

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teaching and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (Cf. LCO 16).

REMEDIES FOR THE TEMPTATION TO EXCESSIVE STUDY

The Venerable Louis of Granada, O.P. (1505-1588)

Editor's note: Monastic rules give a central place to manual labor in the life of the monk. The rule of the friars preachers, however, replaced this monastic "labora" with the study of sacred truth as an essential element of our life. It is only right, then, that the Order of Preachers should prize its intellectual tradition. Yet the very rule that gives such primacy of place to study also warns that pride can corrupt even the noblest of endeavors. In the text that follows, Venerable Louis of Granada, O.P. offers us—from the abundance of his study and contemplation—sage advice and salutary caution: Study without love ceases to be meritorious.

The first remedy for the temptation to excessive study is to consider how much more excellent virtue is than wisdom, and how much more excellent divine wisdom is than human wisdom: in this way, man can see how much more he should occupy his time with exercises that strive for the one rather than the other.

Perhaps you wonder, is this in Scripture? Look at what Sirach says: "How great is the one who finds wisdom and knowledge! Yet no one is greater than the man who fears God. This is because the

fear of God has placed him above all other things.”ⁱ Moreover, look at what St. Augustine writes:

Men place great esteem in the knowledge of the things of heaven and earth, but those who supplant this knowledge with self-understanding are of greater esteem; more praiseworthy is the soul who knows his weakness than he who, forgetting this understanding, works to know the pathways of the stars, not knowing by which paths to approach Heaven.ⁱⁱ

Even if worldly wisdom had all the greatness it might desire, it would not be able to rid itself of one monumental misery: The shared enjoyment that stems from worldly wisdom will end with life. What could be more miserable than to acquire, with so much work, something that will endure for so short a time? St. Jerome once described a philosopher who wept as he lay dying—the awareness was heavy upon him that he was ending his life only as he was beginning to be wise.ⁱⁱⁱ

Truly, if there is any worldly loss worthy of sorrow, it is the death of a great sage, for he leaves behind a skull filled with a multitude of marvels and secrets, only to be laid under the earth. This is the way of human wisdom; thus it is great prudence to accept the council of the Savior: “Do not wish to store up riches on earth, where rust and moths destroy, and where thieves break in and steal; rather, work to store up treasures in heaven, where none of this has a place and where goods will be eternally secure.”^{iv}

According to these words, how much greater is it to be engaged in acts of charity than in the speculations of human understanding? The fruit of the one endures forever, and the other—if it is not born of the same charity and grace—ends with this life.

Consider how much better a home built on a perpetual promise is than one built on a promise with a lifelong duration; even greater than this is the greatness of the exercise of charity above that of human knowledge. And if you desperately desire knowledge, wait

a little while. Do not be in such a hurry; all that you can know here is as nothing. But if you exercise yourself in the love of God, you will go swiftly to see him, and in him you will see all things.

Additionally, you should remember judgment day, when—as one saint says—we will not be asked what we have read, but what we have done; and not how well we have spoken or preached, but how well we have lived.^v This consideration, when pondered, was sufficient to convince all those who wished to attain true knowledge. Tell me: what in the world is better than discovering how to please God and how to become pleasing before Him? And what pleases him more than charity?

This is the only thing that pleases him, and only by charity is anything made pleasing to him. This charity is that by which we will be examined and judged, and it is the measure by which our works will be rewarded. For it is true to say that if, on the one hand, a man possessed (notice: I do not say “learned”) all the knowledge in the world, and preached and converted all the nations of the world, while, on the other hand, an old woman who has done none of this should be found with more charity, then it cannot be doubted that she would be found more pleasing to God, and she would have a larger share in him.

Accordingly, we cannot doubt that the life which assists in achieving the virtue of charity is greater, and that those actions are more on the mark. We are certain that the exercises and acts of the contemplative life are more helpful for this end than any other, so it follows that these acts of charity should be the best and most excellent of all. Oh, if only you knew how many people there are in the world who never learned syllogisms nor converted souls, and yet in the eyes of God are more pleasing than the many great, wise men and preachers of the world! Thus, my brother, if you desire to achieve the better part, examine here the sure path and be sure that you can follow it. I do not say these things so that you abandon all study, but so that you may carry it out in the manner that St. Augustine advises: “We ought not to be continuous in disputation and slothful in prayer.”^{vi}



NICOLAS POUSSIN - ET IN ARCADIA EGO

In addition to this, all law and all natural reason teaches us that we ought to undertake the work of study just as we engage in other works: We should not forget ourselves, nor exchange what is greater for what is lesser. As St. John Chrysostom says, great condemnation is reserved for the man who works much at grinding and polishing his speech, and yet does not strive to arrange and compose his life. We gain little for the composition of our speech, but much for the character of our life. What great madness is it to have inordinate care for so little gain and such carelessness for so much gain?

This is what St. Bernard strongly writes to Pope Eugenius:

Let your consideration begin with yourself, lest, while you neglect yourself, you vainly extend yourself to other things. What does it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul? Though you may be wise in one sense, you

lack wisdom if you do not belong to yourself. And how much do you lack wisdom? In my opinion, completely. Though you know all the mysteries of the Scriptures, though you know the breadth of the earth, the height of the heavens, and the depth of the sea, if you know not yourself, you will be like a man building without a foundation, doing work doomed to fail.

Whatever structure you raise outside yourself will be like a heap of dust before the wind. He, therefore, is not wise who is not wise toward himself. The wise man will be wise toward himself, and will first of all drink from his own well. Let your consideration be for yourself; and do not let it end there. Wherever you go, look that you go by this path that you may finally return. To yourself, be the first and the last. Imitate the example of the great Father of all, who in this way produces and sends forth that eternal Word and keeps it with him.

Your attention is your “word.” If it goes forth, watch that it returns; do not let it desert you altogether. Regarding that which affects your health,^{vii} you ought to have no closer neighbor or brother than the only son of your mother, which is to say yourself. That which is contrary to your health should not be thought. I have said less about what you ought to say because I will not say something contrary to your health; moreover anything contrary to your health ought not be admitted.^{viii}

In these words, St. Bernard manifests how jealous a lover a man should be of his health and how he ought to understand the external world so as to do no harm to himself.

This alone was enough to convince the studious that, as much as they give themselves to study and the advancement of others, so much should they guard themselves from exploiting others for

the sake of their study, even if this exploitation is minor. For the law of charity does not license anyone to take advantage of another to his detriment. Moreover, what if we proved that this path of caring for oneself not only does not impair the advancement of neighbors, but even significantly enhances it to great advantage? What if the only true path to the advancement of others is one's own advancement?

Know for sure, my brother, that if you truly wish to advance, there is no other means more proportionate to this than a good life, and the exercise of prayer and meditation by which this is achieved. I could prove this with many strong reasons, but for the sake of brevity in this volume I will content myself with presenting just a few.

First, it is clear that the principal instrument required for advancement is true wisdom. To reach this wisdom, what is more important than fear of the Lord, a good life, the practice and daily exercise of the virtue, attention, and continuous meditation on the law of God? What does Sacred Scripture repeat more often than the fact that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and that the fullness of all wisdom is this same fear?^{ix} Without these means it is impossible to achieve this virtue, as St. Augustine makes clear: There are many who are greedy for knowledge, but neglect the guarding of justice; they should be warned that they will not achieve what they desire but rather are guarding what they despise. As the Scriptures say: "My son, if you desire wisdom, guard justice, and the Lord will give it to you."^x This is God-given, one of the principal gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, more is achieved by tears than by disputes, and more by prayers than by actions. As St. Augustine says: "Those who have learned from Christ to be meek and humble of heart learn more from prayer and meditation than from reading and studying."^{xi} If this wisdom is the principal instrument for the enjoyment of other things, how can we not use the preceding means by which she is reached?

Second, since converting souls is one of the highest supernatural works, it is indispensable to overcome depraved nature, evil habits—which are little weaker than nature itself—and above all the strength and power of the Enemy, who strongly holds imprisoned and enchained the hearts of his own. In order to defeat such great forces, another, greater force is necessary—one which does not exist on earth, but is found in Heaven; it is not reached so much by study and speculation as by tears and supplications, and the merits of a life well lived.

Those who are converted to God are sons of tears no less than words, nor does prayer take a lesser part in conversions than preaching. Just as the prayers of Moses had more to do with the victory against Amalek^{xii} than all the swords of the Israelites, so must we believe that no less a part is played by the prayer and supplication of the true preacher in order to attain victory, than by all his opinions and words, even if they are well-crafted.

Third, as is found in experience, people sin more through their affections and passions than by ignorance of the truth. So he who attempts their cure ought to work more to move their wills than to teach them through their understanding. Every great master of rhetoric shows there is nothing more important for one who would pretend to move others than to be truly moved within himself. As Quintilian affirms:

The height of this work, all that I can reach, is that if we wish to move the hearts of others, our hearts must be moved. Moreover, our prayer must flow from the same spirit. How is it possible for another to mourn who sees that I do not mourn myself? How should he be outraged who sees that I myself am not outraged? How will he weep who sees me speak with dry eyes? It is impossible because nothing is ignited without fire, nor dampened without water; nor is something able to give the color it does not itself possess.^{xiii}

Accordingly, who would doubt that the one who has no understanding, and yet cries and experiences the things of God day and night, would have greater and more profound affection than another who, for all his knowledge, never shed a single tear for the Lord?

Fourth, as Tully says, eloquence that does not instill admiration in its listeners is worthless. If this approach to eloquence is required for human affairs, how much more is it required to treat divine affairs, to rescue man from sin and defeat the forces of the Enemy, which—since they are supernatural—require spiritual and supernatural eloquence? For reaching this level of eloquence, nothing is more suited than the Spirit of God; thus it can be said sparks shine forth from this Spirit in the words of the speaker. For just as this Spirit exceeds all that exists in natural faculties, so there is nothing that better attracts and captures the hearts of men and leads them to the admiration of God than a single spark from him. In it they recognize the power and strength of the Holy Spirit; they humble themselves and lower their weapons, saying with Pharaoh’s magicians, “the finger of God is here.”^{xiv}

Above all, another help is available that should be taken advantage of: the life of the preacher.^{xv} For there is no greater argument for belief that speaks to the heart than a life conformed to doctrine—to see him do what he says. This is the best and most efficacious of sermons, and it is most advantageous to its listeners. Sanctity of life is a supernatural and divine good, and the just are as tongues and temples of the Holy Spirit, thus, all men possess a certain devotion and reverence, which is more than human, for these holy men. They watch and listen to them not as men, but as if they were angels; not as inhabitants of the earth, but as citizens of Heaven. Their acts and words are regarded as treasures from the Holy Spirit.

When well considered, this clearly demonstrates what is involved in bringing another person to act as the teacher acts. To teach and make others virtuous, the teacher must be virtuous. As

the philosophers write, one thing begets another of the same kind. Man begets man and beast begets beast. What more powerfully begets virtue than another virtue?

Therefore it is advisable that those who truly seek God and not themselves should know neither honors, nor liberties, nor dignities, nor imperiousness, nor authority, but only edification, thereby assisting their own hearts. As the Apostle writes to Timothy, “Look to yourself and your teachings, because in this way you will be able to save yourself and those who hear you.”^{xvi}

Thus, citizens will first desire your life and second your teachings. He that has already partaken of his teaching is advantageous for others. This truth is made manifest in trees that have grown for their own good, but then bear fruit for the good of their owners. Just so, the preacher tastes of what he preaches in order to be useful for others; according to the measure of his benefitting will he be of benefit to his listeners.

Translated by Tomás Martín Rosado, O.P.

Tomás Martín Rosado entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Sir. 25:13.

ⁱⁱ *De Trinitate*, IV: PL 42,885.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Eusebius, *De Morte Hieronymi*: PL 22,2411.

^{iv} Mt. 6:19.

^v Cf. *Contemptus Mundi*, I,3.

^{vi} *In Ps.* 118, sermo 6: PL 37, 1516.

^{vii} St. Bernard and Ven. Louis are playing with the meaning of health and salvation—Trans.

^{viii} *De Consideratione*, II, 3: PL 182, 745-746.

^{ix} Cf. Ps. 110:10; Sir. 1:16

^x Sir. 1:33

^{xi} *In Ps.* 118, sermo 6: PL 37, 1516.

^{xii} Cf. Ex. 17:8-13

^{xiii} M.F. Quintilian, *Institutionis Oratoriae*, I,1.

^{xiv} Ex. 8:19

^{xv} Seneca, *Epistola LXX*: “Longum iter per verba est; breve et efficax per exempla.”

^{xvi} I Tim. 4:16

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