

Love and Sacrifice in the Christian Life

*The Spiritual Life:
A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*

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§. 328–334

III. *The Part of Love and the Part of Sacrifice in the Christian Life*

328. Since both love and sacrifice must have a part in the Christian life, what shall be the role of each? On this subject there are points on which all agree, and there are others on which a difference of opinion is manifest. Practically, however, the present authors of the various schools arrive at conclusions that are nearly the same.

329. All admit that objectively and in the order of *excellence*, love holds the first place. It is the end and the *essential element* of perfection, as we have proved in our first thesis, N. 312. It is love, then, that we must look to above all, it is love that we must seek without respite, it is love that calls for sacrifice and gives it its chief value. Hence, it is essential that even with beginners, the spiritual director should insist on the love of God ; but he should make clear to them that while love renders sacrifice easier, it can never dispense with it.

330. As regards the *chronological* order, all admit that both elements are inseparable and must be cultivated at one and the same time, nay more, that they must blend one with the other. This, because there is no true love here on earth ' without sacrifice, and because sacrifice made for God is one of the best signs of love.

The whole question resolves itself into this: Taking the chronological order, which of these two elements must be emphasized, love or sacrifice? Here we come upon two distinct schools and trends of thought.

331. A) *St. Francis de Sales*, resting upon the authority of many representatives of the Benedictine and the Dominican schools, and relying upon the resources which regenerated human nature has to offer, insists first on the love of God, in order the better to make us accept and practice sacrifice. But far from excluding the latter, he demands of Philothea much self-renunciation and self-sacrifice. If he does so with great caution and suavity of manner, it is to attain his purpose all the better. This becomes evident from the first chapter of the *Introduction to a Devout Life*: “True devotion presupposes not a partial, but a thorough love of God...As devotion then consists in a certain excellent degree of charity, it not only makes us active and diligent *in the observance in God's commandments*, but it also excites us to the performance of every good work with an affectionate alacrity, even though it be not of precept but only of counsel.” But to keep the *commandments*, to follow the counsels and the inspirations of grace, is to practice mortification to a high degree. Besides, the Saint asks that Philothea begin by purifying herself not only from mortal sins, but also from venial faults and from the affection for vain and dangerous things, as well as from evil tendencies. When he deals with the virtues, he does not forget their austere side ; although he is ever concerned that all be pervaded by the love of God and of one's neighbor.

332. B) On the other side, we have the school of *St. Ignatius* and the French School of the Seventeenth Century. Without forgetting that the love of God is the end to be attained and that it. must vivify all our acts, they place to the fore, especially for beginners, renouncement, the love of the Cross, the mortification of our passions, as the surest means

of arriving at real effective love. The representatives of these schools seem to fear that unless this be insisted on at the beginning, many souls would fall victims to illusions, think themselves already far advanced in the love of God, whilst, in fact, their virtue is more sentimental and apparent than real. Hence those lamentable falls when grave temptations come or when spiritual dryness sets in. Besides, sacrifice courageously accepted for the love of God leads to a charity that is more generous and more constant, and the habitual practice of this charity gradually comes to complete the spiritual edifice.

333. Practical conclusion. Without any desire to settle this controversy, we shall simply propose some conclusions admitted by the most prudent of all schools.

A) There are two excesses to be avoided:

a) that of wishing to lead souls prematurely into the so-called way of *love*, whilst failing to train them to the stern discipline of daily self-denial. It is in this way that illusions are fostered and at times the ground made ready for regrettable falls. How many souls experiencing, those sensible consolations God dispenses to beginners, and thinking themselves well-grounded in virtue, expose themselves to occasions of sin and fall into grievous faults! A little more mortification, true humility, distrust of self, and a more determined fight against their passions, would have preserved them from such lapses.

B) The other excess is to speak constantly of renouncement and mortification without making it clear that these are but means of arriving at the love of God, or manifestations of that love. Thus some persons possessed of good will, but as yet of little courage are disheartened, They would take more heart and be filled with greater strength, if they were shown how such sacrifices become so much easier if done for the love of God: "*Where there is love, there is no labor.*"

334. B) Once these excesses are avoided, the spiritual director must know what path to point out to each penitent according to his character and the promptings of grace.

a) There are *affectionate* souls who have no taste for mortification until they have for some time practiced the love of God. It is true that this love is oftentimes imperfect, more sentimental than generous and lasting. However, if one takes advantage of these first flights to show that real love cannot endure without sacrifice, if one succeeds in inducing such souls to exercise themselves in some acts of penance for the love of God, in some acts of reparation, of mortification, such acts as are more indispensable to the avoidance of sin, then their will will be gradually strengthened, and the moment will come when they will understand, that sacrifice and the love of God must go hand in hand.

b) On the other hand, if one has to deal with energetic characters, accustomed to act from a sense of duty, one may from the outset insist on renouncement as the *touchstone* of charity, and cause them to exercise themselves in penance, humility and mortification, while infusing into these austere virtues the motive of the love of God or zeal for souls.

Thus love and sacrifice will ever be united, and it will become evident that these two elements blend and perfect each other.