

New Brighton, Saturday 11th March 2023

Penance and Mortification with St Francis de Sales

Vivo ego dicit Dóminus: nolo mortem peccatóris, sed ut magis convertátur et vivat.

As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live.¹

The Antiphons we may find in the Roman Breviary for the penitential season of Lent express in a real way the intention of forgiveness and mercy, the Lord would like to pour in our souls. We will read again a lot today from our patron saint, Saint Francis de Sales, to see how the doctor of the Love of God seemed to be impregnated of this, and how this thought of misery about ourselves can be our cross to carry, the path of redemption the Lord chose for us, a real penance and mortification to improve ourselves, and make us worthy, because of the grace of penance, to share the divine reward.

When we hear about penance and mortification, we think mostly of the physical things to give up, a corporal penance that **we choose to inflict on ourselves**. Don't get me wrong here, the mortification of the body plays a great part in our participation in the Redemption. The Lord Himself showed us the way, accepting the scourging at the Pillar, the crowning of thorns, the carrying of the Cross, and finally the Crucifixion, and His death upon this ignominious gibbet. I'm not and would never say that that kind of physical suffering is useless, or not to be endured, but our Lenten penances cannot be reduced to them alone, or we may fail, and fall into a greater sin of pride because we achieved them quite well.

We cannot forget that above all these terrible and real sufferings, it was the view of all the sins of all men since the Creation until the Last Judgment, which is the greatest suffering for the innocent, loving and tender Heart of Jesus. To help us understand this way of thinking, let's listen to the master of spiritual life, Blessed Columba Marmion, in one of his numerous letters of spiritual direction:

“Blosius, a great Benedictine mystic, says that the best form of mortification is to accept with all our heart, in spite of our repugnance, all that God sends or permits, good and evil, joy and suffering. I try to do this. Let us try to do it together, and to help one another to reach that absolute abandonment into the hands of God”²

And in another one of his letters, addressed to a nun:

“Keep your soul set at large, and act with the holy liberty of the children of God Who has taken possession of your soul, and if you abandon yourself

¹ Breviarum Romanum, Antiphon for the office of Prime, during Lent.

² Dom Columba Marmion, Union with God, Part III, Chap. 2, The spirit of detachment. Letter of the 17th June 1902

without reserve to His Wisdom and Love, He will send you many mortifications far better than any you could choose for yourself”³

As we have just read, we may find a greater union with God, especially during penitential times, in a perfect abandonment to His Will. The mortifications that are imposed on us, that we do not choose of our own will, are the most rewarding ones, if we joyfully accept them.

But how could we find out about these mortifications? How could we turn for our own profit all these tribulations of life?

Since Original Sin, we are subjected to our wounded nature, with a deep inclination to commit various sins. Most fortunately, Our divine Lord came down upon earth, took our flesh, and restored our human nature in a better condition than it was before the Fall. However, even though we are baptised, we are still in need of the grace of the Lord to achieve anything good. We are still begging for His merciful grace of forgiveness.

The knowledge of our own unworthiness can be turned over for our own benefit. We may take a great opportunity to know about our faults, and while we mourn and make penance because of them, we may benefit from these mistake, because they forced us to come, miserably asking for the grace.

This humiliation before the Lord is a secret mortification which can profit us probably much more than any of the physical penances we could inflict our body. A wonderful little book will guide our meditation today, written by a French disciple of St Francis de Sales at the end of the 19th century. The Reverend Father Joseph Tissot gathered and briefly commented on several excerpts of St Francis de Sales’ letters and writings in his book, *l’art d’utiliser ses fautes*, fortunately translated into English: How to profit from your faults.

It is our privilege, and our continuous suffering to not get used to our own misery, since we were created in the image of God. Although we lost the privileges of our first parents, we keep at the bottom of our heart a noble feeling about our origin and original innocence.⁴ The Christian philosophers and theologians called it the intimate desire of happiness, which can only be achieved in the afterlife. Furthermore, we know that we can surely affirm with our own mind that we are capable of discovering God’s existence through our own reflexion.

But, in His great bounty, and because He wanted us to come nearer, the Lord came down to restore this broken nature, and recreate the bond that was uniting Him and mankind. He made easier this knowledge we may have about Him, but the more we learn about Him, the more distant He appears to us, as He is seen in His Perfections which makes us appear as nothing more than miserable worms, unworthy of Him.

Two attitudes can affect what happens to us: one is the most common weapon of the Devil, the other one is the path full of thorns we ought to choose. The wrong attitude is discouragement, seeing the abyss where we are. The other is a complete abandonment and opening to God’s merciful grace which can repair everything in us, if we let Him operate in our soul.

³ Dom Columba Marmion, Union with God, Part III, Chap. 2, The spirit of detachment. Letter of the 24th February 1921

⁴ Joseph Tissot, How to profit from your faults, Chap. 1.

Following the teaching of several wise doctors, St Francis de Sales always preached a real compassion about human weakness, as we can read with Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, who knew our patron saint so well:

“A certain lady had been guilty of a most serious fault, committed, indeed, through mere weakness of character, but none the less scandalous in the extreme. Our Blessed Father, being informed of what had happened, and having every kind of vehement invective against the unfortunate person poured into his ears, only said: "Human misery! human misery!" And again, "Ah! how we are encompassed with infirmity! What can we do of ourselves, but fail? We should, perhaps, do worse than this if God did not hold us by the right hand, and guide us to His will." At last, weary of fencing thus, he faced the battle, and the comments on this unhappy fall becoming ever sharper and more emphatic, exclaimed: "Oh! happy fault, of what great good will it not be the cause![1] This lady's soul would have perished with many others had she not lost herself. Her loss will be her gain, and the gain of many others.”⁵

We may realise how our saint was looking at all these miseries of our human condition, with a great kindness, trying to direct them towards a future full of hope and not despair, as we can read in this excerpt of a letter to Mrs. Brûlart:

“You complain that there is quite an admixture of faults and imperfections in your life in spite of your great desire to attain perfection and the pure love of God. I answer that it is not possible to empty ourselves completely ourselves. While we are here below, and until such time as God bears us up to heaven we must always bear with ourselves; and as long as we are bearing with ourselves we won't be bearing much of real value.”⁶

Because of the grace of God, which is poured over us in a special way through the Sacrament of Penance, we may be cured for a little while, until new infirmities and failures happen again to us, “for not until we reach paradise shall we be perfectly cured.”⁷

“In short, we always want to have our food sweetened with consolation, that is to say we want to feel love and tenderness, and thus consolation. And in the same way we should like to have no imperfections; but we must patiently accept the fact that our nature is human, my very dear daughter, and not angelic. Our imperfections should not please us and we should say together with the apostle: Unhappy that I am, ‘*who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*’⁸ but on the other hand they should not dismay or discourage us. We should rather

⁵ Msgr. Jean-Pierre Camus, The spirit of St Francis de Sales, Chap. 2, the Love of neighbour, § 8, Excusing our fellow men.

⁶ « *Vous vous plaignes dequoy plusieurs imperfections et defautz se meslent en vostre vie, contre le desir que vous aves de la perfection et pureté de l'amour de nostre Dieu. Je vous respons qu'il n'est pas possible de nous abandonner du tout nous mesmes. Pendant que nous sommes icy bas, il faut que nous nous portions tous-jours nous mesmes jusques a ce que Dieu nous porte au Ciel, et pendant que nous nous porterons, nous ne porterons rien qui vaille.* » St Francis de Sales, Letter to Mrs Brûlart, March 1605. Vol. XIII, Letter 177.

⁷ « *Nous ne serons jamais parfaitement gueris que nous ne soyons en Paradis.* » St Francis de Sales, 20th Spiritual conference “Why we should become Religious”, Vol. VI.

⁸ Rom., VII, 24.

make them a cause for submission, humility and being on our guard against self; but not for discouragement or affliction of heart, and even less for a lack of confidence in God's love for us; for though it is true that God does not love our imperfections and venial sins, he loves us very much in spite of them. Thus a child's weakness and infirmity does not please a mother but she nevertheless goes on loving her child, even tenderly and with compassion; and so too, although God does not love our imperfections and venial sins, he goes on loving us tenderly. That is why David was quite light when he said: *'Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak'*⁹¹⁰

Knowing our own weakness, presenting it as it is before our Creator and Redeemer, begging for His divine help, and never despairing to obtain it, we can from now really benefit from our own weakness. As the Lord said: "They that are well have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For I came not to call the just, but sinners."¹¹

Our infirmity is our richness, because the Lord will more easily bend over the most miserable, as they are more in need of Him. With St Gregory the Great, we may even say that it often happens to someone who sees himself covered with wounds before the Lord, is on the contrary more covered with a large and rich virtue of humility.

With St Francis de Sales, we can say that a real spirit of penance and mortification is to be lived through a real, continuous practice of the virtue of humility.

To sum the content of this little book of Father Joseph Tissot, he gives us a full description of what this practice should be:

- How to not be surprised with our faults
- How to not be disturbed because of our faults
- How to not be discouraged because of them
- How to use our faults to humiliate ourselves with the knowledge of our misery
- How to use our faults to increase our confidence in God's Mercy
- How to use our faults to make progress with perseverance
- How to use our faults to become a more fervent Christian
- How to use our faults with the use of satisfaction
- How to use our faults with a increased devotion towards Our Lady

The acknowledgement of our own misery will profit our spiritual progress on the path to Heaven. Since we now know it, we should no longer be surprised or getting impatient about it.

⁹ Ps. VI, 5.

¹⁰ « En somme, nous voudrions tous-jours avoir un peu de consolation et de sucre sur nos viandes, c'est a dire avoir le sentiment de l'amour et la tendreté, et par consequent la consolation. Et pareillement, nous voudrions bien estre sans imperfections ; mais, ma tres chere Fille, il faut avoir patience d'estre de la nature humaine et non de l'angelique. Nos imperfections ne nous doivent pas plaire, ains nous devons dire avec le saint Apostre : O moy miserable ! qui me delivrera du cors de cette mort ? mais elles ne nous doivent pas ni estonner ni oster le courage. Nous en devons voirement tirer la sousmission, humilité et desfiance de nous mesmes ; mais non pas le discouragement ni l'affliction du cœur, ni beaucoup moins la desfiance de l'amour de Dieu envers nous ; car ainsy Dieu n'ayme pas nos imperfections et pechés venielz, mais il nous ayme bien nonobstant iceux. Ainsy, comme la foiblesse et infirmité de l'enfant desplaist a sa mere, et pourtant, non seulement ne laisse pas pour cela de l'aymer, ains l'ayme tendrement et avec compassion, de mesme, bien que Dieu n'ayme pas nos imperfections et pechés venielz, il ne laisse pas de nous aymer tendrement ; de sorte que David eut rayon de dire a nostre Seigneur : Aye misericorde, Seigneur, parce que je suis infirme. » St Francis de Sales, Letter to Sister de Blonay, 18th February 1618. Vol. XVIII, Letter 1402.

¹¹ Mk., II, 17.

“Take great care not to be troubled when you have done something wrong, but humble yourselves as soon as possible before God, and let it be with a gentle and loving humility that leads you to trust that you will immediately have recourse to his goodness, sure that it will help you to make amends... When you make mistakes, whatever they may be, ask forgiveness from Our Lord, telling Him that you are sure He loves you well and will forgive you. And always simply and gently.”¹²

In another letter to Mrs Brûlart, St Francis de Sales tells us about impatience and anger against ourselves:

“Finally, don’t be angry, or at least don’t be agitated over the fact that you’ve been agitated; don’t be disturbed at having been disturbed; don’t be upset at the fact that these annoying emotions have upset you. But very gently put your heart back into the hands of Our Lord, begging Him to heal it. For your part, do all you can by renewing your resolution, by appropriate reading, and by doing whatever else can help bring about this healing. If you do this, you will gain much from your loss, and will end up healthier for having been ill.”¹³

To enlighten what’s behind this inclination of getting impatient and angry with oneself, St Francis unveils for us this common defect of fallen mankind, which, according to him, will die long after our natural death: our self-love and pride. Saint Francis de Sales makes himself the true disciple of the Carmelite spirituality, as so well expressed by St Teresa of Jesus, in her autobiography:

“Now, though the soul acknowledges itself to be miserable, and though it is painful to us to see ourselves as we are, and though we have most deep convictions of our own wickedness, – deep as those spoken of just now, and really felt, – yet true humility is not attended with trouble; it does not disturb the soul; it causes neither obscurity nor aridity: on the contrary, it consoles. It is altogether different, bringing with it calm, sweetness, and light. It is no doubt painful; but, on the other hand, it is consoling, because we see how great is the mercy of our Lord in allowing the soul to have that pain, and how well the soul is occupied. On the one hand, the soul grieves over its offences against God; on the other, His compassion makes it glad. It has light, which makes it ashamed of itself; and it gives thanks to His Majesty, who has borne with it so long. That other humility, which is the work of Satan, furnishes no light for any good work; it pictures God as bringing upon everything fire and sword ; it dwells upon His

¹² « Ayez grand soin de ne point vous troubler lorsque vous aurez fait quelque faute, mais humiliez-vous dès que possible devant Dieu, et que ce soit d'une humilité douce et amoureuse qui vous porte à la confiance de recourir immédiatement à sa bonté, sûrs qu'elle vous aidera pour vous amender... Quand il vous arrivera de faire des fautes, quelles qu'elles soient, demandez-en pardon tout doucement à Notre-Seigneur, en Lui disant que vous êtes sûre qu'il vous aime bien et qu'il vous pardonnera. Et cela toujours simplement et doucement. » St Francis de Sales, *Spiritual advice to Mother C-A Joly de la Roche*. (Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator)

¹³ « En somme, ne vous fâchez point, ou au moins ne vous troublés point dequoy vous aves esté troublee, ne vous esbranlés point dequoy vous aves esté esbranlee, ne vous inquietés point dequoy vous aves esté inquietee par ces passions fascheuses; mais reprenés vostre cœur et le remettés doucement entre les mains de Nostre Seigneur, le suppliant qu'il le guerisse. Et de vostre costé, faites aussi tout ce que vous pourres, par renouvellement de resolutions, par la lecture des livres propres a cette guerison et autres moyens convenables; et ainsy faisant, vous gaigneres beaucoup en vostre perte et demeureres plus saine par vostre maladie. » St Francis de Sales, *Letter to Mrs Brûlart*, Sept. 1613. Vol. XVI, Letter 910.

justice; and the soul's faith in the mercy of God – for the power of the devil does not reach so far as to destroy faith – is of such a nature as to give me no consolation: on the contrary, the consideration of mercies so great helps to increase the pain, because I look upon myself as bound to render greater service.

This invention of Satan is one of the most painful, subtle, and crafty that I have known him to possess; I should therefore like to warn you, my father, of it, in order that, if Satan should tempt you herein, you may have some light, and be aware of his devices, if your understanding should be left at liberty: because you must not suppose that learning and knowledge are of any use here; for though I have none of them myself, yet now that I have escaped out of his hands I see clearly that this is folly. What I understood by it is this: that it is our Lord's pleasure to give him leave and license, as He gave him of old to tempt Job; though in my case, because of my wretchedness, the temptation is not so sharp."¹⁴

At the school of St Francis, and as St Teresa said in her sharp and strong words, we must be careful of this false humility, which makes us unhappy about ourselves, because we encounter only deception from ourselves, when we are expecting much more, always forgetting about the fallen human condition. This false humility is a powerful, disguised sin of pride, which is searching more to know if the soul is cured, rather than the process of healing itself being followed.

“Self-love, then, is one of the sources of our disturbance; the other is the importance we give ourselves. Why is it that when we happen to commit some imperfection or sin, we are so surprised, upset, and impatient? Without doubt, it is because we thought we were something special, resolute, and steady, and therefore, when we discover that in reality we are nothing of the kind and have fallen flat on our face, we are disappointed, and consequently we are vexed, offended, and upset. If we really knew ourselves well, instead of being astonished at finding ourselves on the ground, we would marvel that we ever manage to remain standing up. That's the other source of our disquiet: we want nothing but consolation and are taken aback when we see and experience our misery, our nothingness, and our weakness.”¹⁵

A bit later, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, he wrote:

“Believe me, Philothea, the correction made by a father gently and with love has much more power to correct the child than one made with anger and fury. So too when our heart has committed some fault we must correct it with

¹⁴ St Teresa, Life written by herself, Chap. XXX, nb 11-12

¹⁵ « L'amour propre est donques l'une des sources de nos inquietudes ; l'autre c'est l'estime que nous faisons de nous mesme. Que veut dire que s'il nous arrive quelque imperfection ou peché nous sommes estonnés, troublés et impatiens ? Sans doute, c'est que nous pensions estre quelque chose de bon, resolu et solide ; et partant, quand nous voyons par effect qu'il n'en est rien et nous avons donné du nez en terre, nous sommes trompés, et par consequent troublés, offensés et inquietés. Que si nous sçavions bien qui nous sommes, en lieu d'estre esbahis de nous voir a terre, nous nous estonnerions comment nous pouvons demeurer debout. C'est la l'autre source de nostre inquietude : nous ne voulons que des consolations, et nous estonnons de reconnoistre et toucher au doigt nostre misere, nostre neant et nostre imbecillité. » St Francis de Sales, Letter to Reverend Mother Bourgeois, 15 April 1605. Vol. XIII, Letter 280.

gentle, calm remonstrances, with more compassion for it than anger against it, encouraging it to amendment. Thus the repentance it will form will sink in much more and penetrate more deeply than a fretful angry, stormy repentance.

As for myself, if I had, for example, taken great care not to fall into the vice of vanity and yet fell deeply into it, I would not like to correct my heart in the following manner: 'Are you not wretched and abominable that after so many resolutions you allowed yourself to be carried away by vanity? Die of shame, do not raise your eyes to heaven, you blind, shameless, traitor disloyal to your God'; and similar expressions. But I would like to correct it reasonably by means of compassion: "Alas! My poor heart, here we are fallen again into the ditch which we had so firmly decided to avoid. Let us get up and leave it for ever. Let us entreat the mercy of God and hope that henceforth it will help us to be firm; let us return to the path of humility. Courage, henceforth let us be on our guard. God will help us and we shall do better." I would like to build up a firm and solid resolution never to fall into the same fault taking suitable means for this and following likewise the opinion of the spiritual director."¹⁶

Amongst the numerous advices, full of compassion and charity, we notice that there is no place to give rest to sin for a soul who desires to amend herself. St Francis de Sales is a loving father for the soul of the sinner, but truly hates the sin who put it in such a miserable state. He doesn't want us to ignore the fault, he wants us to acknowledge it, in order to benefit from the grace, and find the right way of amendment in the future.

But as a good doctor of the souls, he knows that nothing good can happen in our spiritual life if we trouble ourselves with our mistakes. The patience he recommends to us is not a voluntary ignorance of our sins, but an humble acceptation of our misery and complete dependence on God's grace and mercy. How could we only think about our sins and our guilt, without forgetting the eternal punishment that should be ours by justice?

"One day, when I had the pleasure of speaking with him about spiritual matters, I said that venial sins, though small, caused some kind of trouble and anxiety in my heart. But as soon as I had spoken, he said: "Forgive me, venial sins should not trouble us or worry us, but we should be displeased by them. But," he said, "anxiety is caused by self-love, which is angry at the trouble it has in exercising the virtues, and at the fact that it is always to be repeated; displeasure, on the other hand, is an effect of heavenly grace, which inspires in us an aversion to that which displeases the divine pleasure of our Creator.

This is what he felt about the regret that one should have for one's daily offences; this is also what he practised on such occasions, crying out thanks to the gentle Redeemer, aware of his faults, without however becoming in the least bitter. Antaeus fighting against Hercules, as the wise men of Greece represent him in their poems, never fell to the ground until he quickly got back on his feet, with new and stronger strength than before. Thus, this magnanimous man, who was continually struggling against his passions, if he did not take some false

¹⁶ St Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, Chap. 9.

step, he got up courageously, and continued his enterprise peacefully and quietly, without in any way becoming irritated or disgusted.”¹⁷

This vision we may have of our sins and about our own infirmity could scare us to death, but St Francis de Sales never stops urging us to not give in and despair. Nothing is lost until our confidence is truly placed under the shelter of Our Lord. “For we are saved by hope.”¹⁸ This virtue is like a strong bond, a chain, which comes down from Paradise into our souls. If these remain attached, they are dragged, step by step, to the higher mountains, being taken out of the usual troubles of this life. But if we let ourselves be overwhelmed with discouragement, we are taken down to the abyss:

“our perfidious adversary is fully aware of this. As soon as he sees us overwhelmed by the feeling of our faults, he rushes at us, and throws into our hearts thoughts of despair, heavier than lead. If we accept them, this weight drags us down, we let go of the guardian chain, and we roll into the abyss.”¹⁹

St Francis de Sales warns us against the same thought which assailed Cain after his crime: “And Cain said to the Lord: My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon.”²⁰ From that moment, the Devil is the master of the soul who allows himself to go that way, because he poisoned it with his two most powerful evils: being away from God because of the sin, and being afraid of God because of discouragement.

This discouragement may not often happen under its strongest form, but in a more insidious way, which paralyses the soul, and impeaches it to be as near to the Lord, as it was, quietly attracting it towards tepidity. More than your sins themselves, it is the discouragement that follows which rejoices the enemy. Discouragement often goes with a mistrust in divine mercy, as St Francis de Sales says to a lady:

¹⁷ « Un jour que j'eus le bonheur de parler avec lui des choses spirituelles, il m'arriva de dire que les péchés véniels bien que petits, causaient je ne sais quel trouble et inquiétude au cœur : mais à peine eus-je lâché la parole, qu'il me répartit : « Pardonnez-moi, les péchés véniels ne nous doivent point troubler ni inquiéter : mais nous devons en avoir du déplaisir. Mais, disait-il, l'inquiétude est causée par l'amour-propre, lequel se fâche de la peine qu'il a en l'exercice des vertus, et de ce que c'est toujours à recommencer ; le déplaisir par contre est un effet de la grâce céleste, laquelle nous inspire l'aversion de ce qui déplaît au divin plaisir de notre Créateur. »

Voilà quel était son sentiment touchant le regret qu'il faut avoir de ses offenses journalières ; voilà aussi ce qu'il pratiquait en pareilles occasions, criant merci au doux Rédempteur, conscient de ses fautes, sans toutefois s'aigrir le moins du monde. Antée luttant contre Hercules, tel que les sages de Grèce nous le représentent en leurs poésies, ne tombait jamais par terre qu'il ne se remit rapidement sur ses pieds, avec de nouvelles forces plus vigoureuses qu'au paravant. Ainsi, cet homme magnanime, qui luttait continuellement contre ses passions, s'il ne lui arrivait de faire quelque faux pas, il se redressait courageusement, et continuait son entreprise paisiblement et tranquillement, sans nullement s'irriter ni se dégouter. » Father Louis de La Rivière, La vie de l'illustre François de Sales, de très heureuse & glorieuse mémoire évêque & prince de Genève, & instituteur de l'ordre des Dames de la Visitation, Part III, Chap. 9, Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator

¹⁸ Rom., VIII, 24

¹⁹ « Notre perfide adversaire ne l'ignore point. Dès qu'il nous voit accablé par le sentiment de nos fautes, il se précipite sur nous, et jette en nos cœurs des pensées désespérantes, plus lourdes que le plomb. Si nous les accueillons, ce poids nous entraîne, nous lâchons la chaîne tutélaire, et nous roulons au fond du gouffre. » St Francis de Sales, Ad Theod. Laps II Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator

²⁰ Gen., IV, 13.

“It would be better to die rather than offend God knowingly and deliberately. But if we happen to fall it would be better to lose everything rather than lose our courage, our hope and our resolve to keep on trying.”²¹

And here to a superior of a monastery of the Visitation:

“So go forth very bravely with perfect trust in the goodness of Him Who calls you to this holy task. When has anyone ever hoped in the Lord and been disappointed? Mistrust of your own powers is good as long as it is the groundwork of confidence in God’s power; but if you are ever in any way discouraged, anxious, sad or melancholy I entreat you to cast this away as the temptation of temptations; and never allow your spirit to argue or reply in any way to any anxiety or down heartedness to which you may feel inclined. Remember this simple truth which is beyond all doubt: God allows many difficulties to beset those who want to serve Him but He never lets them sink beneath the burden as long as they trust in Him. This, in a few words, is a complete summary of what you most need: never under any pretext whatsoever to yield to the temptation of discouragement, not even on the plausible pretext of humility.”²²

When St Francis speaks about discouragement, he also warns about its cause. Why are we so discouraged? It’s because we are exaggerating our weakness, and worse than that, we despair of God’s mercy.

The sinner falls because he forgot about his weakness, and was too confident in God’s mercy: sin of presumption.

After he felt his weakness seemed too big for him, he despises himself as so unworthy of God’s mercy: sin of despair.

God, Whom we were offending a moment ago, thinking He would easily forgive us, appears now as being a terrible avenger against us.

St Francis de Sales shows in God a loving father quick to forgive, and strong to support us on our pilgrimage to Heaven. We must find a real peace with that thought.

“But you understand that the mountain of Christian perfection is very lofty. You say, “How shall I be able to ascend it?” courage, Philothea! When the little bees are formed they are called nymphs; at this stage they are not yet able

²¹ « O Dieu, il faut plustost mourir que d’offencer sciemment et delibement; mais quand nous tombons, il faut tout perdre, plustost que le courage, l’esperance et la resolution. » St Francis de Sales, Letter to Mrs de la Fléchère, February 1609. Vol. XIV, Letter 513.

²² « Or, alles donq toute courageuse, en une parfaite confiance en la bonté de Celuy qui vous appelle a cette sainte besoigne. Quand est ce qu’aucun espera en Dieu et qu’il fut confus ? La desfiance que vous aves de vous mesme est bonne tandis qu’elle servira de fondement a la confiance que vous devez avoir en Dieu ; mais si jamais elle vous portoit a quelque discouragement, inquietude, chagrin et melancholie, je vous conjure de la rejeter comme la tentation des tentations ; et ne permettes jamais a vostre esprit de disputer et repliquer en faveur de l’inquietude ou de l’abattement de cœur auquel vous vous sentires penchee, car cette simple verité est toute certaine : que Dieu permet arriver beaucoup de difficultés a ceux qui entreprennent son service, mais jamais pourtant il ne les laisse tomber sous le faix tandis qu’ilz se confient en luy. C’est, en un mot, le grand mot de vostre affaire, de ne jamais employer vostre esprit pour disputer en faveur de la tentation du discouragement, sous quel pretexte que ce soit, non pas mesme quand ce seroit sous le specieux pretexte de l’humilité. St Francis de Sales, Letter to Reverend Mother de Bréchar, 22nd July 1616, XVII, Letter 1223.

to fly to the flowers nor to the mountains, nor to the neighbouring hills to gather honey. But little by little feeding on the honey which the bees have prepared, they grow wings and get strong to fly in search of honey all over the countryside. It is true, we are still little bees in devotion. We are not able to ascend according to our purpose, which is to reach the summit of Christian perfection. But if we begin to form ourselves by means of our desires and resolutions, our wings will begin to grow, and we can hope that one day we shall be spiritual bees able to fly. And meanwhile, let us live on the honey of the teachings left by the devout persons of the past. And let us pray to God to give us wings like a dove, so that we may be able not only to fly in this life but also to find rest in the eternity to come.”²³

Quietly and simply, let’s bring with confidence our misery to Our Lord. He will look at us with His divine bounty, and His grace will be given to us to enable us to reach the high mountains of perfection. This work of humility is accomplished in the silence of our heart and requests more attention than any kind of exterior mortification, which, although being good, when well ordered and submitted to obedience, are in need of being completed by this compunction of the heart. That was the ancient regret God talked about the chosen people:

“Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips glorify me, but their heart is far from me, and they have feared me with the commandment and doctrines of men.”²⁴

In the same sentence our Lord also said:

“Hypocrites, well hath Isaias prophesied of you, saying: This people honoureth me with their lips: but their heart is far from me.”²⁵

The practice of humility, following the teaching of St Francis de Sales, will transform our miserable life on a path of sanctification, made with secret penances and mortifications, accomplished in the silence of our heart, but always seen and accounted by Our Father in Heaven. As the prayer of Moses obtained forgiveness for the sin of the people, ours should confidently being said to the Lord, Who will surely listen to His children.

“Moses prayed in the sight of the Lord his God, and said, Why, O Lord, are You angry with Your people? Let the anger of Your soul be appeased: remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom You swore that You would give the land flowing with milk and honey. So the Lord relented in the punishment He had threatened to inflict on His people.”²⁶

We are concluding this meditation with a last short quotation of St Francis de Sales, kindly urging us to never despair:

²³ St Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, Part IV, Chap. 2.

²⁴ Is., XXIX, 13

²⁵ Mt., XV, 7-8

²⁶ Ex., XXXII, 11, 13-14. Offertory of Thursday Mass of the 2nd week in Lent.

“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.”²⁷

²⁷ « Il ne faut nullement entrer en defiance, car bien que nous soyons miserables, si ne le sommes nous pas a beaucoup pres de ce que Dieu est misericordieux a ceux qui ont volonté de l'aymer et qui en luy ont logé leurs esperances. » St Francis de Sales, Letter to Mrs de la Fléchère,, 20th January 1609, XIV, Letter 512.