

DIVINE DEVOTION

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IN CONVERSATION, in newspapers and on the radio the word *devotion* occurs with unflinching regularity. A movie of the recent past was entitled simply "Devotion." The word has come into such common usage that one seldom penetrates its profound significance. Like electricity, none knows what it is, but all use it and take it for granted. "John is such a devoted husband," or "Mary is so devoted to her children," are mites of praise tossed off with abandon and heedlessness. Devotion to our country is present in every patriot from street sweeper to senator. Devotion is often praised, yet frequently overlooked and sometimes misunderstood. It cannot be said that the ordinary person doesn't know the meaning of devotion for we call none devoted who does not always seek the good of the person or cause to which he is devoted. John is not the devoted husband unless he tries to please his wife, never willingly disappointing her or causing her unhappiness. Mary does everything for her children, always with their good in mind. But seldom does the ordinary person realize that the words *devoted*, *devout*, *devotion*, have a higher and more sublime meaning when applied to a person with reference to God.

Devotion in its religious sense signifies a special act of the will by which one promptly and totally subjects himself to God. In reality we are all subject to the Providence of God whether we will it or not. We cannot escape His all-powerful will. But true devotion is voluntary and free. By devotion to God, we do not try to escape His laws and judgments but love them and see all that God wills as good and desirable above all material goods. The devoted man can say in his heart, "With my whole heart have I sought after Thee, let me not stray from Thy commandments. Thy words have I hidden in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee. I have been delighted in the way of Thy commandments as in all riches."¹ Nor is devotion a mere lip service to God but a subjection of one's whole being. With his lips the devoted person will pronounce all the judgments of God and praise

¹ Ps. cxviii, 10, 11, 14.

Him.² With his mind he will meditate on the commandments of God and consider His ways. With his whole being, body and soul, he will be exercised by God in God's wondrous works.³ And this subjection to God is not a temporary thing to be practiced on one day a week. Devotion to God cannot be only for an hour or a day, for God is good and worthy to be loved and obeyed every hour of every day of every year.

WORK OF DEVOTION

Devotion is an act of the virtue of religion, that is, an act of that good habit binding us to God and to His holy will. In reality devotion is due to God, much more than rent to the landlord or income tax to the government. For God is infinitely good and worthy of infinite praise and homage. Of course, we creatures cannot give Him infinite praise and homage. But we must give Him what we can and we can give Him all that we are and all that we possess. Even this is the same old story of the young son giving his father a birthday present. The father knows the box of cigars was purchased with allowance money he had given his son, yet he accepts the gift in the spirit given. God gave us all that we are and all we possess. When we return God's gifts in a spirit of devotion, He accepts them as the submission and reverence due to Him. And this is the work of devotion, to dedicate ourselves freely, willingly, to Him, without stint or reservation; to perform all the duties connected with His adoration and homage. The hearing of Mass on Sundays and days of obligation, daily prayer, fasting and other acts of mortification, the support of one's pastor, almsgiving, visiting the sick, a kind word said to one in distress, a silent prayer offered now and again for the souls in purgatory, all these and countless more are done promptly, with loving care by the devoted Catholic.

Now, any discussion of devotion offers us all an opportunity to learn devotedness and the means of advancing in the service of our Creator. It would indeed be incongruous for a Catholic to ask, "Why be devoted to God?" We believe that the end of mortal life is to be united with God forever. We have believed since our catechism days that we were born to know God, to love and serve Him on earth and to be happy with Him forever in heaven. This means that while we are yet alive we must work at the winning of eternal happiness; work in union with God on earth towards an eternity of union with Him in heaven. For we also believe that the supernal prize for which we run,

² *Ibid.* 13.

³ *Ibid.* 15, 27.

the heavenly beatific vision, will not be ours, unless, by prompt and willing subjection we be united to God now. The intent, therefore, of this mortal life is to become more and more under the command of God in all our thoughts, words and actions. The purpose of earthly life is to become constantly more devoted to God.

CAUSE OF DEVOTION

Hence it is of the utmost importance for us to know the cause from which devotion will flow into our hearts. We wish to know how we can joyfully subject ourselves more completely to God and how our wills can become more prompt in obedience to His. Devotion is the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field. How can we purchase a priceless gem? How shall we dig the difficult treasure? The price of the pearl and the tool for the treasure is meditation.

Now, before all else one must remember that the cause of all goodness and the bestower of all good things is God Himself. Hence, if one is devoted to God and His commandments, let him thank the Giver of this priceless grace; for God has taken his mind and heart and subjected them to His gentle control. But our Creator, the external cause of devotion, has allocated to secondary causes the internal inculcation of prompt and voluntary service to His Majesty. Here we begin to play our parts in becoming devoted sons of God.

Devotion, clearly, is an act of the will by which a man promptly gives himself over to the service of God; to a service not necessarily of consecration to God by vows or as a priest, but a service of such homage and obedience due to God from all His creatures. However, one's will is a blind power. It doesn't see or know. It loves and desires and reaches out after things already known to be good and desirable. The man who has never tasted deliciously roasted peanuts has no desire for them. The Catholic who does not realize the goodness of God and his own need for God's help, does not endeavor to subject himself to the prompt service of a loving Master. The purpose of our meditation, therefore, is to dissolve the fog of ignorance by showing us God as we know Him by faith and ourselves as we know ourselves from sad experience. Meditation is the mental tasting of God's goodness, the dwelling of our minds on the truths of faith, exposing God's loveliness to our understanding. One realizes how lovable He is, infinitely beyond our capacities to love Him. At the same time in our meditation we encounter the vast and tremendous mountain of our own sinfulness and lack of claim to any help from God. One experiences the irrepressible urge to run, run, run after God, as if it were possible to catch up to His goodness. One tries to hide from one's own wicked-

ness in the bottomless reservoir of God's love. He seeks to pay for the past and to purchase the future as far as he is able, by complete subjection to his Master in the present. Nothing is left but to serve and by service subtract from the debt that screams for payment. One realizes the weakness and rottenness of the pole of one's own actions by which he expected to vault into heaven, and discarding presumption, throws himself into the service of God.

DOMINIC'S WAY

The truths of faith and the debility and infirmity to which our human nature has become a prey since the fall of Adam and Eve are the subjects of our meditations. Undoubtedly there is an almost infinite variety of ways of meditation and subjects on which to think, since God's goodness has so many facets and our own sinfulness has so many shades of grey and black. But there is one way, one prayer which is dear to the heart of a Dominican. Our Blessed Mother gave to her client, St. Dominic, her psalter of Paters and Aves, the Rosary. Here is a prayer at once vocal and meditational. As he counts his beads, the lips of the lover move with words once spoken by Elizabeth, the servant of God, Gabriel, the Messenger of God, and Jesus Christ, God Himself. His thoughts caress and dwell on the scenes of our Salvation. The culmination of God's infinite goodness lives again on the stage of the mind. The glorious tragedy of the Son of God is enacted again in fifteen acts as the prayerful whisperer watches in adoration.

The stream of meditation and the bottomless pool of God's infinite goodness converge and spring up into a fountainhead of devotion pouring into the soul a spirit of service and subjection. In our Rosary we meditate on the goodness of God in the dawn of Salvation when the Son of God became subject to man. With Mary and Joseph we rejoice in the Joyful Mysteries. As the presence of God brought into their lives a heavenly joy, so the thought of God having come to earth for us, fills the contemplator with love, which is the bond of perfection, peace, which is the tranquility of order among men who love God, and joy, which is the fruit of devotion to God.

In our consideration of the Sorrowful Mysteries we see the infinite expression of God's infinite love for us. Incarnate Goodness suffers for consummate wickedness. The Most High God assumes the basest guilt, the sins of all men. That which had been scarlet becomes as white as snow. The flame of His love which moved Him to suffer for us enkindles the dry tinder of our wills, and with devotion we daily shoulder our crosses and follow Him.

The Glorious Mysteries show us the fruition of sorrow in the

glories of our risen Savior. His is the exemplar of our resurrection and the pledge of the joys of heaven which will be the fruit of a devoted life. The Holy Ghost comes to guide the Church of Christ and to sanctify our souls by our subjection to His inspirations. Mary, while not ceasing to be our Mother, is crowned our Queen. By service to the Queen we become subject to the King, because Mary's will is eternally united to that of her Son.

DOMINICAN DEVOTION

This is our Rosary, a prayer and a meditation. We dwell on and savor the goodness of God. We experience the vileness of sin. Christ did not kill Himself. Men killed Him. Could we have done such a thing had we been there? Could an Apostle betray his Master for thirty pieces of silver? Christ suffered for sin. Have we sinned, or was Christ's death for someone else, not us? We all have sinned and for our sins, each little one, Christ died.

If the prompt and voluntary service of God flows, as it most surely does, from loving meditation on His goodness and our own perfidy, then one of the foremost causes of devotion in our hearts is the recitation of Our Lady's Rosary. For in this prayer, which is at the same time both vocal and mental, the very apex of God's goodness, the death of His Son for our sins, is brought before our mind's eye; and we shudder at the nadir of human perfidy, Deicide. But for the grace of God, we also would take our places before the cross to calumniate and revile. But, by the grace of God bestowed on us through the Rosary, we take our places with Our Blessed Mother and the Saints in the ranks of the servants of the Most High, with a prompt and ready will, bondsmen and vassals of the Lord of all.

FRUIT OF DEVOTION—JOY

Now, the bondage of men bruises the spirit and bows the head. It frequently engenders fear and despair and servility. But the bondage of God frees the spirit in the supernatural world of God's radiant goodness. This bondage germinates joy and hope and filial love. This bondage which is devotion is bittersweet, the shuttle between tears and laughter. Devotion proceeds from a double consideration, that of the divine goodness and of our own defects. Principally, however, devoted service springs from the consideration of the divine goodness. But this supernal goodness is the term of the act of devotion. For by subjecting himself to God, one aims at the prize of life which is the enjoyment of divine goodness forever. In the contemplation of the eternally happy ending of a devoted life a spiritual joy and gladness per-

meates the soul. But since we are still fettered by our mortal bodies and cannot see the majesty and superexcellence of God face to face, we sorrow a little, impatient, as it were, to be joined to our Master forever without fear of ever losing Him.

From the realization of our own defects proceeds immediately and aptly a bitter sadness that we had ever offended so kind and loving a Lord. The state of sin and rebellion is the doleful condition from which the will flees by throwing itself into the divine service. Even though one be saddened by the remembrance of past offences, there tarries in his soul a glow of hope. It is a hope that gives birth to spiritual joy because it is the hope that God, in His loving kindness, will reach down from heaven by His grace to strengthen with struts and stays our weak resolve to serve Him always.

Devotion is bittersweet, blending joy and sorrow according to the measure of God. Devotion is a sunflower rooted in meditation; a sunflower that joyfully follows God wherever He leads. It grows and grows until it reaches God Himself. At last the flower yields the fruit of unending joy in the vision of God, face to face.