

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teachings and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (See Liber constitutionum et ordinationum 160).

TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Girolamo Savonarola, O.P.

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Many books have been written concerning the life and times of fra Girolamo Savonarola, one of the Renaissance's apocalyptic voices. He was born in Ferrara in 1452 and entered the Order of Preachers at San Domenico in Bologna in 1475, serving variously as novice master, lector, and itinerant preacher. Toward the end of his life he famously preached many series of sermons at San Marco and the cathedral of Florence, which inspired both many conversions and a popular revolution in the city. This political turmoil led eventually to his papal excommunication and his execution. While the details of his life are well documented, his legacy is disputed. Was Savonarola a holdover from the Middle Ages or a herald of modernity, a theocrat or a republican, a true prophet or a fraudulent doomsayer, a defender of Catholic tradition or a proto-Protestant Reformer? Was he a villain or a saint?

It is the opinion of this translator that judging by the sermons and other works that have been passed down to us, by the overwhelmingly favorable reception of Savonarola in the Order since his death, and by the witness of saints devoted to Savonarola (St. Philip Neri, St. Catherine de' Ricci, and Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati come to mind), this friar from Ferrara is a holy (if complicated) preacher of the Word of God. In our own day, we would surely profit from heeding the Truth he was sent to proclaim.

The following selection is an excerpt from Savonarola's Italian *Treatise on the Love of Christ*.



Moretto da Brescia — Portrait of a Dominican, presumed to be
Girolamo Savonarola

A note on Biblical citations: In this text, Savonarola cites the Scriptures in Latin. I have used English translations wherever Savonarola simply cited the Bible. In a few places, I have kept the Latin and translated Savonarola's elaborated translations from the original Italian.

WHAT GREAT PRIZE CAN THEY EXPECT WHO LOVE JESUS
CHRIST WITH ALL THEIR HEART UNTIL THEIR DEATH

I want to demonstrate that the lovers of Jesus will not only have present consolation, but even more that they will also have a prize so great that there is no intellect high enough in the world able to understand it. First, I will prove this through Holy Scripture. The Apostle says in the second chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians: "*Oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit, quae praeparavit Deus iis qui diligunt illum*" (1 Cor 2:9): Eye has never seen, nor has ear ever heard, nor has it ever dawned in the human heart, what God has prepared for his lovers. Therefore, this prize is so great that it surpasses not only the power of the senses but even that of the human intellect.

Moreover, this can be shown by reason. For God has ordered man toward a beatitude that consists in the vision of the divine essence and its fruition. This is demonstrated by the natural desire in the heart of man that cannot be satisfied in any creature even if it were among the angelic hierarchies, because seeing the beauty of the angels, it would have a supreme desire to see their creator, and therefore it would be uneasy and anxious until it saw the face of God. To whom should this infinite and eternal beatitude be given if not to the lovers of Jesus who have subjected all of their wishes to his commandments and for whose honor they suffer many trials in this world? And that this happiness is great and immense is manifested in the first place by this: that God is infinite, ineffable, incomprehensible, and more excellent than any created thing and the whole universe together, without any comparison since there is [between them] infinite distance. Nevertheless, in beatitude the

rational creature is so elevated that she joins herself to this infinite good by knowledge and love and transforms herself entirely into him. The eye of the intellect becomes so strong that without any harm it peers into that inaccessible light and contemplates fearlessly that infinite and most strong majesty. Moreover, with great security, [the creature] embraces him not only as lord but also as a friend, rather as her most sweet spouse. And this security increases joy, because she knows that this ultimate happiness is without end; and everything she sees—present or past or future—generates joy in her heart and she cannot in any way be saddened, but always, without tedium, she remains in continual jubilation and exultation of mind.

And although I am unable to express the greatness of such a prize, it can nevertheless be known that it is an inestimable reality, if we consider that which the saints have suffered, especially the martyrs. Among these, the ones who most rouse our minds, which are slow to believe great things about the next life, are those who used to be rich and excellent in doctrine who, so as not to lose such a prize, suffered not only the decimation of their own possessions but even harsh martyrdoms and cruel death. They would not have endured these things if they had not certainty concerning the next life because, being very wise, as was especially Dionysius the Areopagite, they would not have moved towards these lightly.

Here I could say many things about such happiness, but I'll leave them, because this happiness can be known better through an interior instinct of the Holy Spirit and through devout contemplation than through human persuasion. One thing alone I would like to note for beginners: That if the tears and sighs in the prayer and contemplation of Jesus's servants are so sweet that for them they leave all other worldly consolations; and if that sweetness of spirit is so sweet that the saints not only patiently, but willingly, even joyfully suffer every tribulation; now what will be in that heavenly homeland when God will lovingly dry the tears from the saints and give repose to their sighs and thus will surround them with every consolation? Surely, there is no intellect

that can understand this beatitude, nor tongue that can express it, therefore, I will finish here.

HOW THE LOVE OF SWEET JESUS IS GAINED

Having said that without the love of Jesus no one is saved, and that to love Jesus is a most sweet thing, and that he who loves him awaits a great prize, perhaps, by these words, one may be enkindled to want to love him. And so, I intend with divine help here to discuss how this love can be gained. And even though to treat of this would be more fitting to those who are more expert than I, nonetheless, because I was asked to do it, I will say that which I feel.

It seems to me, therefore, that he who wants to gain the love of Jesus should first raise his affection totally from earthly things, him having said: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). As a result, it is necessary for him who wants to save himself and to love God sufficiently unto salvation to raise his affection from earthly things, so that his end is not placed in these. But for him who wants to gain a perfect love it is not enough to elevate the affections but moreover he must, if he can, effectively leave behind all the things of the world and, poor and naked, follow Christ Jesus. For, even though a rich man might be perfect in the love of Jesus while not leaving his riches—as were Abraham and David and King Saint Louis, and many others—nevertheless it is a great burden to be able to be saved amid riches, let alone to achieve such perfection. And these were few, especially compared to those who have abandoned the world. So said the Savior: “It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:23). And it is written in Ecclesiasticus: “Blessed is the rich man who is found blameless, and who does not go after gold, and who did not hope in treasures. Who is he? And we will call him blessed, for he has done wonderful things among his people” (Sir 31:8–9). He esteems it as a marvel that the rich man be

not tangled in his riches, because of the great difficulty that it is to have temporal things and not to place one's affection in them. And thus, whoever wants to make himself perfect in the love of Jesus, may he raise himself up with the affections and with effect from the world. Take note that I don't mean from great things alone, but even from the small ones; for there are many who have left behind great things and still, having later put their affection on minutiae, remain sterile and infertile on the way of God. And so many religious never make any profit in the cloister due to this affection they have for tiny things, like little books, small knives, and other knick-knacks. To them such an affection does not seem to be a sin, or that if it is a sin, it is small, and thus they do not guard themselves and are tempted by the devil. And they do not know that these affections, even though they are miniscule, remove them from the way of perfection and distance them much from the Spirit, much more dangerously if they are in a more perfect religious order. I do not say this by myself, rather it has been preached and approved by all the holy fathers, and the present-day experience demonstrates it to us. So say the holy experts in religion, that it behooves one to subtly examine his conscience and to penetrate neither feignedly nor lukewarmly the secret of his heart, and if he finds it again to be inclined to earthly things, he must quickly return it to heavenly ones and leave behind even tiny things, and not to have for his use anything except the necessities for corporeal or spiritual life, and better less than much. And this he will be able to do easily if he contemplates often the vanity of passing things and death which is near.

Whoever observes that which I have said should not therefore believe himself to be a perfect lover of Jesus. Rather, there is a need for him to recollect himself within himself and to consider his own misery, both corporeal and spiritual, and his sins and his weakness, and that he humble himself much before God, knowing himself to need God in all things and contemplating that he not only cannot do but cannot even think any good without him. He needs to have this recognition not through sure

knowledge, as even sinners have it, but through long experience of his own frailty. Consequently, he needs to be on top of the custody of his own life and to diligently consider his own defects every day. And since he easily falls from good resolutions he must fall back on God and with contrition and tears every day ask for the aid of Jesus, humbling himself not only before [Jesus] but even before his inferiors, considering himself least not with the tongue but with the mind and heart due to his reflection on his own defects, interior and exterior, and deeming himself not to be worthy of such a state. Because reflecting every hour on his own lacks and on the other hand the great kindness of Jesus—who does not cease rousing him to do good and giving him many inspirations and receiving him kindly in prayer, not ever taking offense from his sins nor from his indignities repeated every day—and recurring often to prayer, prostrate before the holy feet, he will not be able to help but to grow little by little in the love and the knowledge of his Creator and Redeemer, who will secretly open the eyes of his intellect. Then he will begin to contemplate eternal things, no longer holding in esteem the whole world nor his own glory, from which he must guard himself as if from poison. Moreover, like him who has tasted a drop of Jesus's sweetness, he will ever seek to distance himself from any other care to be able to remain with Jesus in prayer and contemplation. If anyone, therefore, has arrived at this state, it would seem to me that he would begin to give himself over greatly to contemplation of the goodness of God in the Incarnation of his only Begotten Son, contemplating all the things he did in this world and preeminently his Passion and Death for our love. And so, little by little he will grow from humanity to divinity, and here that charity will be made perfect that will make his heart burn with love of Jesus. Few gain this state. Not for this should anyone despair but rather he should grow in fervor to attain it. Because, if he continues with prayer and contemplation and other pious deeds, he will in any case attain to great perfection even if in a long time, and [in a] greater or lesser [degree] depending on how far God will deign to stretch his benevolent hand and depending on how

diligent and solicitous he will be to good and holy works. Note, however, that when contemplating, a man must follow more the instinct of the Holy Spirit than his own orders. Hence, if you had decided to contemplate one thing at a certain time and then within that hour of contemplation the Spirit within you encouraged you toward another, you must follow the interior instinct and not your own view.

But since the instinct of the Holy Spirit teaches better than human words on how to contemplate, it seems to me better to make an end of this here than to elongate words unnecessarily.

HOW TO MAINTAIN THE LOVE OF JESUS ONCE GAINED

It is not enough to gain divine love if, once gained, it is not maintained until the end, for Our Lord said: “Whoever perseveres until the end, this one will be saved” (Mt 24:12). Therefore, it seems to me necessary to say how to maintain this love, however much God will give me or has given me to understand.

Then, after the soul feels itself enkindled by this sweet love, tasting a spark from the heavenly things, she must keep continuous care of herself. In this way, so far as it is possible for her frailty, she will not offend the eyes of sweet Jesus who has given her such treasure, considering how great her ingratitude would be if, through her own negligence, she separated herself from him. So much more must she remain in fear the more she has tasted his sweetness and proved her own infirmity, especially given what the Apostle Paul said to the Hebrews: “*Impossibile est eos qui semel sunt illuminati et gustaverunt etiam donum caeleste, et participes facti sunt Spiritus Sancti, gustaverunt nihilominus bonum Dei verbum, virtutesque saeculi venturi, et prolapsi sunt, rursus renovari ad poenitentiam*” (Heb 6:4–6). It’s an impossible thing, that is to say very difficult, for those who were once enlightened by God and have tasted his heavenly gift and have been made participants of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good Word of God, having joy in the hope for the virtues and for the glory of the future age, and have then

fallen into mortal sin, that they would again raise themselves up to penitence. And of this difficulty we have continual experience in the religious orders. Never has it been seen, or rarely, that a religious comes back to true penitence who once has fallen out of the religious state, and much less the greater was his position or fervor in the cloister. And we see through experience that to these one cannot preach but in vain, because they receive no correction, as if they were despised by God, according to Solomon's saying in Ecclesiastes: "Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what God has made crooked?" (Eccl 7:13). And so, he must remain in great fear who tastes the love of Jesus, as the Apostle says: "He who stands, let him see to it that he does not fall" (1 Cor 10:12) and "you stand fast only through faith. So, do not become proud but stand in awe" (Rom 11:20). But he is reputed to be blessed who always remains in the fear of the Lord, as says the Scripture: "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord always" (Prv 28:14).

It is not necessary only to be shy of falling into mortal sin and to separate oneself from the good and kind Jesus but also to remain in fear of not becoming lukewarm and negligent. Thus, this terrible sentence is written in the Apocalypse: "*Utinam calidus aut frigidus esses, sed quia tepidus es neque calidus neque frigidus, incipiam te evomere ex ore meo*" (Rv 3:15–16). I desire that you be hot or cold, that is fervent or a great sinner; but since you are neither one nor the other but lukewarm and negligent I will begin to hold you as an abomination, as is the food to the sick man once he has vomited it. God does not say this because he is pleased with sinners but to show how displeasing he finds the lukewarm. He lets it be understood that a great sinner can be converted to a greater perfection than can one who is lukewarm. This too proves itself true every day among religious orders, in which never has it been seen, or rarely, that a lukewarm religious resurfaces to great fervor. Rather, doing everything in the cloister through a certain customariness, he does not receive correction humbly in his heart, but almost through a servile fear he observes the Rule, thinking nothing but on present things. And so, little by little, he loses merit

and becomes a gossip and loses time and often breaks out in great impatience, and he delights in eating and drinking well and in being dispensed much, saying that he is weak or that he cannot live so austerely, and he says few prayers and much drivel. And one sees many of such type, whose state is very dangerous; many of them are seen to jump out of their religious orders; and no one sees them ever return to spiritual fervor. But one can often see great sinners come to penitence and make themselves very fervent in the love of Jesus. So that, it is necessary to be vigilant and to continuously excite oneself to greater fervor, considering that whoever does not continue to make profit and gain in the love of Jesus necessarily turns around. This turning, as I have said, is very dangerous.

Still it seems to me that it is necessary to consider and foresee often the temptations that could truly come to be. For example, when a man sees himself in a tranquil state, he should think about the persecutions and humiliations that could happen to him and, in his mind, arm himself against them and pray to God that he strengthen his soul against them should they come to pass. This Job did when he was in prosperity, and so he was later strong in adversity. Because tribulations foreseen wound less. So said Saint Job: "For the thing that I fear comes upon me" (Job 3:25). Similarly, when a man is of low estate according to the world, he must think of escaping every dignity and human glory, considering everything to be vain and that there is nothing he could have more likely to make him fall from the love of Jesus and his sweetness than external dignities. And so, he must be solicitous to flee from every glory and to present himself as contemptible to the outside, but not with scandal to his neighbors, but hiding his treasure, not revealing himself to the outside except as pertains to the glory of God and the salvation of his neighbors. Also, the lover of Jesus, as he is able, must flee human conversations even if they are good, because the Bridegroom of the soul is shy and does not want to embrace the bride that is, our soul, in the presence of others. Rather, he says through the mouth of the Prophet: "I will lead her into solitude and speak to her heart" (Hos 2:14). And

especially he must flee conversations with women even if they are devout, because they are very dangerous, more so if under the guise of religion one becomes very familiar with them and the devil subtly sows sensual passions amid devout things. Similarly, a man should flee all company that he knows to be detrimental to the spirit. Also, he must often flee from speaking, because talking too much, even about good things, makes a man very lukewarm and makes him lose his fervor because as St. James says: “if anyone makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man” (Jas 3:2).

Many other things could be said, but you already know the love of Jesus and the other virtues, in what ways and works they are gained, and by which ones they are retained. And so, it is necessary to do everything with fervor and promptness of will, and, if it is possible, to actually order it toward God, and to be assiduous in contemplation, and especially to contemplate often and chew on the lives of the holy fathers of the past and of all the saints, because these greatly comfort the heart and confirm it in the love of Jesus. Lastly, since perseverance is a gift from God, the man in love with Jesus must daily pray the omnipotent God to grant it to him, to make him persevere in that love until the end. Doing so, he will be able to maintain this most sweet love.

WHAT PAIN AWAITS HIM WHO DOES NOT LOVE JESUS

Lastly, we see what pain awaits him who does not love Jesus, so that, if anyone reading were not stirred by love, at least he may be moved by fear. Take note, then, that every pain is the privation of some good, as corporal illness is a pain because it deprives the body of health which is its good. And so, greater is the pain that deprives of a greater good. Since they who will not love Jesus will be deprived of the vision of infinite goodness, their greatest pain will be to see themselves excluded and separated as unworthy of such vision and of the company of the blessed whom they will know to be rejoicing in heaven. They will also have great mental suffering when they see themselves enclosed in external shadows in the

company of cruel and insatiable demons, where they will not see anything but hideous and sorrowful things. The reunion with the body will increase their pain, for it will have continual affliction in fire. It will be fetid and dark, with cries and the grinding of teeth. And above all will the irreversibility worsen their pain, as they reflect that they are never to leave. I believe that whoever should diligently consider this last point would guard himself from evil doing and would begin to love the good and sweet Jesus. And if it were not enough, besides those pains that await them in the future, in the present life they have many others, and here begins their hell. Because whoever does not love Jesus is unstable and desires continually things that cannot sate his appetite and has a thousand pains in this world that are not had by the lovers of Jesus, Son of the eternal Father, blessed God, with the Holy Spirit, forever. Amen.

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