

## Advantages of the Spiritual Exercises made in Retreat.

A LETTER TO A YOUNG MAN WHO IS DELIBERATING ON THE CHOICE OF A STATE OF LIFE.

I have received your last favor, in which you tell me that you are still undecided as to the state of life you should choose, and that, having communicated to your pastor the counsel I gave you,— namely, to go for that purpose to perform the spiritual exercises in that house which your father has in the country, — the said pastor answered you that it was not necessary for you to go to that house to torture your brains during eight days in solitude, but that it was enough for you to attend the exercises he would soon give to the people in his own church. Since, then, on this last point of the exercises, you again ask my advice, it is necessary that I should answer you more at length, and show you, first, how much greater the fruit of the spiritual exercises is, when they are performed in silence, in some retired place, than when performed whilst they are given in public, when one is obliged during that time to go to one's own house, and continues to converse with one's parents and friends ; and the more so in your case, as you write to me, you have in your house no room to which you may retire. On the other hand, I am very much in favor of those exercises when performed in solitude, as I know it is to such I owe my own conversion and my resolution to leave the world. I will then, in the second place, suggest to you the means and precautions to be taken during the exercises, in order to derive from them the fruit you desire. I beg you, when you have read this letter yourself, to give it to your Rev. Pastor, that he may read it also.

I.

Let us then speak first of the great benefit of the exercises, when they are performed in solitude, where one treats with no person but God; and, first of all, let us see the reason for it.

The truths of eternal life, such as the great affair of our salvation, the value of the time that God gives us that we may amass merits for a happy eternity, the obligations under which we are to love God for his infinite goodness and the immense love he bears towards us, — these and similar things are not seen with the eyes of the flesh, but with the eyes of the mind. It is, on the contrary, certain that, unless our intellect represents to the will the value of a good or the greatness of an evil, we shall never embrace that good nor reject that evil. And this is the ruin of those who are attached to the world. They live in darkness; whence it happens that, not knowing the greatness of eternal good and evil, and allured by the senses, they give themselves up to forbidden pleasure and miserably perish.

Wherefore the Holy Ghost admonishes us that in order to avoid sin, we must keep before our eyes the last things which are to come upon us; that is, death, with which all the goods of this earth will come to an end for us, and the divine judgment, in which we shall have to give an account of our whole life. *Remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin.* And in another place he says, *Oh, that they would be wise and would understand, and would provide for their last end.* By which words he wishes to give us to understand that if men would consider the things of the other life, they would all certainly take care to sanctify themselves, and would not expose themselves to the danger of an unhappy life through all eternity. They shut their eyes to the light and thus, remaining blind, precipitate themselves into so great evils. For this

reason the saints always prayed the Lord to give them light. *Enlighten my eyes, that I never sleep in death. May God cause the light of His countenance to shine upon us? Make the way known to me wherein I should walk. Give me understanding and I will learn Thy commandments.*

But to obtain this divine light, we must go near to God. *Come ye to Him and be enlightened.* "For," says St. Augustine, "as we cannot see the sun without the light of the sun itself, so we cannot see the light of God but by the light of God himself." This light is obtained in the spiritual exercises; by them we approach to God, and God enlightens us with his light. The spiritual exercises mean nothing else than that we retire for that time from intercourse with the world, and go to converse with God alone, where God speaks to us by his inspirations, and we speak to God in our meditations by acts of love, by repenting of our sins by which we have displeased him, by offering ourselves to serve him for the future with all our heart, and by beseeching him to make known to us his will, and to give us strength to accomplish it.

Holy Job says, *Now I should have rest in my sleep with kings and consuls of the earth, who build themselves solitudes.* Who are those kings that build themselves solitudes? They are, as St. Gregory says, those despisers of the world, who go from its tumults to render themselves fit to talk alone with God. "They build solitudes, that is, they separate themselves as far as possible from the tumult of the world, in order to be alone and to become fit to speak with God.

When Arsenius was reflecting on the means that he should take to become a saint, God caused him to hear these words: "Fly, be silent, and rest." Fly from the world, be silent, cease to talk with men, and talk alone with me, and thus rest in peace and solitude. In conformity with this, St. Anselm wrote to one worried by many worldly occupations, who complained that he had no moment of peace, the following advice: "Leave a little your occupations; hide yourself for a while from your tumultuous thoughts; apply yourself a little to contemplate God and rest in him; say to God, Now teach my heart where and how I may seek Thee, where and how I shall find Thee." Words that are applicable each and all to yourself. Fly, says he, for a short time from those earthly occupations which render you so unquiet, and rest in retirement with God; say to him, O Lord, show me where and how I may find Thee, that I may speak alone to Thee, and at the same time hear Thy words.

God speaks indeed to those who seek him, but he does not speak in the midst of the tumult of the world. *The Lord is not in the commotion of the earthquake,* as was said to Elias, when God called him to solitude. The voice of God, as it is said in the same place, is as *the whistling of a gentle air*, which is scarcely heard, not, however, by the ear of the body, but by that of the heart, without noise and in a sweet rest. This is exactly what the Lord says through Osee: *I will lead her into solitude, and I will speak to her heart.* When the Lord wishes to draw a soul to himself, he leads it into solitude, far from the embarrassment of the world and intercourse with men, and there speaks to it with words of fire. The words of God are said to be of fire, because they melt a soul, as the sacred Spouse says: *My soul melted, when He (my Beloved) spoke.* In fact, they prepare the soul to submit readily to the direction of God, and to take that form of life which God wishes it to take; they are words exceedingly efficacious, and so

efficient that at the very time they are heard they operate in the soul that which God requires of it.

One day the Lord said to St. Teresa: " Oh, how willingly would I speak to many souls, but the world makes so great a noise in their hearts that my voice cannot be heard! Oh, if they would but separate themselves a little from the world!" Thus, then, my very dear friend, the Lord wishes to speak to you, but alone and in solitude; since if he should speak to you in your own house, your parents, your friends, and your domestic occupations would continue to make a noise in your heart, and you would be unable to hear his voice. The saints have for this reason left their homes and their country, and gone to hide themselves in caverns or deserts, or at least in a cell of a religious house, there to find God and hear his words. St. Eucherius relates that a certain person seeking a place in which he could find God, went for this purpose to ask counsel from a master of the spiritual life. The man of God led him to a solitary place and then said: "Behold, here God may be found," without saying anything more. By this he wished to give him to understand that God is not to be found in the midst of the noise of the world, but in solitude. St. Bernard says that he learned to know God among the beech-trees and oaks better than in all the learned books he had read.

The inclination of worldlings is to be in company with friends, to talk and divert themselves; but the desire of the saints is to be in solitary places, in the midst of forests, or in caverns, there to converse alone with God, who in solitude familiarly converses with souls, as a friend with his friend. " Oh, solitude!". exclaims St. Jerome, " in which God familiarly converses with his servants." The Venerable Vincent Caraffa said that if it had been free to him to wish for anything in this world, he would have asked for nothing but a little grotto with a piece of bread and a spiritual book; there always to live far from men and conversing alone with God. The Spouse of the Canticles, praising the beauty of a soul living in solitude, compares it to the beauty of the turtle-dove: *Thy cheeks are beautiful as the turtle-dove's*. Precisely because the turtle-dove avoids the company of other birds, and always lives in the most solitary places. Hence it is that the holy angels admire with joy the beauty and splendor which embellish on its flight to heaven a soul, that in this life has lived hidden and solitary as in a desert: *Who is this that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights?*

I have wished to write all these things to you in order to inspire you with a love for holy solitude, for I hope that in the exercises which you will perform, you will not have to torture your brains, as your pastor said, but that the Lord will make you taste so great a spiritual delight, that you will come out of your retreat with such an affection for them that you will not fail hereafter to go through them every year; a thing which will be of immense advantage to your soul, whatever state of life you may choose, because in the midst of the world, the various occupations, disturbances, and distractions always produce dryness of spirit, so that it is necessary from time to time to irrigate, as it were, and renew it, as St. Paul exhorts: *Be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind*.

King David, troubled by earthly cares, wished to have wings and to fly away from the bustle of the world in order to find rest: *Who will give me wings. and I will fly away, and be at rest?* But being unable to leave the world with his body, he at least sought from time to time to disengage himself from the affairs of the realm he governed, and dwell in solitude conversing

with God, and thus his spirit found peace. *I have gone far off flying away, and I abode in the wilderness.*

Jesus Christ also, who had no need of solitude to be recollected and united with God, but wished to set us an example, often retired from intercourse with man and went away to mountains or into deserts to pray: *Having dismissed the multitude, He went into a mountain alone to pray; and He retired into a desert and prayed.* And he desired that his disciples, after the fatigue of their missions, should retire to some solitary place to rest in spirit: *Come apart into a desert place and rest a little;* declaring by this that the spirit, even amidst spiritual occupations, being obliged to treat with men, becomes somewhat relaxed, whence it becomes necessary to re- new it in solitude.

Worldlings, who are accustomed to divert themselves in conversations, at banquets and plays, believe that in solitude, where no such things are found, one must suffer an insupportable tediousness. This is really the case with those who have a conscience defiled by sin; for when they are occupied in the affairs of this world, they do not think of the things of the soul; but when they are disengaged and in solitude, as they do not seek God, they feel at once the remorse of their conscience, and thus find not peace, but tediousness and pain. But give me one who seeks God; and he will find in solitude not tediousness, but contentment and joy. This the Wise Man assures us of: *For her (wisdom's) conversation hath no bitterness, nor her company any tediousness, but joy and gladness.* Oh no! to converse with God causes no bitterness, no tediousness, but joy and peace.

The venerable Cardinal Bellarmine used, during the season, when the other cardinals went to divert themselves in countryseats and villas, to go to some solitary house to make the exercises during a month, and these he called his country diversions, and certainly his heart found more delight in them than all the others did in their amusements.

St. Charles Borromeo made the exercises every year and found in them his paradise on earth; and it was whilst he was one year engaged in these exercises on Mount Varalla that his last illness came upon him and brought him to his blessed end. For this reason St. Jerome says that solitude was a paradise which he had discovered on earth: "Solitude is a paradise to me."

But, perhaps, someone will say, What contentment can a person find, being alone and having no one to converse with? St. Bernard answers, "He who seeks God is by no means alone in solitude, for God himself is there with him, and renders him more content than if he had the company of the first princes of the world." "I was never less alone," writes the holy abbot, "than when I was alone."

The prophet Isaias, describing the sweetness which God gives those to taste who go to seek him in solitude, says: *The Lord therefore will comfort Sion, and will comfort all the ruins thereof; and He will make her desert as a place of pleasure, and her wilderness as the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of praise.* The Lord well knows how to comfort a soul who retires from the world; he recompenses a thousand-fold all the pleasures of the world it foregoes, and makes solitude become for it a garden of delight, where all the tumult of the world being excluded and there being only thanksgiving and praise to that God who treats it so lovingly, it finds a peace that satiates it.

If there were no other contentment in solitude than that of knowing the eternal truths, this alone should be sufficient to induce us to desire it. Divine truth, when known, truly satiates the soul, and not the vanities of the world, which are but lying and deceitful things; and this is precisely that great delight which is found in the exercises made in solitude and silence. In them we see in their purest light the Christian maxims, the importance of eternal salvation, the ugliness of sin, the value of grace, the love of God towards us, the vanity of the goods of this world, and the foolishness of those who, in order to acquire them, lose eternal goods and prepare for themselves an eternity of pains. Whence it happens that man, at the sight of these truths, takes the most efficacious means to secure his eternal salvation, and rises above himself, as Jeremiah says: *He shall sit solitary and hold his peace, because he raised himself above himself.* There man disengages himself from earthly affections, and unites himself to God in prayer, by the desire of belonging to him altogether, by offering himself to him, and by other repeated acts of sorrow, love, and resignation, and thus finds himself raised so high above all created things that he laughs at those who so much prize the goods of this world which he despises, knowing them to be too little and too unworthy of the love of a heart created to love the infinite good, which is God.

It is certain that he who comes out of the exercises, comes out of them much changed and better than he was when he began them. It was the sentiment of St. John Chrysostom that retirement is a great help towards the acquisition of perfection. <sup>1</sup> Therefore a learned author speaking of the exercises, writes thus: "Happy the man whom Christ leads from the noise of the world to the spiritual exercises, and into the solitude filled with heavenly sweetness." Happy indeed is the man who, flying from the tumult of the world, lets the Lord lead him to the spiritual exercises, where he enjoys a solitude which gives him a foretaste of the delights of paradise. The sermons preached in churches are good; but if the hearers do not apply themselves to reflect on them, little will be the fruit they will derive from them. Our reflections on them will never be made as they ought, if we do not make them in solitude. The sea-shell, after having received the dew of heaven, suddenly shuts itself and goes down to the bottom of the sea, and there the pearl is formed. It is an undoubted fact that what makes the fruit of the exercises perfect is the reflecting in silence (treating alone with God) on the truths heard in the sermon or read in a book. Therefore St. Vincent of Paul, in the missions he gave, always invited the hearers to perform the exercises, retired in some solitary place. One single holy maxim, well ruminated, is sufficient to make a saint. St. Francis Xavier left the world in consequence of the impression made on him by that sentence of the Gospel: "*What doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?*" A certain student in consequence of one single sentiment on death, suggested to him by a good religious, changed his bad life and became virtuous. St. Clement of Ancyra was encouraged by another consideration on eternity suggested to him by his mother, namely, "The thing we contend for is life eternal," and joyously suffered for Jesus Christ many torments inflicted on him by the tyrant.

To conceive, then, a just idea of the fruit which the exercises produce when performed in solitude, read a book on this subject, if you have one, and see there the stupendous conversions occasioned by them. I will here mention a few.

Father Maffei relates that there was in Sienna a priest who gave public scandal. This priest having made the exercises with a missionary who passed by accident through Sienna, was not only converted and made a good confession, but on a certain day, whilst a great number of people was present in the church, he went into the pulpit weeping and having a cord round his neck, and asked pardon for all the scandals he had given, and after this he went away to become a Capuchin and died as a saint. On his death-bed he confessed that for all the graces he had received he was indebted to those spiritual exercises.

Moreover, Father Bartoli relates of a certain German knight who had given himself up to all kinds of vice, so far as to give his soul to the devil by a written contract signed with his own blood, that, having afterwards performed the exercises, he conceived so great a sorrow for his sins that he fainted several times, and thenceforth he continued to lead a penitential life as long as he lived.

F. Rossignoli relates that, in Sicily, a son of a certain Baron became so debauched that his father, after having tried without effect many means to correct him, was obliged to put him in chains in a galley with the slaves. But a certain good religious, moved by compassion, went to see him, and by his winning manners and good advice induced him to meditate on certain eternal truths in the galley where he was confined. The young man having done so, wished to make a general confession, and showed such a change in his conduct that his father with much joy received him again into his house, and never afterwards had any reason to be displeased with him.

Another youth of Flanders, having made the exercises and being converted by them from a most wicked life he had been leading, said afterwards to his companions who were wondering at this: "You wonder at me, but I tell you that the d-evil himself, if he could make the exercises, would be brought to penance."

Another, a religious, but of so bad conduct that he had rendered himself insupportable to all, was by his Superiors sent to make the exercises. Being about to leave, he jestingly said to his friends, "Keep your beads ready to touch my body when I come back." But after the exercises he was so much changed that he became an example to all the other religious, who, seeing this change, wished to make them also.

Certain young men seeing other young men, their friends, going to make the exercises, wished to accompany them, not to profit, but to jest afterwards in their conversations about their devotions. But exactly the contrary happened; for during the exercises they were filled with such compunction that they all began to sigh and weep, confessed their sins, and changed their lives.

I could adduce such facts by thousands, but I shall relate only one more, that of a nun in the monastery of Torre di Specchi in Rome, who pretended to learning, but led a very imperfect life. This nun began, though with a bad will, to assist at the exercises that were given in the monastery; but the first meditation she made on the end of man made such an impression on her that she began to weep, went to her spiritual Father and said to him u Father, I wish to become a saint, and this promptly." She wanted to say more, but the tears prevented her from speaking. Having then retired to her cell, she made a writing by which she

gave herself entirely to Jesus Christ, and began to live a penitent and retired life, in which she persevered until death.

But when we see the esteem in which the exercises have been held by so many holy men, this, if we had no other reason, should be enough to make us prize them highly. St. Charles Borromeo, from the first time he made the spiritual exercises in Rome, began to lead a perfect life St. Francis de Sales confessed that it was to the exercises he owed the beginning of his holy life. Father Louis of Granada, a holy man, said that his whole life would not suffice to explain the knowledge of heavenly things that he had received in making the spiritual exercises Father Avila called the exercises a school of heavenly wisdom, and wished that all his spiritual children should go to make them. Father Louis Blosius, a Benedictine, said that we should give to God special thanks for having in these latter times made known to his Church this treasure of the exercises.

## II.

But if the exercises are of a great help to persons in every state or condition, they are of an especial help to him who wishes to make the choice of the state of life he should embrace. For I find it stated that the first end for which the exercises were instituted was that of making the choice of a state of life, because upon this choice depends the eternal salvation of each one. We cannot expect that an angel from heaven should come to assure us of the state which, according to the will of God, we should choose. It is sufficient to place before our eyes the state we think of choosing, and then we ought to consider the end we have in view in that choice, and weigh all the circumstances of the case.

This is the principal reason for which I wish you to make the exercises in silence; namely, for making the choice of the state of life. When, then, you have entered upon the exercises, as I hope you will, I beg of you to follow the advice I am going to subjoin:

1. The only intention you should have in making these exercises is that you may know what God will have you to do; and, therefore, in going to that solitary house, say within yourself, *I will hear what the Lord God shall speak in me*. I go to know what the Lord will tell me and what he wishes from me.

2. Besides, it is necessary that you have a determined will to obey God and to follow without reserve the vocation he will make known to you.

3. It is, moreover, necessary that you pray earnestly to the Lord, that he may make known to you his will, namely, in what state of life he wishes you to live. But remember that in order to obtain this light you ought to pray with indifference of mind. He who prays to God to enlighten him on his state of life, but does so without this indifference, and, instead of wishing to conform to the will of God, wishes rather that God should conform to his own will, is like a pilot who feigns to will, but indeed wills not that his vessel should advance, since he casts the anchor and then hoists the sail. God does not enlighten or speak to, such a person. But if you will supplicate him with this indifference and the resolution to accomplish his will, he will make you see clearly the state which is best for you. And if you should then feel any

repugnance to it, you ought to place before your eyes the hour of your death, and reflect which state you would in that hour wish to have embraced, and then embrace it.

4. Take with you to your house of retreat a book containing the meditations which are commonly made during the exercises; read these meditations and let them be instead of sermons, reflecting on them for half an hour, as well in the morning as in the evening. Take also with you the Life of some saint or some other spiritual books out of which to make your spiritual reading; and these ought to be your only companions in solitude during the eight days. It is also necessary, in order to obtain that light and to hear what the Lord will speak to you, to avoid every distraction: *Be still, and see that I am God*. To hear the divine voice, we must cease all intercourse with the world. To a sick man no remedies will be of any use if he does not take them with the proper precaution, as avoiding exposure to the cold air, unwholesome food, or too much application of mind. In the same manner, in order that the exercises may be useful for the health of your soul, you must remove hurtful distractions, such as the receiving of visits from friends, messages from without, or letters which are sent to you. St. Francis de Sales, when he was engaged in the exercises, laid aside all the letters he received, and did not read them until after the exercises. It is also necessary to read no books of amusement, and not even of study; for then we ought only to study the crucifix. Therefore, have in your room none but spiritual books, and, reading in them, read not for curiosity's sake, but only for this one end, — namely, to decide on the state of life which God will make known to you as the one that he wishes you to embrace.

6. Moreover, it is not enough to avoid distractions from without, you must also avoid those from within, for if you should there deliberately allow your mind to think on the things of the world, or of study, or the like, the exercises and the solitude will be of little use to you. St. Gregory says, "What avails the solitude of the body if the solitude of the heart is wanting?" Peter Ortiz, an envoy of Charles V., wished to go to the monastery of Monte Cassino, to make the exercises. Having arrived at the door of the monastery, he said to his thoughts what our Lord said to his disciples: *Sit ye here till I go yonder and pray*. Thoughts of the world, wait here outside; having finished the exercises, I shall again see you, and we will again talk together. Whilst one is engaged in the exercises, one ought to make use of the time only for the good of his soul, without losing any moment of it.

7. I beg of you to recite during the exercises the following short prayer:

My God, I am that miserable one who in the past have despised Thee; but now I esteem and love Thee above everything, nor will I love any other but Thee. Thou wouldst have me belong entirely to Thee, to Thee I will belong entirely. *Speak, O Lord; for thy servant heareth*. Let me know what Thou wishest from me, and I will do all; and let me especially know in what state Thou wishest me to serve Thee: *Make Thou known to me the way in which I should walk*.

During the exercises recommend yourself also in an especial manner to the divine Mother Mary, praying her to obtain for you the grace perfectly to accomplish the will of her Son.

And do not forget, when you make the exercises, to recommend me to Jesus Christ, as I will not omit to do in a particular manner for you, that he may make you a saint, as I heartily wish. In which sentiment I sign myself to be your most devoted and obliged servant, etc.