

CONSOLATIONS IN TEMPTATIONS AGAINST THE FAITH (Treatise of St. Vincent Ferrer)

Translated by
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In his preface to the *Treatise On The Spiritual Life* St. Vincent Ferrer says: "I wish to use but few words and to address myself to the humble and simple of heart, whose only desire is to accomplish what may appear to him to be most available for rendering himself pleasing to God."

In the treatise translated below St. Vincent again is speaking "to the humble and simple of heart." He is not speaking to the seekers of spiritual nosegays. He speaks from the heart, from his own experience in temptation. For those who are honestly striving to follow Christ, St. Vincent's words will be encouraging. They outline an attitude of confidence and cheerfulness in the face of the clever attacks of Satan.

For those who have never tried to follow Christ closely this treatise may not be impressive. Such people are not much concerned with temptations against the Faith. They are too busy offending against the teachings of that Faith. However, this treatise should be instructive to all. If we are not tempted internally we may soon perhaps be tempted externally, as many members of the Church militant in Europe and Asia.

It would not do for the translator to be verbose when the author was so brief. "Take and read."

INTRODUCTION



HERE OCCUR TO ME at this time nine consoling aids against the temptations or doubts that arise in the minds of devout people with regard to the profound matters of the Christian Faith. There are three by which the Faith is strengthened by means of the action of our guardian King; three by which the struggling servant is encouraged in the Faith; three by which the Faith is glorified in the face of the attacking enemy.

THE CONSOLING THOUGHT OF GOD

Our first consideration is the unlimited power of our King Himself, Jesus Christ—God and man. Through His merits the Catholic Faith is strengthened in the hearts of His creatures. God's power transcends all man's words, thoughts and ideas. He, as the Apostle says, "is able to do all things more abundantly than we desire or understand, according to the power that worketh in us" (*Eph. 3, 20*).

Thus, when some doubt arises in the mind about a marvelous mystery of the Faith, we should immediately rest secure in the almighty power of God. We read that, when the Blessed Virgin anxiously asked how she could conceive and yet remain an obedient virgin, the Angel comforted her by proclaiming the almighty power of God, saying "Because no word shall be impossible with God" (*Lu. 1, 37*). A servant of Christ faced with a temptation regarding a marvel of the Faith should similarly use the omnipotence of God as a weapon and say: "No word shall be impossible with God."

The second aid is His infallible truth. Just as the first Truth, God Himself can not be deceived, so He can not deceive. Richard of St. Victor, in his book on the Trinity, tells us why: "Since the incarnate truth of God, Christ, the Lord, has Himself taught us the mystery of the Christian Faith, we should certainly feel a great and consoling security relative to the teachings of the Faith. We can in no way be deceived by them, unless we are deceived by Him, Who can in no way be deceived, nor deceive." Augustine says in the second chapter of *The City of God*: "In order that man might more confidently attain to the truth, the Truth Itself, the Son of God, having become man, established and founded the Faith."

That being the case, the Christian, stalwart in the face of temptations against the Faith, should use as weapons the solid truths of Holy Scripture, after the example of Christ. He escaped His tempter not so much by power as by wisdom rooted in the authority of Holy Scripture. One can say with the Psalmist before each and every attack of temptation: "The truth of the Lord remaineth forever."

The third aid is God's incomprehensible Goodness. He is not only good in Himself and better than all others. He is absolutely sublime. Dionysius says, (*The Divine Names*, ch. 1), "He Himself is the complete essence of Goodness." It was fitting then that He accomplish the works of human redemption not merely well,

but even in a sublime way. According to the same Dionysius, "It belongs to the sublime to use sublime means." Most fittingly then did God become incarnate in the accomplishment of our redemption. In this way human nature was established in sublime being, that is, in divine being. Most fittingly did He preserve His Virgin Mother intact. In this way, she is made perfect according to a sublime degree of chastity. Most fittingly the God-man suffered and died for us, for, because of this, the human race is granted eternal life by a sublime right. Most fittingly also did He give His Body as food and His Blood as drink, for, in this way, man is fed with sublime nourishment for his spiritual life. The same is true of the other mysteries of our Faith.

Thus, against doubts about the Faith, as, for instance, why the mystery of man's redemption was accomplished as it was and not in some other way, the servant of Christ ought to be forearmed by what was written of the works of creation: "God saw all the things that he had made, and they were very good" (*Gen. 1*).

THE FAITHFUL ENCOURAGED BY THESE TEMPTATIONS

The servant of God, who is tempted against the Faith, should be consoled first of all, because he is purged of sin by such temptations. In the ordinary case, a man is allowed to be struck by temptations against the Faith as a punishment for some previous arrogance. Hence the Sacred Doctors teach that it was not without significance that, of the Apostles, Peter was struck with temptations against the Faith. He presumed in his own strength in a singular manner.

Now the devout servant of Christ patiently, even joyfully bears the punishing labors and afflictions of the body because of his hope of overcoming sin. He should, of course, bear the wearisome and disturbing spiritual attacks on his Faith just as patiently and joyfully, strong in the Faith. In this way will he be preserved from the sin of arrogance, which is particularly displeasing to the Lord. This is in accord with what is said by St. Peter: "Now you must for a little time made sorrowful in divers temptations: that (there may be) the trial of your faith, much more precious than gold which is tried by the fire."

In the second place, man is made strong in the Faith. The true Faith of a Christian grows in an special way in the midst of temptation and is strengthened by tribulations. Hence we read

that, when the Apostles besought the Lord: "Increase our faith," the Lord said, showing them how to act: "If you had faith like to a grain of mustard seed, you might say to this mulberry tree: Be thou rooted up and be thou transplanted into the sea. And it would obey you." According to St. Gregory, in his book, *On Morals*, the Lord has compared the Faith to a grain of mustard seed for the following reason: Just as the power of the tiny mustard seed is made known and waxes greater after it has been ground, so the true Faith of a Christian is particularly perfected in strength when rudely ground by the millstone of temptation.

Thus the devout and faithful servant of Christ ought to rejoice in the Lord when, firm in the Faith, he is troubled by temptations about the Faith itself. St. James has told us "Count it all joy when you shall fall into divers temptations: knowing that the trying of your faith worketh patience. And patience hath a perfect work: that you may be perfect and entire, failing in nothing" (*James* 1).

In the third place, our life is ennobled by temptations of this kind. Since spiritual persons, by divine arrangement, are allowed to be tempted in this world, according to their strength and capacity (as the Apostle says, *I Cor.* 10), it is a strong proof of spiritual strength and nobility in a man, if he be exposed to great temptations, such as temptations against the Faith. It is a matter of great joy and consolation for the faithful of Christ to see themselves, like the noble saints, strong in the Faith, though hard pressed by temptations against Faith. In this regard the Apostle says: "Giving thanks to God, the Father, who hath made us worthy to be partakers of the lot of the saints in light" (that is in Faith): "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness" (the absence of Faith), (*Coloss.* 1).

ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

In this there is real glory for the Faith over the attacking enemy.

In the first place the Faith is not easily wrecked by the enemy. According to St. Augustine, commenting on St. John, it is the foundation of the whole spiritual edifice in man. Hence, though the whole spiritual man trembles with fear at a slight blow given to a spiritual foundation of this sort, still it is extremely rare that the Faith collapses, just as, in the destroying of a building, the foundation must be reached last. Thus, according to the Doctors of Theology, though all the infused virtues

are lost by any mortal sin, still Faith and Hope remain. Even in the demons and the damned, all other virtues being totally destroyed and annihilated, Faith alone perdures immovably.

Generally then, the intention of the devil in striking at the Faith of a servant of Christ is not to cast him into the abyss of infidelity. Rather it is done in order that the man, suffering fear and sadness, may lose his sweetness of spirit and devotion in prayer. Then, putting aside his zeal for contemplation, he may become immersed in business and secular occupations. In the Lives of the Fathers we read that this happened to many of them. "No man being a soldier to God, entangleth himself with secular businesses: that he may please him to whom he hath engaged himself" (II *Tim.* 2).

Therefore let the servant of Christ take care lest he be overcome by the tedium or annoyance of temptations of this sort. Let him not, by way of remedy, occupy himself with unnecessary or superfluous activities, while at the same time putting off his spiritual exercises. On the contrary, as often as he feels himself struck in the foundation of the Faith, let him remain firm in his spiritual purpose and say with the Apostle: "Other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid: which is Christ Jesus" (I *Cor.* 3). According to the gloss this foundation is the Faith of Christ. Another noteworthy comment on this text is that of Augustine in his book on Faith and works: "By Christ's grace, the Faith, working through love, allows no one to perish, when it is fixed as a foundation."

In the second place we are encouraged to be brave and cheerful in the face of the enemy. The rarity of defections from the Faith depends upon how bravely and cheerfully temptations against the Faith are borne.

Thus, in temptations of this sort the best way to vanquish the enemy is by way of magnanimity and joyfulness. We read in the Lives of the Fathers that the blessed Anthony so instructed his followers. Since, as we have noted, the principal intention of the enemy in suggesting temptations of this kind is to reduce the servant of Christ to sadness because of fear; and to transform the sweetness of the spiritual life into bitterness, certainly the devil is already in great part overcome when the servant of Christ sustains such temptations with cheerfulness and magnanimity. When the evil spirit, worn out by the strength of the Faith, ceases attacking with this sort of temptation, it seems to me excellent counsel to the servant of Christ that he

again provoke the spirit to battle contemptuously and almost mockingly. Let him do this from the strength and joy of his heart. Let him say with the blessed Vincent: "Stand up wretch, and rage with all the malignity of your spirit. You will see me, though tormented, more able by God's strength than you are who do the tormenting."

In the third place, the enemy himself is outrageously reduced to ridicule by the Faith. The ancient enemy, desirous of carrying away the merits of the spiritual life from the servant of Christ by temptations of this kind, forges instead, against his will, an excellent crown of glory. The devil himself, like an iron worker, places the iron of temptation in the furnace of the heart so that there may be produced a chain for the feet of the devout person. However, when his temptations are resisted by the virtue of Faith, then, by divine Providence, the iron of temptations is converted into the gold of consolation and merit; the chain for the feet is made a crown for the head and the evil worker himself, contrary to his intention, becomes a silver or goldsmith.

Augustine says in the second chapter of *The City of God*: "The demons are useful to us. In tempting us they forge our crowns." In the Lives of the Fathers we read that it was revealed to an old man that a disciple of his had gained seven very beautiful crowns in one night because, though seven times fatigued to the point of sleeping, he had not allowed himself to slumber. Much more then will a devout servant of Christ gain glorious crowns in heaven if, strong in the Faith, he sustains the wearisome temptations against the Faith. "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for, when he hath been proved he shall receive the crown of life which God hath promised to them that love Him" (*St. James* 1). Then he will be able to say with the Apostle: "I have fought a good fight: I have finished my course: I have kept the faith. As to the rest there is laid up for me a crown of justice which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day" (*II Tim.* 4).

Beyond the above listed remedies and spiritual helps in temptations against the Faith, there are three other general helps. They are earnest reading, devout prayer, and divine consolation.

As to reading, the book entitled *Summa De Virtutibus*,¹ which

¹ Work of Wm. Peraldi, O.P., who was a follower of St. Thomas.

begins: "Since we ought to study useful things . . ." seems very much to the point.

A prayer which seems to be quite fitting is the frequent repetition of the Psalm, beginning, "How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me unto the end?"

Spiritual consolation, however, is freely poured into all who seek God. He is "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort: Who comforteth us in all our tribulation" (II *Cor.* 1). Amen.

Thanks be to God.