Thy Will Be Done!
Fifty-eight letters to souls troubled by problems that afflict each of us today: anger, frustration, grief and sickness, difficulties in praying, and even lack of faith — with wise, practical remedies for each.
Lovingly written by St. Francis de Sales

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by Alice von Hildebrand

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My very dear confrère,

Pardon me, I beg you, for taking so long to respond to the first letter you ever wrote to me; it will not be so with the others, if I have the consolation of receiving any. But I was so occupied with my departure that I did not have any sort of leisure with which to render to you this duty; and, with that, I placed my hope in your affection, that you would interpret the delay benevolently.

I persist always in telling you that you must serve God where you are and do what you are doing. Not, my dear brother, that I would like to hinder the increase of your good spiritual exercises or the continual purification of your heart; but continue to do what you are doing, and better than you are doing it. Because I know well that God commands all His faithful in the person of Abraham, “Walk before me, and be perfect”; I also know that “blessed are those who walk in the ways” of the Lord, that our fathers walked in them, and that they “resolved to ascend by steps,” so that they might go from “virtue to virtue.”

Therefore have good courage to cultivate this vineyard, contributing your little effort to the spiritual good of the souls that the Lord has reserved for Himself lest they “bend their knees before Baal,” “in the midst of a people that has unclean lips.” Do not be surprised if the fruits do not yet appear, because if you do the work of God patiently, your labor will not be “in vain in the Lord.”

Alas! Sir, God has nourished us with the gentle milk of many consolations so that, having grown up, we might try to help in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, whether by carrying stones, or by mixing the mortar, or by hammering. Believe me, remain there where you are; do faithfully everything in good conscience that morally you can do, and you will see that “if you believe, you will see the glory of God.” And if indeed you wish to do well, consider as temptation everything that will be suggested to you regarding changing your place; because as long as your spirit looks elsewhere than where you are, it will never apply itself rightly to profiting from where you are.

Well, know that all this has been said in the confidence that you gave me in your letter, and in the sincere friendship that I bear for you in the bosom of the One whose side was pierced for love of us. I entreat Him that He may strengthen more and more in you the zeal of His honor, and I am with all my heart,

Your humble and very affectionate servant,

Francis
“There are two principal reasons for prayer”

To a young woman having difficulty praying

Mademoiselle,

Some time ago I received one of your letters, which I greatly value, because it testifies to the confidence you have in my love, which indeed is really yours; do not doubt it. I only regret that I am hardly capable of answering what you ask me concerning your troubles in prayer. I know that you are in a place and in a company in which you cannot lack good advice about this problem, but charity, which loves to communicate itself, makes you ask mine in giving me yours. I will therefore say something to you.

The disquietude you have in prayer, which is joined with a very eager anxiety to find some object that may content your spirit, is enough in itself to hinder you from getting what you seek. When we seek a thing with too much excitement, we pass our hand and our eyes over it a hundred times without noticing it at all.

From this vain and useless eagerness you can only incur lassitude of spirit; and from this comes the coldness and numbness of your soul. I know not the remedies you should use, but I feel sure that if you can prevent this eagerness you will gain much, for it is one of the greatest traitors that devotion and true virtue can meet with. It pretends to excite us to good, but only to make us tepid; it only makes us run in order to make us stumble. This is why we must always beware of it, and especially in prayer.

To aid yourself in this, remember that the graces and goods of prayer are not waters of earth but of Heaven, and that our own efforts will never be sufficient to obtain them. Of course, we must dispose ourselves for them with a great care, but with a humble and quiet care. We must keep our hearts open to Heaven, and wait for the holy dew. And we must never forget to carry with us into prayer the knowledge that in it we approach God and place ourselves in His presence for two principal reasons.

First, we pray in order to give God the honor and homage we owe Him; and this can be done without His speaking to us or we to Him, for this duty is paid by remembering that He is our God and we are His vile creatures, and by remaining prostrate in spirit before Him, awaiting His commands.

How many courtiers go a hundred times into the presence of the king, not to hear him or speak to him, but simply to be seen by him, and to testify by this assiduity that they are his servants? And this purpose in prostrating ourselves before God—to testify to and profess our good will and gratitude in His service—is excellent, holy, and pure, and therefore of the greatest perfection.
Second, we pray in order to speak with God, and to hear Him speak to us by inspirations and movements in the interior of our soul. And generally this is with a very delicious pleasure, because it is a great good for us to speak to so great a Lord; and when He answers, He spreads abroad a thousand precious balms and unguents, which give great sweetness to the soul.

Well, my good daughter, one of these two goods can never fail you in prayer. If we can speak to our Lord, let us speak, let us praise Him, beseech Him, listen to Him. If we cannot use our voice, still let us stay in the room and do reverence to Him. He will see us there; He will accept our patience, and will favor our silence. Another time we shall be quite amazed to be taken by the hand and He will converse with us, and will make a hundred turns with us in the walks of His garden of prayer. And if He should never do this, let us be content with our duty of being in His suite, and with the great grace and too great honor He does us in suffering our presence.

Thus we shall not be overeager to speak to Him, since it is no less useful for us just to be in His presence; yea, it is more useful, although not so much to our taste. When, then, you come to Him, speak to Him if you can. If you cannot, stay there; be seen; and care for nothing else.

Such is my advice. I do not know if it is good, but I am not too much concerned about it, because, as I have said, you are where much better advice cannot fail you.

As to your fear that your father may make you lose your desire to be a Carmelite by the long time he requires you to wait, say to God, "Lord, all my desire is before you" (PS 37:10) and let Him act; He will turn your father's heart and arrange for His own glory and your good. Meanwhile nourish your good desire, and keep it alive under the ashes of humility and resignation to the will of God.

My prayers, which you ask, are not wanting to you. For I could not forget you, especially at holy Mass; I trust to your charity not to be forgotten in yours.

Francis
My dearest child,

Your manner of prayer is good, but be very careful to remain near God in this gentle and quiet attention of heart, and in this sweet slumber in the arms of His holy will, for all this is agreeable to Him.

In praying this way, avoid strenuous efforts to understand, because they hurt you, not only in other matters, but even in prayer; circle around the dear object of your meditation with your affections quite simply, and as gently as you can. Your understanding will surely make some dartings to intrude itself, but you must not busy yourself to keep on your guard against it, for that would form a distraction. But when you perceive it, be satisfied with returning to the simple act of the will.

To keep ourselves in the presence of God and to place ourselves in the presence of God are, in my opinion, two different things. For to place ourselves in this presence it is necessary to recall our minds from every other object and render it actually attentive to the divine presence, as I say in my book.

But after placing ourselves in the presence of God, we keep ourselves there by making certain acts toward God, either by understanding or by will. We can make these acts by looking at Him or by looking at some other thing for love of Him. We can make them by looking at nothing, and instead by speaking to Him. Lastly, we can make them by neither looking nor speaking, but simply by staying where He has put us, like a statue in its niche.

When there is added to this simple staying some feeling that we belong completely to God, and that He is our all, we must indeed give thanks to His goodness. If a statue that had been placed in a niche in some room could speak and was asked, “Why are you there?” it would say, “Because my master has put me here.”

“Why don’t you move?”

“Because he wants me to remain immovable.”

“What use are you there; what do you gain by being so?”

“It is not for my profit that I am here; it is to serve and obey the will of my master.”

“But you do not see him.”

“No, but he sees me, and takes pleasure in seeing me where he has put me.”

“Would you not like to have movement, so that you could go nearer to him?”
“Certainly not, except when he might command me.”

“Don’t you want anything, then?”

“No; for I am where my master has placed me, and his good pleasure is the unique contentment of my being.”

My God! What a good prayer and a good way to keep in the presence of God, to keep ourselves in His will and His good pleasure! I think that Magdalen was a statue in her niche, when without speaking, without moving, and perhaps without looking at Him, she listened to what our Lord said, seated at His feet. When He spoke she heard; when He paused from speaking, she ceased to listen, and still stayed ever there.

A little child who is on the bosom of its sleeping mother is truly in its good and desirable place, although it says no word to her nor she to it.

My God! How glad I am, my child, to speak a little of these things with you! How happy we are when we will to love our Lord! Let us, then, love Him well. Let us not set ourselves to consider too exactly what we do for His love, provided we know that we will to do nothing but for His love.

For my part, I think we keep ourselves in the presence of God even while sleeping. For we go to sleep in His sight, by His will, and at His pleasure; and He puts us there like statues in a niche. And when we wake we find that He is there near us; He has not moved any more than we; we have then kept in His presence, but with our eyes shut and closed. . . .

Be resolute, dear child; doubt not. God holds you with His hand, and will never leave you. Glory be to Him for ever and ever! Amen.

Francis
Madame,

I cannot give you all at once what I promised, because I do not have sufficient time to put together all that I have to tell you on the subject you want me to explain. I will therefore tell it to you in several letters. Besides the convenience to me, you will have the advantage of having time to ruminate on my advice properly.

You have a great desire for Christian perfection. It is the most generous desire you could have: feed it and make it grow every day. The means of gaining perfection are various according to the variety of vocations: religious, widows, and married persons must all seek after this perfection, but not all by the same means.

For you, Madame, who are married, the means of gaining perfection are to unite yourself closely to God and to your neighbor, and to what belongs to them. The means to unite yourself to God are, chiefly, the use of the sacraments and prayer. As to the use of the sacraments, you should let no month go without receiving Communion. After some time, and under the advice of your spiritual fathers, you will be able to receive Communion more often.

As to confession, I advise you to frequent it even more, especially if you fall into some imperfection by which your conscience is troubled, as often happens at the beginning of the spiritual life. Still, if you have not the opportunity for confession, contrition and repentance will do.

As to prayer, you should apply yourself to it much, and especially to meditation, for which you are, I think, well suited. Make, then, a short hour every day in the morning before going out, or else before the evening meal; and be very careful not to make it either after dinner or after supper, for that would hurt your health.

And to help yourself to do it well, you must previously know the point on which you are to meditate, so that in beginning your prayer you may have your matter ready. For this purpose you may use books by the authors who have treated the points of meditation on the life and death of our Lord, such as Granada, Bellintani, Capiglia, and Bruno. Choose the meditation you wish to make and read it attentively, so as to remember it at the time of prayer, and not to have anything more to do except to recall the points, always following the method that I gave you on Holy Thursday.

Besides this, often make spontaneous prayers to our Lord, at every moment you can, and in all companies, always seeing God in your heart and your heart in God.
Take pleasure in reading Granada’s books on prayer and meditation, for none teach you better, nor with more stirring power. I should like you to let no day pass without giving half an hour to the reading of some spiritual book, for this would serve as a sermon.

These are the chief means to unite yourself closely to God. Those to unite yourself properly with your neighbor are in great number; but I will only mention some of them. We must regard our neighbor in God, who wills that we should love and cherish him. It is the counsel of St. Paul, who orders servants to serve God in their masters and to serve their masters in God. We must exercise ourselves in this love of our neighbor, expressing it externally. And although it may seem at first against our will, we must not give up on that account; our repugnance will at last be conquered by habit and good inclination, which will be produced by repetition of the acts. We must refer our prayers and meditations to this end: for after having prayed to love God, we must always pray to love our neighbor, and especially those to whom our will is not attracted.

I advise you to take care sometimes to visit hospitals, comfort the sick, pity their infirmities, soften your heart toward them, and pray for them, at the same time giving them some help.

But in all this take particular care that your husband, your servants, and your parents do not suffer by your too long stayings in church, by your too great retirement, or by your failing to care for your household. And do not become, as often happens, manager of others’ affairs, or too contemptuous of conversations in which the rules of devotion are not quite exactly observed. In all this charity must rule and enlighten us, to make us condescend to the wishes of our neighbor in what is not against the commandments of God.

You must not only be devout, and love devotion, but you must make it lovable to everyone. Well, you will render it lovable if you render it useful and agreeable. The sick will love your devotion if they are charitably consoled by it; your family will love it if they find you more careful of their welfare, more gentle in little accidents that happen, more kind in correcting, and so on; your husband, if he sees that as your devotion increases you are more devoted in his regard, and sweet in your love to him; your parents and friends if they perceive in you more generosity, tolerance, and condescension toward their wills, when not against the will of God. In short, you must, as far as possible, make your devotion attractive. . . .

I beg you to give me some part in your prayers and Communions, as I assure you I will give you, all my life, a share in mine, and will be without end, Madame,

Your most affectionate servant in Jesus Christ,

Francis
“Have patience with everyone, including yourself”

To a woman beset by many tasks

My dear daughter,

I remember you telling me how much the multiplicity of your affairs weighs on you; and I said to you that it is a good opportunity for acquiring the true and solid virtues. The multiplicity of affairs is a continual martyrdom, for just as flies cause more pain and irritation to those who travel in summer than the traveling itself does, just so the diversity and the multitude of affairs causes more pain than the weight of these affairs itself.

You need patience, and I hope that God will give it to you (if you ask it of Him carefully) and that you will try to practice it faithfully, preparing yourself for it every morning by a special application of some point in your meditation, and resolving to restore yourself to patience throughout the day as many times as you sense yourself becoming distracted.

Do not lose any occasion, however small it may be, for exercising gentleness of heart toward everyone. Do not think that you will be able to succeed in your affairs by your own efforts, but only by the assistance of God; and on setting out, consign yourself to His care, believing that He will do that which will be best for you, provided that, on your part, you employ a gentle diligence. I say “gentle diligence,” because violent diligence spoils the heart and affairs, and is not diligence, but haste and trouble.

My God, Madame, we will soon be in eternity, and then we will see how all the affairs of this world are such little things and how little it matters whether they turn out or not. At this time, nevertheless, we apply ourselves to them as if they were great things. When we were little children, with what eagerness did we put together little bits of tile, wood, and mud, to make houses and small buildings! And if someone destroyed them, we were very grieved and tearful at it; but now we know well that it all mattered very little. One day it will be the same with us in Heaven, when we will see that our concerns in this world were truly only child’s play.

I do not want to take away the care that we must have regarding these little trifles, because God has entrusted them to us in this world for exercise; but I would indeed like to take away the passion and anxiety of this care. Let us do our child’s play, because we are children; but also, let us not trouble ourselves to death in playing it. And if someone destroys our little houses and little designs, let us not torment ourselves greatly at this; because also, when this night comes in which it will be necessary for us to take shelter — I mean to say, death — all these little houses will be of no use to us; we will have to take our shelter in the house of our Father. Faithfully attend to your obligations, but know that you have no greater obligation than that of your salvation and of the saving progress of your soul on the way to true devotion.
Have patience with everyone, but chiefly with yourself; I mean to say, do not trouble yourself about your imperfections, and always have the courage to lift yourself out of them. I am well content that you begin again every day: there is no better way to perfect the spiritual life than always to begin again and never to think you have done enough.

Recommend me to the mercy of God, which I ask to make you abound in His holy love. Amen.

I am Your most humble servant,

Francis
“We must not ask of ourselves what we don’t have”
To a pregnant woman suffering lassitude and discouragement

My dearest daughter,

I am not at all surprised that your heart seems a little heavy and torpid, for you are pregnant, and it is an evident truth that our souls generally share in their inferior part the qualities and conditions of our bodies — and I say in the inferior part, my dearest daughter, because it is this that immediately touches the body, and which is liable to share in the troubles of it.

A delicate body that is weighed down by the burden of pregnancy, weakened by the labor of carrying a child, and troubled with many pains, does not allow the heart to be so lively, so active, so ready in its operations; but this in no way injures the acts of that higher part of the soul, which are as agreeable to God as they would be in the midst of all the gladnesses in the world. Yea, to God these acts are even more agreeable in truth, for they are done with more labor and struggle; but they are not so agreeable to the person who does them, since — not being in the sensible part of the soul — they are not so much felt, nor are they so pleasant to us.

My dearest daughter, we must not be unjust and require from ourselves what is not in ourselves. When troubled in body and health, we must not exact from our souls anything more than acts of submission and the acceptance of our suffering, and holy unions of our will to the good pleasure of God, which are formed in the highest region of the spirit. And as for exterior actions, we must manage and do them as well as we can, and be satisfied with doing them, even if without heart, languidly, and heavily. To raise these languors, heavinesses, and torpors of heart, and to make them serve toward divine love, you must profess, accept, and love holy abjection. Thus shall you change into gold the lead of your heaviness, and into gold finer than would be the gold of your most lively gladnesses of heart. Have patience then with yourself. Let your superior part bear the disorder of the inferior; and often offer to the eternal glory of our Creator the little creature in whose formation He has willed to make you His fellow worker.

My dearest daughter, we have here at Annecy a Capuchin painter who, as you may think, only paints for God and His temple. And although while working he has to pay so close an attention that he cannot pray at the same time, and although this occupies and even fatigues his spirit, still he does this work with good heart for the glory of our Lord, and with the hope that these pictures will excite many faithful to praise God and to bless His goodness.

My dear daughter, the child who is taking shape in your womb will be a living image of the divine majesty; but while your soul, your strength, and your natural vigor is occupied with
this work of pregnancy, it must grow weary and tired, and you cannot at the same time perform your ordinary exercises so actively and so gaily. But suffer lovingly this lassitude and heaviness, in consideration of the honor that God will receive from your work. It is your image that will be placed in the eternal temple of the heavenly Jerusalem, and that will be eternally regarded with pleasure by God, by angels, and by men. The saints will praise God for it, and you also will praise Him when you see it there.

And so in the meantime have patience, although feeling your heart a little torpid and sluggish, and with the superior part attach yourself to the holy will of our Lord, who has so arranged for it according to His eternal wisdom.

I do not know of anything that my soul fails to think and to desire for the perfection of yours, which, as God has willed and wills it so, is truly in the midst of mine. May it please His divine goodness that both your soul and mine may be according to His most holy and good pleasure, and that all your dear family may be filled with His sacred benedictions, and especially your very dear husband, of whom, as of you, I am invariably

Your very humble and most obedient servant,

Francis
My dearest daughter,

... It is necessary before all things, my daughter, to obtain tranquillity, not because it is the mother of contentment, but because it is the daughter of the love of God and of the resignation of our own will.

The opportunities of practicing it are daily. For contradictions are not wanting wherever we are; and when nobody else makes them, we make them for ourselves. My God! How holy, my dear daughter, and how agreeable to God we should be, if we knew how to use properly the subjects of mortification that our vocation affords! For they are without doubt greater than among religious; the evil is that we do not make use of them as they do.

Be careful to spare yourself in this pregnancy: make no effort to oblige yourself to any kind of exercise, except quite gently. If you get tired kneeling, sit down; if you cannot command attention to pray half an hour, pray only fifteen minutes or even half of that.

I beg you to put yourself in the presence of God, and to suffer your pains before Him. Do not keep yourself from complaining; but this should be to Him, in a filial spirit, as a little child to its mother. For if it is done lovingly, there is no danger in complaining, nor in begging cure, nor in changing place, nor in getting ourselves relieved. But do this with love, and with resignation into the arms of the good will of God. Do not trouble yourself about not making acts of virtue properly; for as I have said, they do not cease to be very good, even if they are made in a languid, heavy, and (as it were) forced manner.

You can only give God what you have, and in this time of affliction you have no other actions. At present, my dear daughter, your Beloved is to you a “bundle of myrrh”; cease not to press Him close to your breast. “My Beloved is mine, and I am His”; ever shall He be in my heart. Isaiah the prophet calls Him the “man of sorrows.” He loves sorrows, and those who have them.

Do not torment yourself to do much, but suffer with love what you have to suffer. God will be gracious to you, Madame, and will give you the grace to arrange this more retired life of which you speak to me. Whether languishing “or living or dying, we are the Lord’s” and nothing, with the help of His grace, will separate us from this holy love. Never shall our heart live, save in Him and for Him; He shall be for ever “the God of our heart.” I will never cease to beg this of Him, nor to be entirely in Him.

Your very affectionate servant,
Francis
“Calm your mind, lift up your heart”
To a woman whose husband died recently

Madame,

You cannot think how deeply I feel your affliction. For many reasons, but chiefly for his virtue and piety, I honored with a very particular affection this dear departed gentleman. How grievous that, at a time when there is so great a dearth of such souls among men of his rank, we should see and suffer these losses, so injurious to the commonwealth.

Still, my dear lady, considering all things, we must accommodate our hearts to the condition of life in which we are. This is a perishing and mortal life, and death, which rules over this life, keeps no regular course — it seizes sometimes here, sometimes there, without choice or any method, the good among the bad, and the young among the old.

Oh, how happy are they who, being always on their guard against death, find themselves always ready to die, so that they may live again eternally in the life where there is no more death! Our beloved dead was of this number, I well know. That alone, Madame, is enough to console us; for at last, after a few days, or sooner or later in a few years, we shall follow him in this passage; and the friendships and fellowships begun in this world will be taken up again never to be broken off. Meanwhile, until the hour of our departure strikes, let us have patience and await with courage our own departure for that place where these friends already are. And as we have loved them cordially, let us continue to love them, doing for their love what they wished us to do in the past, and what they now wish for on our behalf.

Doubtless, my dear lady, the greatest desire your deceased husband had at his departure was that you should not long remain in the grief that his absence would cause you, but try to moderate, for love of him, the passion that love of him excited in you. And now in the happiness that he enjoys, or certainly expects, he wishes you a holy consolation, and that by moderating your tribulation, you save your eyes for a better purpose than tears, and your mind for a more desirable occupation than sorrow.

He has left you precious pledges of your marriage. Keep your eyes to look after their bringing up; keep your mind to raise up theirs. Do this, Madame, for the love of your dear husband, and imagine that he asked you for this at his departure, and still requires this service from you. For truly he would have done it if he could, and he now desires it. The rest of your griefs may be according to your heart, which remains in this world, but not according to his, which is in the other.

And since true friendship delights in satisfying the just desires of the friend, so now in order to please your husband, be consoled; calm your mind, and lift up your heart. And if this counsel that I give you with entire sincerity is agreeable to you, put it into practice. Prostrate yourself before your Savior, acquiesce in His ordinance; consider the soul of this dear departed, which wishes from yours a true and Christian resolution; and abandon yourself altogether to the heavenly Providence of the Savior of your soul, your protector,
who will help you and succor you, and will, in the end, unite you with your dead, not as wife with husband but as heiress of Heaven with co-heir, and as faithful lover with her beloved.

I write this, Madame, without leisure and almost without breath, offering you that very loving service of mine that has long been yours, and also that is required from my soul by the merits and the goodness of your husband toward me.

God be in the midst of your heart. Amen.

Francis
“We must be patient as we seek perfection”
To a young woman who is discouraged by spiritual failures

Mademoiselle,

. . . My good daughter, as you have half got out of those terrible paths that you have had to travel, I think you should now take a little rest, and consider the vanity of the human spirit, how prone it is to entangle and embarrass itself within itself.

For I am sure you will note that those interior troubles you have suffered have been caused by a great multitude of considerations and desires produced by an intense eagerness to attain some imaginary perfection. I mean that your imagination had formed for you an ideal of absolute perfection, to which your will wished to lift itself; but frightened by this great difficulty— or rather impossibility — it remained in dangerous travail, unable to bring forth, to the great danger of the child. . . .

So now take a little breath, rest a little, and by considering the dangers escaped, avert those that might come afterward. Suspect all those desires that, according to the general opinion of good people, cannot come to effect: such as the desires for a certain Christian perfection that can be imagined but not practiced, in which many take lessons, but which no one realizes in action.

Know that the virtue of patience is the one that most assures us of perfection; and if we must have patience with others, so we must with ourselves. Those who aspire to the pure love of God have not so much need of patience with others as with themselves. We must suffer our imperfection in order to have perfection. I say suffer, not love or pet; humility feeds on this suffering.

The truth must be told: we are poor creatures, and can only just get on. But our God, who is infinitely good, is content with our little services and pleased with the “preparation of our heart.”

I will tell you what is meant by this preparation of heart. According to the Holy Scriptures, “God is greater than our heart,” and our heart is greater than all the world. Now, when our heart, by itself, in its meditation prepares the service it will render to God — that is, when it makes its plans for serving God, honoring Him, serving our neighbor, mortifying the interior and exterior senses, and similar good resolutions — at such times it does wonders; it makes preparations and gets ready its actions for an eminent degree of admirable perfection. All this preparation is indeed in no way proportioned to the greatness of God Himself, who is infinitely greater than our heart; but still this preparation is generally greater than the world, than our strength, and than all of our exterior actions.

A soul that considers the greatness of God, His immense goodness and dignity, cannot satisfy herself in making great and marvelous preparations for Him. She prepares Him a flesh
mortified beyond rebellion, an attention at prayer without distraction, a sweetness in
conversation with no bitterness, a humility with no outbreak of vanity.

All this is very good; here are good preparations. And still more would be required to serve
God according to our duty. But in the end of this we must find someone to do it: for when it
comes to practice we stop short, and perceive that these perfections can neither be so
grand in us nor so absolute. We can mortify the flesh, but not so perfectly that there shall
be no rebellion; our attention will often be broken by distractions, and so on. And must we,
for this, trouble, worry, and excite ourselves? Certainly not.

Are we to apply a host of desires to excite ourselves to arrive at this miracle of perfection?
No. We may indeed make simple wishes that show our gratitude. I may say, “Ah! Why am I
not as fervent as the Seraphim, in order better to serve and praise my God?” But I would not
occupy myself with forming desires, as if I must in this world attain that exquisite
perfection. I must not say, “I wish it; I will try to get it; and if I cannot reach it, I will be
vexed.”

I do not mean to say that we are not to put ourselves in that direction; but that we are not
to desire to get there in one day, that is, in one day of this mortality. For this desire would
torment us, and for nothing. To advance well we must apply ourselves to make good way in
the road nearest to us, and to do the first day’s journey. We must not busy ourselves with
wanting to do the last, but remember that we are to do and work out the first.

I will give you this word, but you must keep it well: sometimes we occupy ourselves so much
with being good angels that we neglect being good men and women. Our imperfection must
accompany us to our coffin; we cannot walk without touching earth. We are not to lie or
wallow there, but still we are not to think of flying. For we are but little chicks, and have
not our wings yet. We are dying little by little, so we are to make our imperfections die with
us day by day: dear imperfections, which make us acknowledge our misery and e
xercise us in
humility, contempt of self, patience, and diligence, and in spite of which God regards the
preparation of our hearts, which is perfect.

I know not if I am writing to the purpose, but it has come to my heart to say this to you, as I
think that a part of your past trouble has come from this: that you have made great
preparations, and then, seeing that the results were very small and that strength was
insufficient to put in practice these desires, these plans, these ideas, you have had certain
heartaches, impatience, disquietudes, and troubles. Then followed distrusts, languors,
depressions, or failings of heart. Well, if it is so, be wiser in the future.

Let us go by land, since the high seas make our heads turn, and give us retchings. Let us
keep at our Lord’s feet, with St. Mary Magdalen, whose feast we are celebrating. Let us
practice certain little virtues proper for our littleness. Little pedlar, little pack. These are
the virtues that are more exercised in going down, than in going up, and therefore they are
suitable to our legs: patience, bearing with our neighbor, submission, humility, sweetness of
temper, affability, toleration of our imperfection, and such little virtues as these. I am not
saying that we should not try to mount by prayer, but that we should do so step by step.

I recommend to you holy simplicity: look before you, and regard not those dangers that you
see far off. As you say, they seem to you armies, yet they are only willow branches; and
while you are looking at them you may make some false step. Let us have a firm and general intention of serving God all our life, and with all our heart. Beyond that, let us have no solicitude for the morrow. Let us only think of doing well today; when tomorrow arrives it will be called in its turn “today,” and then we will think of it. We must here again have great confidence and acquiescence in the Providence of God. We must make provision of manna for each day and no more, and we must not doubt that God will send us more tomorrow, and after tomorrow, and all the days of our pilgrimage. . . .

Pray hard for me, I beg you. It is incredible how pressed down and oppressed I am by this great and difficult charge. This charity you owe me by the laws of our alliance, and I pay you back by the continual memory that I keep of you at the altar in my feeble prayers. Blessed be our Lord. I beg Him to be your heart, your soul, your life; and I am

Your servant,

Francis
Madame,

I truly and greatly desire that when you think you can obtain any consolation by writing to me, you should do so with confidence.

We must join these two things together: an extreme affection for practicing our exercises very exactly — whether these concern prayer or virtues — and a calmness, quietness, and lack of dismay if we happen to commit a fault in them. For the practice of our exercises depends on our fidelity, which ought always to be entire, and grow from hour to hour; but faults come from our infirmity, which we can never put off during this mortal life.

My dearest daughter, when faults happen to us, let us examine our heart at once, and ask it if it has still alive and entire the resolution of serving God. I hope it will answer us yes, and that it would rather suffer a thousand deaths than withdraw itself from this resolution.

Then let us ask it, “Why then do you now fail; why are you so cowardly?” It will answer, “I have been surprised, I know not how; but I am now fallen, like this.”

Well, my child, it must be forgiven; it is not by infidelity it falls; it is by infirmity. It needs then to be corrected, gently and calmly, and not to be vexed more and troubled. We ought to say to it: “Well now, my heart, my friend, in the name of God take courage; let us go on, let us beware of ourselves, let us lift ourselves up to our help and our God.” Ah! My dear daughter, we must be charitable toward our soul, and not scold it, so long as we see that it does not offend out of set purpose.

You see, in this exercise we practice holy humility. What we do for our salvation is done for the service of God; for our Lord Himself has worked out in this world only our salvation. Do not desire the battle, but await it with firm foot. May our Lord be your strength. I am, in Him,

Your very affectionate servant,

Francis
“To change the world, we must change ourselves”

To a woman angered by sinfulness in the world

Madame,

No doubt you would explain yourself much better and more freely by speaking than by writing; but, while waiting for God to will it, we must use the means which offer themselves. You see, lethargies, languors, and numbness of the senses cannot be without some sort of sensible sadness, but so long as your will and the substance of your spirit is quite resolved to be all to God, there is nothing to fear, for these are natural imperfections, and rather maladies than sins or spiritual faults. Still you must stir yourself up and excite yourself to courage and spiritual activity as far as possible.

Oh! Death is terrible, my dear daughter, it is very true, but the life which is beyond, and which the mercy of God will give us, is also very desirable indeed; and so we must by no means fall into distrust. Although we are miserable, we are not nearly so much so as God is merciful to those who want to love Him and who have placed their hopes in Him. When the blessed Cardinal Borromeo was on the point of death, he had the image of our dead Savior brought to him, in order to sweeten his death by that of his Savior. It is the best of all remedies against the fear of our death, this thought of Him who is our life: you must never think of the one without adding the thought of the other.

My God! Dear daughter, do not examine whether what you do is little or much, good or ill, provided it is not sin, and provided that in good faith you will to do it for God. As much as you can, do perfectly what you do, but when it is done, think of it no more; go simply along the way of our Savior, and do not torment your spirit.

We must hate our faults, but with a tranquil and quiet hate, not with an angry and restless hate; and so we must have patience when we see them, and draw from them the profit of a holy abasement of ourselves. Without this, my child, your imperfections, which you scrutinize so subtly, will trouble you by getting still more subtle, and by this means sustain themselves, as there is nothing that more preserves our weeds than disquietude and eagerness in removing them. . . .

To be dissatisfied and fret about the world when we must of necessity be in it, is a great temptation. God’s Providence is wiser than we. We fancy that by changing our ships, we shall get on better; yes, if we change ourselves.

My God, I am sworn enemy of these useless, dangerous, and bad desires; for although what we desire is good, the desire is bad, because God does not will us this sort of good, but another, in which He wants us to exercise ourselves. God wishes to speak to us in the thorns and the bush, as He did to Moses; and we want Him to speak in the small wind, gentle and fresh, as He did to Elijah. May His goodness preserve you, my daughter; but be constant, courageous, and rejoice that He gives you the will to be all His. I am, in this goodness, entirely.

Yours, Francis
“In patience shall you possess your soul”

To Jane de Chantal, on patience and bearing temptations

Madame,

... I praise God for the constancy with which you bear your tribulations. I still see in it, however, some little disquiet and eagerness, which hinders the final effect of your patience. “In your patience,” said the Son of God, “you shall possess your souls.” To possess fully our souls is then the effect of patience; and in proportion as patience is perfect, the possession of the soul becomes more entire and excellent. Now, patience is more perfect as it is less mixed with disquiet and eagerness. May God then deign to deliver you from these two troubles, and soon afterward you will be free altogether.

Good courage, I beseech you, my dear sister. You have only suffered the fatigue of the road three years, and you crave repose. But remember two things. The first one is that the children of Israel were forty years in the desert before arriving in the country of rest that was promised them, and yet six weeks might easily have sufficed for all this journey. But it was not lawful to inquire why God made them take so many turns, and led them by ways so rough, and all those who murmured died before their arrival. The other thing is that Moses, who was the greatest friend of God in all that multitude, died on the borders of the land of repose, seeing it with his eyes, and not able to have the enjoyment of it.

Oh, might it please God that we should little regard the course of the way we tread, and have our eyes fixed on Him who conducts us, and on the blessed country to which it leads! What should it matter to us whether it is by the deserts or by the meadows we go, if God is with us and we go into Paradise? Trust me, I pray you, cheat your trouble all you can: if you feel it, at least do not look at it, for the sight will give you more fear of it than the feeling will give you pain. For just this reason the eyes of those who are going to suffer some painful application of the iron are covered. I think you dwell a little too much on the consideration of your trouble.

And as for what you say, that it is a great burden to will and to be unable, I will not say to you that we must only will what we can achieve, but I do say it is a great power before God to be able to will. Go further, I beg you, and think of that great dereliction which our Master suffered in the Garden of Olives and see how this dear Son, having asked consolation from His good Father, and knowing that He willed not to give it Him, thinks of it no more, strives after it no more, seeks it no more; but, as if He had never thought of it, executes valiantly and courageously the work of our redemption.

After you have prayed to the Father to console you, if it does not please Him to do it, think of it no more, and stiffen your courage to work out your salvation on the Cross, as if you were never to descend from it, and as if you would never more see the sky of your life clear and serene.
What do you want? You must see and speak to God amid the thunders and the whirlwinds. You must see Him in the bush and amid the thorns; and to do this, the truth is that we must take off our shoes, and make a great abnegation of our wills and affections. But the divine goodness has not called you to the state in which you find yourself without strengthening you for all this. It is for Him to perfect His work. True, it takes quite a while, because the matter requires it; but patience.

In short, for the honor of God, acquiesce entirely in His will, and by no means believe that you can better serve Him otherwise; for He is never well served save when He is served as He wills.

Now He wants you to serve Him without relish, without sentiment, with repugnances and convulsions of spirit. This service gives you no satisfaction, but it contents Him. It is not to your pleasure, but it is to His.

Suppose you were never to be delivered from your troubles, what would you do? You would say to God, “I am Yours; if my miseries are agreeable to You, increase their number and duration.” I have confidence in God that you would say this, and think no more of them; at least you would no longer excite yourself. Do the same about them now, and grow familiar with your burden, as if you and it were always to live together. You will find that when you are no longer thinking of deliverance, God will think of it; and when you are no longer disquieted, God will be there. . . .

Courage, I beseech you; let nothing move you. It is still night, but the day approaches; yes, it will not delay. But, meantime, let us put in practice the saying of David: “Lift up your hands to the holy places in the night, and bless the Lord.” Let us bless Him with all our heart, and pray Him to be our guide, our bark, and our port.

I do not intend to answer your last letter in detail, save in certain points which seem to me more pressing.

You cannot believe, my dearest child, that temptations against the Faith and the Church come from God. But who ever told you that God was the author of such things? [God permits] much darkness, much powerlessness, much being tied to the perch, much dereliction and loss of vigor, much disorder of the spiritual stomach, and much bitterness in the interior mouth (which makes bitter the sweetest wine in the world) — but suggestions of blasphemy, infidelity, disbelief? Oh no, they cannot come from our good God; His bosom is too pure to conceive such objects.

Do you know how God acts in this? He allows the evil maker of such wares to come and offer them for sale, so that by our contempt of them we may give witness to our affection for divine things. And for this, my dear sister, my dearest child, are we to become disquieted, are we to change our attitude? Oh God, no, no! It is the Devil who goes all around our soul, raging and fuming, to see if he can find some gate open. He did so with Job, with St. Anthony, with St. Catherine of Siena, and with an infinity of good souls that I know, and with mine, which is good for nothing, and which I know not. And for what? For all this, my good daughter, must we grow troubled? Let the Devil rage; keep all the entrances closely shut. He will tire at last, or if he does not tire, God will compel him to lift the siege.
Remember what I told you once before. It is a good sign when the Devil makes so much noise and tempest round about the will; it is a sign that he is not within. And courage, my dear soul; I say this word with great feeling and in Jesus Christ. My dear soul, courage, I say. So long as we can say with resolution, even if without feeling, Vive Jésus!, we must not fear.

And do not tell me that you say this with cowardice, without force or courage, but as if by a violence that you do yourself. Oh God! There it is then, the holy violence that bears Heaven away.

Now, do you see souls afflicted because the enemy, occupying all the other faculties, makes in them his clamor and most extreme hubbub? Scarcely can one bear what is said and done in this superior will. The superior will has indeed a voice more clear and telling than that of the inferior will; but this latter has a voice so harsh and so noisy that it drowns out the clearness of the other.

Lastly, note this: while a temptation displeases you there is nothing to fear; for why does it displease you, save because you do not will it? In a word, these burdensome temptations come from the malice of the Devil; but the pain and suffering that we feel come from the mercy of God who, against the will of the enemy, draws from his malice holy tribulation, by which He refines the gold that He would put into His treasures.

I sum up my remarks in this way: your temptations are from the Devil and from Hell, but your pains and afflictions are from God and Paradise. The mothers are from Babylon, but the daughters from Jerusalem. Despise the temptations; embrace the tribulations.

I will tell you one day when I have plenty of leisure, what evil it is that causes these obstructions of spirit; it cannot be written in a few words.

Have no fear, I beg you, of giving me trouble; for I protest that it is an extreme consolation to be pressed to do you any service. Write to me then, and often, and without order, and in the most simple way you can; I shall always have an extreme contentment in it.

I am going in an hour to the little hamlet where I am to preach, God willing to employ me both in suffering and in preaching. May His name be forever blessed! . . .

You cannot have too much confidence in me, who am perfectly and irrevocably yours in Jesus Christ, whose dearest graces and benedictions I wish you a thousand and a thousand times a day. Let us live in Him and for Him. Amen.

Your most assured and very devoted servant in our Lord,

Francis