTER who does not Fast. - Virtue is so beautiful, children, it has such a charm that people are often seen trying to practice it only through hypocrisy. Blunderers! they all have the trouble of virtuous people, and they shall have none of their reward! There are frightful stories on that subject. Pope St. Gregory the Great himself relates one; he had it from a priest of Isauria (in Asia Minor), named Athanasius, who had been an eye-witness of it. "I knew," said that good priest, "I knew in the city of Icona, at the time I was stationed there, a monk who dwelt in the monastery of the Galates, where he was esteemed for his virtue. Every one saw in him a good living man, regular in his whole conduct. But it was found at the end of his life that things were very different in him from what they appeared; for, making a show of fasting with his brethren, he was accustomed to eat in secret, without any one perceiving it. Having fallen sick, and seeing himself near his end, he caused all the monks of the monastery to be assembled, they came with joy, hoping to hear from the mouth of this holy man some words of comfort. Alas! they were much mistaken in their expectation, for he was compelled to disclose to them the misfortune wherewith he was threatened. He told them, therefore: 'When you thought I fasted with you, I eat in secret; and for that I am now left a prey to a frightful dragon, who has bound my knees and my feet with his tail, and who, thrusting his head into my mouth, sucks and exhausts all my breath.' Having said these words he died immediately, without the demon he had seen giving him time to escape eternal misery by a sincere repentance, or, at least, so it seemed to us who were there to pray for him." - ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogues*, Book IV., Chapter 28.

429. The Sins of St. Ignatius. - The Saints were so ingenious in practising virtue, that they found motives for it even in the sins of their past life. You can form no idea, dear friends, of the acts of humility, of contrition, of love of God and many other virtues, which this remembrance made them practice. I will take for example St. Ignatius Loyola. It is related in his life that this great Saint, considering his faults and bitterly bewailing them, sometimes conceived the wish that God might punish him for them by depriving him of the sweetness of his consolations, in order that this chastisement might render him more careful and more ardent in his service. "But God was always so merciful towards me," adds the humble priest, "and treated me with so much sweetness, that the more faults I committed and the more I desired to be chastised in this way, the more goodness the Lord manifested towards me, and the more abundantly He poured forth upon me the treasures of His infinite bounty." See, dear friends, how virtuous he was; he sometimes said that he did not believe there was in the world a person in whom these two things met to such an excess as in him; the one, offending God so often, and the other, receiving such great favours! Certainly, if a great Saint had such low sentiments with regard to himself, what are we to think of each of ourselves in particular, we who are so far from resembling him in virtue and in merit? - RODRIGUEZ, *Chris. Perf.*, II., 464.

