

The Spiritual Virtues according to St. Francis of Assisi

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IN his *Laudes*, St. Francis of Assisi extols the virtues "with which the most holy Virgin was adorned, and with which every holy soul must also be adorned (*Laude delle virtù delle quail fu adornata la Santissima Vergine, e deve esserne l'anima santa*)". These two references, one to the Virgin and the other to the soul, have a profound and precise meaning: indeed, the Virgin is the prototype of the perfect soul; she incarnates the universal soul in her purity, her receptivity towards God, her fecundity and her beauty, attributes which are at the origin of all the angelic and human virtues, and even of every possible positive quality, as, for example, the purity of snow or the incorruptibility and luminosity of crystal.

The first virtue which St. Francis greets (*Dio vi salvi*), in the *Laudes*, is "Queen Wisdom", next to whom he places her "holy sister Pure Simplicity". This connection between wisdom and simplicity contains an essential truth: it enables us to see that simplicity is as it were the criterion of perfect wisdom; that it is a necessary dimension of wisdom and, to some extent, its consummation. Simplicity is none other than "poverty of spirit" which the saint explains in the following way in his "Beatitudes": "Many persevere in prayers and offices and inflict numerous abstinences and afflictions on their bodies; but should any word appear to be an attack on their person, or should they be deprived of some object or other, they take offence and immediately become distressed. Such men are not poor in spirit, for those who are truly poor in spirit hate themselves (that is, they hate their egoism or egocentric hardness of heart which results from the fall) and love those who persecute them and strike them on the cheek (because they love surrounding reality in respect of its divine function with regard to themselves, that is to say, in so far as it opposes the 'deifugal' and egocentric tendencies of fallen nature)". Consequently, simplicity is indifference to the egoistic reactions of the soul; it is imperturbable and calm concentration on the "one thing necessary". Knowledge, to be integral, must in some way take possession of every human mode and must therefore be accompanied by indifference to the passions, since, in a certain respect, these are privations of truth. Attachment to God goes hand in hand with detachment from the world; The "world", however, is not the surrounding cosmos in so far as it reflects the truths and beauties of Heaven,—St. Francis was certainly capable of seeing God in nature, as is proved by his "Canticle of Brother Sun" amongst other things,—but the tendency of our passions towards ephemeral things.

Lastly let us note the idea of "purity" which the saint associates with "simplicity" (*vostra santa sorella la pura semplicita*). The soul which is altogether untroubled by passions,—and this does not mean that it is absolutely impassive, but that it is always fixed on God, whence the exclusion of "worldly", egoistic and pretentious movements of the soul, which nevertheless remains capable of holy joy, holy sadness and holy anger,—the soul which is not carried away by passions, is "pure", without nevertheless being exempt from the natural conditions of the

human microcosm, since a plane of existence cannot cease to be what it is by definition. The soul in a state of "pure simplicity" is the receptacle of the Divine Presence, being neither determined nor soiled by anything which is beneath its nature; and that is why the Blessed Virgin is "pure" and "full of grace", and prepared to receive the Word: she is thus the model of every holy soul, or rather, she is as it were sanctity itself, without which there is neither divine revelation nor return to God.

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After "Queen Wisdom" and her "holy sister Pure Simplicity" comes the "holy Lady Poverty with your holy sister Humility", and then the "holy Lady Charity with your sister holy Obedience".

Poverty, whether it takes the external form of renunciation or not, is essentially detachment (from outward things, not inward as in the case of simplicity); St. Louis was just as detached—therefore just as "poor"—as St. Francis, but being king, he could not materially renounce either his palace or his family. The connection between this poverty and humility is very important: indeed, whoever is detached from things is also detached from himself, the one being impossible without the other.

Likewise for charity and obedience: whoever loves God more than anything in the world, and who, acting upon this love, loves his neighbor as himself—for love of one's neighbor is the criterion of one's love for God, which implies that the latter determines and limits the former, and that spiritual benefit takes precedence over temporal benefit, in so far as this alternative presents itself,—whoever has charity also has obedience, that is to say, submission to the interest of others, or, more precisely, submission to the Divine Will in one's neighbor.

And now follows an observation which is of the greatest importance for the understanding of this doctrine of the virtues: "There is no man on earth," St. Francis goes on, "who can possess one of you (the virtues) without having first died (to himself). Whoever possesses one of the virtues without offending the others, possesses them all; and whoever does violence to one of them alone, possesses none, and does violence to them all".

The *Laudes* goes on to describe in further detail how the different virtues are to be understood: "And each one covers with confusion vices and sins. Holy wisdom confounds Satan and all his snares (by striking evil at its very heart). Pure holy simplicity confounds all the wisdom of this world and of the body (the 'wisdom of the flesh' of which St. Paul speaks, that is to say the blind reasoning of the ignorant and hardened mind and also a certain mental cleverness, or in other words, rationalism and trickery). Holy poverty confounds cupidity, avarice, and preoccupation with this world (or rather the spirit of dissipation which these sins generally entail). Holy humility confounds pride and all worldly men (by refusing to place itself on their level) and also all the things of this world (by robbing them of their illusory value). Holy charity confounds all the temptations of the demon and of the flesh (the first being active and subversive and the second passive and natural, corresponding to the difference between wickedness and weakness), and all carnal anguishes (worldly fears of which the subjective basis is the natural egoism of the soul). Holy obedience confounds all corporal and carnal desires (that is desires whose source is the earthly domain in the double respect of need and passion) and maintains the body in a state of mortification (the body having to participate in the spiritual detachment from the world), so that it obeys the spirit and its brother (God in one's neighbor, the latter being considered in his indirectly divine function of 'cosmic corrective'), so that it is

subjected and submissive to everyone in the world; and not only to men, but also to all the animals, tamed or savage (one's 'neighbor' not being limited, and obedience becoming a universal attitude), in so far as this is permitted them from above by the Lord (*supernamente concesso dal Signore*) (because holy abandonment is compensated by divine protection)".

St. Francis, in his aphorisms entitled "Effects of the Virtues", says that "wherever true charity and true wisdom are found, there is neither fear nor ignorance"; and he says further, as regards poverty (which must be distinguished here from poverty of spirit, simplicity): "Wherever there is poverty with joy, there is neither cupidity nor avarice". One might add: nor curiosity, nor meanness, nor any sort of greed, thus no passion which causes dissipation or hardness of heart. Joy goes hand in hand with poverty, because the latter is detachment, and release from limitations of any sort gives rise to joy.

In his commentary on the Lord's Prayer, St. Francis of Assisi defines the love of God in the following manner: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven: so that we may love Thee with all our heart, thinking unceasingly on Thee (this 'thought' not being a discursive ratiocination, but a direct, intuitive and synthetic 'recollection' of the heart); with all our mind, directing towards Thee all our intentions and seeking Thine honor in all things (volitive attitude); with all our strength, putting all the powers of the soul, and the sentiments (sensible faculties) of the body in the service of Thy love and of nothing else (synthesis of all possible human attitudes); and so that we may likewise love our neighbors as ourselves, drawing them all, as far as we are able, towards Thy love, rejoicing in the good which they enjoy, and having compassion in their misfortunes, as if they were our own, and causing no offence whatsoever to anyone".

Very important in the above is the definition of love of one's neighbor: to draw him, as far as we are able (that is to say, according to our capacities and the vocation which results from them), towards the love of God; all manifestations of charity are thus subordinated to this essential charity, which, without being opposed to any partial aspect, goes to the heart of things and touches, with that which is divine in ourselves, that which is divine in our neighbor.

Love of the heart, as we have seen, is "to think unceasingly on Thee": "Wherever there is repose and remembrance of God (*il riposo e il ricordo di Dio*)", says St. Francis, "there is neither anxiety nor dissipation". This connection between calm and contemplation is very significant, for "peace" has always been associated with "gnosis"; the "holy silence" of the Hesychasts is none other than the "intellect pacified of all its movements", according to the saying of a Greek Father; in other words: the intelligence of the heart, purified of all passions and made fit to receive the immutable Light, imbues the soul with the serenity of things eternal.