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## BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER I: *How the inner and outer lives of a Christian  
should correspond*

DEAR SISTER IN JESUS CHRIST, I BEG YOU to be content and remain steadfast in the vocation through which God has called you to His service. Strive by the grace of Jesus Christ and with all the powers of your soul to live a life of true holiness, befitting the calling that you have embraced. Since you have forsaken the world and turned wholly to God, you are symbolically dead in the eyes of men; therefore, let your heart be dead to all earthly affections and concerns, and wholly devoted to our Lord Jesus Christ. For you must be well aware that if we make an outward show of conversion to God without giving Him our hearts, it is only a shadow and pretence of virtue, and no true conversion. Any man or woman who neglects to maintain inward vigilance, and only makes an outward show of holiness in dress, speech, and behaviour is a wretched creature. For they watch the doings of other people and criticize their faults, imagining themselves to be something when in reality they are nothing. In this way they deceive themselves. Be careful to avoid this, and devote yourself soul and body to God alone, conforming yourself inwardly to His likeness by humility, charity, and other spiritual virtues. In this way you will be truly converted to God. I do not say that you can be converted immediately, and possess all virtues in the same way as you can enclose yourself in a cell; but you should bear in mind that the purpose of your present bodily enclosure is to enable you more readily to attain spiritual enclosure.\* You are

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shut away from dealings with other folk in order that your heart may be withdrawn from all worldly affections and fears. And in this little book I propose to tell you as well as I can how you may best achieve this purpose.

### CHAPTER 2: *The active life and its duties*

**Y**OU must understand that, as Saint Gregory says, there are two ways of life in Holy Church through which Christians may reach salvation; one is called active and the other contemplative. One or other of these is necessary to salvation.

The active life consists in love and charity shown outwardly in good works, in obedience to God's Commandments, and in performing the seven corporal and spiritual works of mercy\* for the benefit of our fellow-Christians. This is the life suited to all who live in the world, and who enjoy wealth and ample goods. It is also suited to all who hold positions of rank, authority, and responsibility over others, and who have means at their disposal, whether they are learned or unlettered, laymen or churchmen: in short, all men of the world. These are bound to execute their duties with zeal and wisdom as common sense and discretion require. If a person is wealthy, let him be generous; if he has little, let him give less. Even if he has nothing, let him show goodwill. These are the spiritual and material duties of the active life.

Another requirement of the active life is the disciplining of our bodies by fasting, vigils, and other severe forms of penance. For the body must be chastised with discretion to atone for our past misdoings, to restrain its desires and inclinations to sin, and to render it obedient and ready to obey the spirit. Provided that they are used with discretion, these practices, although active in form, greatly assist and dispose a person in the early stages of the spiritual life to approach the contemplative life.

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### CHAPTER 3: *The contemplative life and its duties*

**T**HE contemplative life consists in perfect love and charity inwardly experienced through the spiritual virtues, and in a true knowledge and perception of God and spiritual things. This life belongs especially to those who for love of God forsake all worldly riches, honours, and outward affairs, and devote themselves body and soul to the service of God in spiritual occupations. Now since your state requires you to be a contemplative – for the purpose of your enclosure is that you may give yourself more freely and completely to spiritual things – you must toil night and day both in body and soul in order to attain this state of life as best you may, employing whatever means seem best to you.

But before I tell you of the means, I will first tell you a little more about the life of contemplation itself, so that you may understand something of what it is. You can then set it before you as the goal towards which you can direct all your energies.

### CHAPTER 4: *The first degree of contemplation*

**I**N the contemplative life there are three degrees. The first degree consists in knowledge of God and of spiritual matters. It is reached through the use of reason, through the teachings of others, and by study of the Holy Scriptures; it is not accompanied by feelings of devotion infused by a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Learned men and great scholars who have devoted great effort and prolonged study to the Holy Scriptures reach it to a greater or less extent as a result of natural intelligence and regular study, employing the gifts which God gives to every person who has the use of reason. This knowledge is good and

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may be termed a part of contemplation inasmuch as it implies perception of truth and a knowledge of spiritual things. But it is only a figure and shadow of true contemplation, because it does not bring with it any spiritual experience or inward savour of God, for these graces are granted only to those who have a great love for Him. This fountain of love issues from our Lord alone, and no stranger may approach it. But knowledge of this kind is common to good and bad alike, since it can be acquired without love. Therefore it is not true contemplation, since heretics, hypocrites, and men of a worldly life are sometimes more knowledgeable than many true Christians although they do not possess this love. Saint Paul describes this kind of knowledge: *Si habuero omnem scientiam et noverim mysteria omnia, caritatem autem non habuero, nihil sum* (1 Cor. xiii, 2). If I had full knowledge of all things and knew all secrets, but had no love, I should be nothing. Nevertheless, if those who have knowledge of this kind keep themselves in humility and charity, shunning worldliness and sins of the flesh with all their might, they are following a good way which will prepare them for true contemplation if they sincerely and devoutly ask this grace from the Holy Spirit.

Some people who possess this knowledge become proud and misuse it in order to increase their personal reputation, worldly rank, honours and riches, when they should use it humbly to the praise of God and for the benefit of their fellow-Christians in true charity. Some fall into heresies, errors, and other public sins, through which they become a scandal both to themselves and to the whole Church. Saint Paul says of this kind of knowledge: *Scientia inflat, caritas autem aedificat*. Knowledge by itself stirs the heart to pride, but united to love it turns to edification. By itself this knowledge is like water, tasteless and cold. But if those who have it will offer it humbly to our Lord and ask for His grace, He will turn the water into wine with His blessing, as He did at the request of His Mother at the marriage-feast.

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In other words, He will turn this savourless knowledge into wisdom, and cold naked reason into spiritual light and burning love by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

#### CHAPTER 5: *The second degree of contemplation*

THE second degree of contemplation consists principally in loving God, and does not depend upon intellectual light in spiritual matters. This degree is commonly attained by simple, unlearned folk who give themselves completely to devotion, and it is felt in these ways. When a person is meditating upon God, the grace of the Holy Spirit may move him to feelings of love and spiritual fervour at the thought of Christ's Passion or some other event in His earthly life. Or he may feel great trust in the goodness and mercy of God, His forgiveness of our sins, and His gifts of grace. Or there may come to him a heartfelt fear and awe of the hidden and unsearchable judgements of God and His justice. Or again, while at prayer he may feel his heart detach itself from all earthly things, all its powers uniting to reach up to our Lord in fervent desire and spiritual ecstasy. At such times there is no particular intellectual illumination in spiritual matters, or in the mysteries of Holy Scripture: the person simply knows that he desires nothing more than to pray and feel as he is doing, so great is the joy, delight, and comfort that he experiences. He cannot describe it, but knows that this feeling is real, for from it spring sweet tears, burning desires, and inexpressible grief. These scour and cleanse the soul from all stains of sin, and cause it to melt with wonderful love for Jesus Christ, so that it becomes obedient, responsible, and ready to do God's will. So profound is this experience that he does not care what becomes of him, provided that God's will be done. And there are many other feelings which I am unable to describe, and which cannot be experienced without great grace;

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but whoever has them is in charity. And although this fervour passes away, charity cannot be lost or lessened except by mortal sin. This affords great comfort. This may be called the second degree of contemplation.

### CHAPTER 6: *The lower stages of the second degree of contemplation*

THIS degree has two stages. When God visits the soul with His grace, this stage may be experienced as strongly and fervently by those living the active life as by those who are wholly devoted to the life of contemplation and have received this gift. But this feeling of fervour does not come at the soul's desire, nor does it often last long, but comes and goes at the will of Him who gives it. Therefore whoever enjoys it should be humble and thank God, keeping it hidden – unless he reveals it to his confessor – and preserving it with discretion as long as he may. And when it is withdrawn he should not be too anxious, but firmly persevere in faith and humble hope, waiting patiently until it returns. This fervour is a small foretaste of the sweetness of God's love, of which David speaks in the psalms: *Gustate et videte quam suavis est Dominus* (Ps. xxxiv, 8). Taste and see the sweetness of our Lord.

### CHAPTER 7: *The higher stage in the second degree of contemplation*

THE higher stage in this degree can only be reached and retained by those who live in great peace of body and soul, and who by the grace of Jesus Christ and through prolonged bodily and spiritual discipline have found peace of heart and purity of conscience, so that they desire nothing more than to

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live quietly in constant prayer to God, and in meditation on our Lord. The thought of the blessed Name of Jesus brings them comfort and joy, and meditation on it feeds their love for Him. And not only the Name of Jesus, but all other prayers, such as the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, hymns, psalms, and other devotions used by Holy Church become sources of spiritual joy and melody that comfort and strengthen them against all sin, and relieve them in bodily distress.

Saint Paul says of this degree of contemplation: *Nolite inebriari vino sed implemini Spiritu Sancto, loquentes vobismetipsis in hymnis et psalmis, et canticis spiritualibus, cantantes et psallentes in cordibus vestris Domino* (Eph. v, 18). Do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to yourselves in hymns and psalms and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord. Whoever enjoys this grace must be humble, and ensure that his constant desire is to attain to greater knowledge and awareness of God in the third degree of contemplation.

### CHAPTER 8: *The third degree of contemplation*

THE third degree of contemplation, which is the highest attainable in this life, consists of both knowledge and love; that is, in knowing God and loving Him perfectly. This is achieved when the soul is restored to the likeness of Jesus and filled with all virtues. It is then endowed with grace, detached from all earthly and carnal affections, and from all unprofitable thoughts and considerations of created things, and is caught up out of its bodily senses. The grace of God then illumines the mind to see all truth – that is, God – and spiritual things in Him with a soft, sweet, burning love. So perfectly is this effected that for a while the soul becomes united to God in an ecstasy of love, and is conformed to the likeness of the Trinity. The

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beginnings of this contemplation may be experienced in this life, but its consummation is reserved for the bliss of heaven. Saint Paul says of this union and conformation to our Lord: *Qui adhaeret Deo, unus spiritus est cum illo* (1 Cor. vi, 17). That is, whenever a soul is united to God in this ecstasy of love, then God and the soul are no longer two, but one: not, indeed, in nature, but in spirit. In this union a true marriage is made between God and the soul which shall never be broken.

CHAPTER 9.: *The difference between the third and second degrees of contemplation, and the excellence of the third degree*

THE second degree of contemplation may be called love on fire with devotion; the third is love on fire with contemplation. The former is a lower state, and the latter a higher. The former is more satisfying to the natural senses, and the latter to the spiritual faculties, for it is more interior, more spiritual, more noble, and more wonderful. Although imperfect, it is a true foretaste and promise of the joys of heaven, now perceived not clearly but dimly, which will be revealed and fulfilled in the bliss of heaven. As Saint Paul says: *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate; tunc autem videbimus facie ad faciem* (1 Cor. xiii, 12). Now we see God in a mirror, as it were dimly; but in heaven we shall see Him clearly, face to face. This is the illumination of the understanding coupled with the joys of His love to which David refers in the Psalter: *Et nox mea illuminatio mea in deliciis meis* (Ps. cxxxix, 11). Night is as light to me in my joy. The other degree of contemplation is as milk for children; this is solid meat for perfect souls of experienced judgement, who can discern good and evil. As Saint Paul says: *Perfectorum est solidus cibus qui habent sensus exercitatos ad discretionem boni et mali* (Heb. v, 14).

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No one can have the full exercise of this gift unless he is first reformed in the likeness of Jesus by bringing virtue to perfection. And no one living in this mortal body can retain it constantly in all its fullness and excellence, but only when he is visited by grace. And we learn from the writings of holy men that this is only for short periods, for we soon return to our normal level of perception. This gift springs wholly from love. As I understand him, Saint Paul is speaking of his own experience when he says: *Sive excedimus, Deo, sive sobrii sumus, vobis; caritas Christi urget nos* (II Cor. v, 13). Whether we transcend our bodily senses in contemplation of God, or whether we remain at our normal level of perception, it is the love of Christ that moves us. Saint Paul also expressly describes this stage of contemplation and of being conformed to God: *Nos autem revelata facie gloriam Domini speculantes, transformamur in eandem imaginem, a claritate in claritatem tamquam a Domini Spiritu* (II Cor. iii, 18). In other words, Saint Paul says of himself and of others made perfect: Being first reformed in virtue, with our inward vision clarified, we see the joy of heaven as in a mirror; we are transformed and united to His likeness, passing from clarity of faith to clarity of knowledge, and from clarity of desire to the clarity of true love. All this is brought about in a soul by the Spirit of God, as Saint Paul says. God gives this degree of contemplation where He will, both to learned and to simple, to men and women in spiritual authority, and to solitaries; but it is an especial favour, and not common. And although a person living the active life may receive this gift as an especial favour, none but a contemplative or solitary can possess it in all its fullness.

CHAPTER 10: *How things seen and felt in the bodily senses may be good or evil*

FROM what I have said you may understand that visions or revelations by spirits, whether seen in bodily form or in the imagination, and whether in sleeping or waking, do not constitute true contemplation. This applies equally to any other sensible experiences of seemingly spiritual origin, whether of sound, taste, smell, or of warmth felt like a glowing fire in the breast or in other parts of the body; anything, indeed, that can be experienced by the physical senses. None of these things, however comforting and pleasing, constitute true contemplation. Although good, they are unimportant, and are secondary to the spiritual virtues and to the pursuit of virtue and the knowledge and love of God; for in the knowledge and love of God there can be no deception. Feelings of this kind may be good, and caused by a good angel, or they may be deceptions caused by a wicked angel posing as an angel of light. And since they may be good or evil, it is clear that they are not of great significance. Remember that, when God permits it, the Devil has power to affect the bodily senses in the same way as a good angel. For as a good angel can appear in light, so can the Devil; and the same thing applies to the other senses. A person who has experienced both is able to tell which are good and which are evil, but one who has experienced neither, or only one, can easily be deceived; for although they are similar as regards the outward senses, their inward effect is very different. For this reason the soul should not have a great desire for them, nor should it experience them without caution, but use its discretion to distinguish good from evil, and so avoid deception. As Saint John says: *Nolite credere omni spiritui, sed probate si ex Deo sint* (1 John iv, 1). Saint John warns us not to believe every spirit,

but first to test it to see whether it comes from God or not. So I will tell you of one method by which I think you can distinguish the good from the evil in such instances.

CHAPTER 11: *How to know whether sensible experiences are good or evil*

SHOULD you see any light or brightness, whether outwardly or in your imagination, which is not visible to other people, treat it with caution. And should you hear any sweet melody or suddenly taste a sweet but unaccountable savour in your mouth, or a fiery heat in your breast, or any other kind of pleasurable sensation elsewhere in your body, be on your guard. Even if a spirit such as an angel appears to you in bodily form to comfort and guide you, or if you have some experience that is not attributable to any bodily creature, treat it with reserve both then and afterwards, and test the reactions of your soul. If the pleasure that you feel leads you to abandon the thought and contemplation of Jesus Christ, and your spiritual exercises and prayer, so that you neglect self-examination and cease to long for virtue and the spiritual knowledge and love of God, then beware. And take care lest you allow the inmost desire of your heart, your pleasure and your peace of mind to depend principally on these experiences, regarding them as part of the joy of Heaven and the happiness of the angels, so that you do not wish to pray or think of anything else. For if your sole desire is to preserve and enjoy such experiences, beware of these feelings, for they come from the devil. Therefore, however pleasing and attractive they may appear, reject them and do not yield to them. When the devil sees a soul devote itself wholly to spiritual things he is greatly angered, for he hates nothing more than to see a soul in this sinful body enjoying the savour of the knowledge and love of God, which he as a spirit wilfully lost. So that if he cannot injure it by open sins, he tries to hinder

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and beguile it into spiritual pride and false security by means of sensible enjoyments and intellectual pleasures. In this way he tricks it into thinking that it is experiencing the joys of Heaven or is half-way to Paradise when in reality it is nearing the gates of Hell. Thus through pride and presumption such a person may fall into errors and delusions, and may suffer other bodily and spiritual harm.

However, an experience of this kind may not discourage you from spiritual exercises, and may enable you to pray more fervently and devoutly, and to think more readily of spiritual things. If this be so, although it may be disturbing at first, it will later transform and quicken your heart to a deeper desire for virtue, increase your love towards God and your fellow-Christians, and make you more humble in your own eyes. By these indications you may know that it comes from God, and is brought about by the presence and action of a good angel. Such an experience is granted by God in His goodness to comfort simple devout souls, to increase their trust and desire for Him, and to make them seek to know and love Him more perfectly. In the case of souls made perfect, it is granted to afford them such joy as will give them a promise and foretaste of the glory that awaits them in Heaven. I do not know whether there is any such person living on earth, but it seems that Mary Magdalene had this privilege, when she lived alone in a cave for thirty years, and was daily borne up by angels and fed in body and soul by their presence. We read this in the legend about her.\*

Saint John speaks of this way of testing the spirits in his epistle, and teaches us: *Omnis spiritus qui solvit Jesum hic non est ex Deo* (1 John iv, 3). Every spirit that denies Jesus is not of God. These words may be understood in many ways, but in one sense they apply to what I have been saying.

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### CHAPTER 12: *What unites Jesus to a man's soul, and what separates Him from it*

JESUS is united to a man's soul by goodwill and by a deep desire to possess Him alone, and see Him spiritually in His glory. The stronger this desire, the closer the union between Jesus and the soul: the weaker this desire, the looser the union. Any spirit or experience that weakens this desire and distracts the soul from constant thought of Jesus Christ and its proper aspiration for Him will damage and disrupt this union between Jesus and the soul. It is therefore not of God, but the work of the devil. But if some spiritual experience or revelation fires the desire, draws the knot of love and devotion to Jesus more tightly, clarifies the soul's spiritual vision and knowledge, and makes the soul more humble, then it comes from God. From this you will understand that you may not deliberately allow your heart to depend on or derive all its pleasure from any sensible consolations of this kind even if they are good. Regard them as of little significance compared with the spiritual desire and constant thought of Jesus Christ, and do not allow your thoughts to become too engrossed in them.

Devote all your energies to prayer, so that your soul may come to a real perception of God; that is, that you may come to know the wisdom of God, the infinite might of Our Lord Jesus Christ, His great goodness in Himself and towards His creatures. For true contemplation consists in this, and not in these other matters. Thus Saint Paul says: *In caritate radicati et fundati, ut possitis comprehendere cum omnibus sanctis, quae sit longitudo, et latitudo, sublimitas, et profundum* (Eph. iii, 17). Be rooted and grounded in love – not in order to experience sound or sweet savours or other physical sensations – but that with all the saints you may know and experience something of the

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greatness of the infinite Being of God, the wideness of His wonderful love and goodness, the height of His almighty majesty, and the boundless depths of His wisdom.

### CHAPTER 13: *The occupation of a contemplative*

THE occupation of a contemplative consists in acquiring the knowledge and experience of these four things, upon which depend the whole science of the spiritual life. This is the one thing that Saint Paul desired, when he said: *Unum vero, quae retro sunt obliviscens, in anteriora me extendam, sequor si quo modo comprehendam supernum bravium* (Phil. iii, 13). In other words, one thing I earnestly desire, and that is to forget all that is behind me, and to reach forward with all my heart to grasp and enjoy the supreme reward of endless bliss. All material things are behind us, before us are the spiritual; therefore Saint Paul desires to forget all material things, even his own body, so that he may see those that are spiritual.

### CHAPTER 14: *How virtue begins in the reason and the will, and is perfected in love*

I HAVE told you a little about contemplation and what it means, so that you may keep it before you as your goal, and make it your lifelong desire by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to reach some degree of it. Contemplation conforms the soul to God, but this cannot take place until the soul is reformed by the practice of all virtues, and comes to love virtue for its own sake.

Many a man practises such virtues as humility, patience, and charity towards his fellow-Christians prompted only by his reason and will, and without any spiritual delight in them. He

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often performs them grudgingly, reluctantly, and coldly, practising them only because his reason moves him to the fear of God. Such a man is virtuous in his reason and will, but has no real love of virtue. But when, by the grace of Jesus and as a result of spiritual exercises and bodily discipline, acts prompted by reason alone become prompted by enlightenment, and acts of will become acts of charity, then this man has a love of virtue. He has gnawed through and broken the bitter shell of the nut, and feeds on its kernel. In other words, virtues which were formerly burdensome have become pleasant and desirable, so that he takes as much delight in humility, patience, purity, temperance, and love as in any worldly pleasures. Indeed, until virtue turns into love, he may reach the second degree of contemplation, but he certainly will not attain the third. Now since virtues predispose us to contemplation, it is essential for us to employ the right means to acquire them.

### CHAPTER 15: *On three means to attain contemplation*

THERE are three means most commonly employed by those who devote themselves to contemplation; these are reading the Holy Scriptures and books of spiritual guidance, meditation, and constant prayer. Since you are not able to read the Holy Scriptures, you should spend more time in prayer and meditation. By means of meditation you will see how deficient you are in virtues, and by prayer you will obtain them. By meditation you will realize your own wretched state, your wickedness, and your sins of pride, greed, gluttony, and impurity, evil impulses to envy, wrath, hatred, melancholy, anger, bitterness, sloth, and senseless despair. You will see that your heart is full of foolish shame, concern for your bodily needs, and fear of the world's opinion. All these emotions will constantly bubble up in your heart like foul water from a contaminated



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spring. They will obscure your spiritual vision, so that you can neither realize nor feel the love of Jesus Christ. For remember that until your heart is thoroughly cleansed from such sins by knowledge of the truth and by constant remembrance of Christ's humanity, you cannot reach a true and spiritual knowledge of God. Christ Himself witnesses to this in the Gospel: *Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt* (Matt. v, 8). Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. In meditation you will also recognize the virtues that you ought to possess: humility, gentleness, patience, righteousness, strength of spirit, temperance, purity, peace, self-control, faith, hope, and love. In meditation you will see the goodness, beauty, and value of these virtues. In prayer you will learn both to love and to acquire them, for without them you cannot become a contemplative. For Job says: *In abundantia ingredieris sepulchrum* (Job v, 26). In the fullness of good works and spiritual virtues you shall enter the tranquillity of contemplation.

### CHAPTER 16: *How humility fosters discernment*

NOW if you wish to use these spiritual exercises wisely and persevere in them safely, you must begin at the beginning, and there are three things which you need as a secure foundation on which to build; these are humility, firm faith, and a whole-hearted intention towards God. First of all you must acquire humility in this way. Discipline your will and, if possible, your feelings to recognize that you are unfit to live among other folk, unworthy to serve God in the fellowship of His servants, unprofitable to your fellow-Christians, and lacking both knowledge and strength to perform the good works of the active life for the benefit of your fellows as other men and women do. Consequently you are a wretched outcast, rejected by everyone, and confined to a cell alone, so that, since you cannot help

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anyone by good works, you may not harm anyone by your evil example. Consider further that since you are unable to serve our Lord in active works, you are even more unworthy and incapable of serving Him in spiritual activities. For our Lord is a spirit, as the prophet says: *Spiritus ante faciem nostram Christus Dominus* (Lam. iv, 20). The Lord Christ is a spirit before our face. The service which we owe to Him is spiritual, as He Himself says: *Veri adoratores adorabunt Patrem in spiritu et veritate* (S. John iv, 23). His true servants will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. But since you are so undisciplined, so sensual, so worldly, so blind to spiritual things, and to the state of your soul in particular – which ought to be your first consideration if you wish to come to the knowledge of God – how can you feel yourself worthy or capable of entering the contemplative life which, as I have said, consists above all else in the spiritual knowledge and experience of God? I do not say this to discourage you from your intention or to make you regret your enclosure, but in order that if possible you should really feel this humility in your heart. For what I say is true, and no exaggeration. So you must long and labour constantly to come as near to perfection as you may in the vocation which you have embraced, firmly trusting that by the mercy of God this way is the best for you. And although you may not reach perfection in this life, yet make a good beginning in it, with a sure trust that by God's mercy you will attain it in the joys of heaven. Indeed, my own life is like this; I feel myself so wretched, so weak, so worldly, and so far from the full experience of what I have been saying that I can do nothing but beg for mercy and long for this state of perfection, trusting that our Lord of His grace will bring me to it in the joy of heaven. Do the same, and do better if God gives you grace. This realization of your own unworthiness will drive out of your heart all unreasonable interest in other people's affairs and criticism of their actions, and will compel you to look at yourself alone, as though there were no one in existence

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but God and yourself. You should consider yourself more vile and wretched than any living creature, so that you can hardly endure yourself, so great will be your consciousness of inward sin and corruption. For I assure you in all sincerity that if you wish to become truly humble you should come to have this feeling, and regard venial sin in yourself as more serious and painful than mortal sin in others. For whatever defiles your soul or hinders its knowledge and experience of God must be very grievous and painful to you. But a venial sin of your own is a greater obstacle to your experiencing the perfect love of Jesus Christ than the sin of anyone else, however great it may be. It is clear, then, that you must harden your heart against yourself, humbling and detesting yourself more strongly for all the sins that hold you back from the vision of God than you detest the sins of others. For if your own heart is free from sin, the sins of others will not hurt you. Therefore, if you wish to find peace, both in this life and in heaven, follow the advice of one of the holy fathers, and say each day: 'What am I?', and do not judge others.

### CHAPTER 17: *Who may reprove the faults of others, and who may not*

**B**UT you may object: 'How can this be so? It is an act of charity to reprove people for their faults, and an act of mercy to rebuke them to obtain their amendment.' My reply is that it is not fitting for you or for any contemplative to neglect your own soul in order to note and rebuke others for their faults, unless the need is so urgent that a person may lose his soul unless you correct him. But those who lead the active life and exercise authority and responsibility over others, such as prelates, clergy, and such men, are bound both by their office and in charity to notice and correct other men's faults. They should

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not do so out of any desire or pleasure to punish them, but only when need arises; then they must act in the fear of God and His Name, and with a desire to save souls. Others who lead the active life, but have no authority over their fellows, are in charity bound to reprove the faults of others only when the sin is mortal and no one else can correct them, and when they think that the sinner may be won back by their rebuke. For unless this is so, it is better to refrain. The truth of this is evident in Saint John, who was a contemplative, and Saint Peter who was a man of action. During the Last Supper with His disciples, our Lord told Saint John – who had been secretly prompted by Saint Peter – how Judas would betray Him. But Saint John did not inform Saint Peter as he had asked, but turned and laid his head on Christ's breast, and was transported by love into the contemplation of God's secrets. So great was his reward that he forgot both Judas and Saint Peter. This is a lesson to all who aspire to contemplation that they should be ready to do the same.

You will now understand that you should not judge other people, or deliberately cherish evil suspicions about them. Indeed you should love and honour those who lead an active life in the world and undergo many trials and temptations of which you in your cell have no experience. They endure hardship and toil for their own and others' living; and many of them would choose to serve God in tranquillity as you do if they had the opportunity. Nevertheless, despite their worldly business, they avoid many sins which you, in their place, would fall into, and they do many good deeds which you could not do. There is no question that many live in this way, but you cannot know who they are.

CHAPTER 18: *Why humble people should respect others, and regard themselves as inferior to all*

HONOUR all men and regard them as your betters, behaving humbly in their company, and seeing yourself as the most worthless and insignificant of men. It will do you no harm however much you humble yourself, even though in God's sight you have more grace than another. But it is dangerous for you to consider yourself superior to anyone else, even though he may be the most depraved and wicked scoundrel alive. For our Lord says: *Qui se humiliat exaltabitur, et qui se exaltat humiliabitur* (S. Luke xiv, 11). Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. It is necessary for you to acquire this degree of humility as a start, for by this and by God's grace you will at length attain perfect humility and all other virtues. Whoever possesses this one virtue possesses all others, for whatever your degree of humility, the same your degree of charity, patience, and other virtues, although they may not show outwardly. Therefore try to learn humility and keep it, for it is the first and last of all virtues. It is the first because it is the foundation of all virtues; as Saint Augustine says, if you plan to build a high house of virtues, first lay deep foundations of humility. It is also the last because it preserves and guards all other virtues: as Saint Gregory says: Whoever acquires any virtues without humility is like a man who carries powdered spices in the wind. And however numerous your good deeds – fasts, vigils, or anything else – they are valueless without humility.

CHAPTER 19: *Advice to those who lack any love for humility, and how they should not be too anxious on this matter*

NEVERTHELESS, if you are unable to feel any real love for humility in your heart as you would wish, do whatever you can and humble yourself by reason, knowing that you ought to be humble, as I say, even though you do not feel it. Regard yourself all the more as a sinner because you cannot feel yourself to be what you are. And, although your inclinations rebel and refuse to submit to your will, do not be over-anxious, but endure the misguided feelings of your nature as a penance. Despise and reprove these feelings and subdue your rebellious heart, knowing that you would well deserve to be trodden and spurned under the feet of all men as an outcast. And so by the grace of Jesus Christ and by constant meditation on the humbleness of His precious humanity, you will greatly abate the impulses of pride, while the virtue of humility, formerly dependent on your will alone, will become the object of your love. Without this virtue, either truly desired or loved, whosoever tries to serve God in the contemplative life will stumble like a blind man, and will never attain his purpose. The higher he seeks to climb by bodily penance and other virtues without humility, the lower he falls. For as Saint Gregory says: One who cannot utterly despise himself never yet found the humble wisdom of our Lord Jesus.

CHAPTER 20: *How the lack of humility causes hypocrites and heretics to consider themselves superior to all others*

HYPOCRITES and heretics do not possess this humility either in will or feeling. For lack of this gentle virtue their hearts and instincts are dry and cold, and they are all the further from

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it because they think they have it. They gnaw at the dry shell of the nut, but cannot reach the kernel with its sweet savour. They make an outward show of humility in dress, pious speech, and modest bearing, and seem to possess many virtues of mind and body. But in their will and affection, where humility should be especially evident, it is only pretended. For they condemn, despise, and belittle those who will not do as they do or accept their teachings. They regard them either as ignorant fools or as blinded by sensual living. So they exalt themselves in their own opinion above all others, thinking that they alone possess the secret of a good life, and are favoured by God with the grace of knowledge and devotion beyond all other men. From this complacency springs a delight in self-admiration and praise, as though there were none like them. They praise and thank God with their lips, but in their thievish hearts they steal the worship and thanks due to God alone and bestow it on themselves; consequently they neither desire nor feel humility. A sinner who falls daily and is sorry for it is humble in will, even though he may not feel humble. But a heretic or hypocrite is neither. He is in the same condition as the Pharisee described by our Lord in the Gospel (S. Luke xviii, 9), who came into the temple with the publican to pray. When he came, he did not offer prayer, and asked nothing of God, for he thought that he had no need, but he began to thank God saying: 'Lord, I thank you for giving me grace above all others, so that I am not as other men are, robbers, fornicators, and sinners of that sort.' And he looked around him and saw the publican, whom he knew for a sinner, beating his breast and crying for mercy. Then he thanked God that he was not such a man as he was, saying, 'Lord, I fast twice a week, and pay my tithes honestly.' And when he had ended, says our Lord, he returned home without grace as he had come, and gained nothing. But you may say, 'How did this Pharisee do wrong, since he thanked God, and what he said was true?' I answer that the Pharisee did wrong because he judged and

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condemned the publican, who was justified by God. He also did wrong in thanking God only with words, meanwhile taking a secret pride in himself because of God's gifts, stealing the honour and praise due to God, and bestowing it upon himself. Heretics and hypocrites are in just the same state as the Pharisee. They do not pray willingly, and when they do pray, they do not humble themselves and acknowledge their sins honestly, but make a pretence of thanking and praising God, giving Him lip-service only. Their satisfaction is shallow and false, for their delight is not in God at all, although they imagine otherwise. They cannot praise God, for as the wise man says: *Non est speciosa laus in ore peccatoris* (Ecclus. xv, 9). The praise of God in the mouth of a sinner is neither fair nor seemly. Therefore sinners like you and me must take care to avoid the condition of this Pharisee with his pretended praise of God, and imitate the publican in humility, asking mercy and forgiveness for our sins, and the gift of spiritual virtues. We can then thank and praise Him sincerely with a pure heart, and offer Him our worship without pretence. For our Lord asks through His prophet: *Super quem requiescit spiritus meus, nisi super humilem et contritum spiritum et trementem sermones meos?* (Isaiah lxvi, 2). Upon who shall My spirit rest? and He answers Himself; and says: Upon none but the humble, the poor, the contrite in heart, and those who fear My words. Therefore if you desire to have the spirit of God to rule your heart, be humble and fear God.

#### CHAPTER 21: *Articles of faith to be firmly held*

THE second thing necessary to you is a firm belief in all the articles of faith, and in the sacraments of the Church, holding them steadfastly with all your heart and will. And although the suggestions of the devil may stir up qualms of doubt and uncertainty in your mind about any of them, be steadfast, and

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do not pay too much attention to such feelings. Set aside your personal opinions without examining and revolving them in your mind, and conform your own faith wholly to the Faith of Holy Church. Do not harass your mind with any doubts that seem contrary to it, for these doubts are not what you believe; the Faith of Holy Church is what you believe, though you neither see it nor feel it. So endure these difficulties patiently, as a trial sent by God to purify your heart and strengthen your faith.

It is also your duty to cherish and respect all the laws and regulations made by prelates and others who rule Holy Church, whether issued to define the Faith and sacraments, or for the direction of Christians in general. Accept them humbly and sincerely, and although you may not understand the reason for them and think some of them unreasonable, do not criticize or condemn them. Observe them all, although they may not greatly concern you. Do not accept any other opinions or fancies which appear more holy, as some foolish folk do, whether they spring from your own mind or from the teaching of others, if they run contrary to the ordinances or general teaching of Holy Church. You should also firmly believe that by God's mercy you are called by our Lord to be saved as one of His chosen. Never abandon this hope. Whatever you may hear or see, whatever temptations assail you, and even though you consider yourself so great a sinner that you desire to be cast into Hell because of your failure to do good and to serve God as you ought, yet hold firmly to this faith and hope, and all shall be well. Even though all the devils in hell were to appear to you in bodily form, and tell you that you cannot be saved, do not believe them. And were all the people of the world and all the angels of heaven to tell you the same thing, do not believe them or abandon this hope of salvation. I tell you this because some who have devoted themselves wholly to the service of God are so weak and simple that if the devil stirs up evil inclinations in

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them, or if his prophets – whom people call fortune-tellers – inform them that they cannot be saved or that their way of life is displeasing to God, they become distressed and despondent. So in their ignorance they sometimes fall into great depression and almost despair of salvation. Therefore I am sure that everyone who is fully resolved by the grace of our Lord Jesus to forsake sin should have a firm trust in salvation. For so long as his conscience assures him clearly that any mortal sin that he has committed has been promptly confessed and absolved, and if he humbly approaches the sacraments of Holy Church, he may rightly hope for salvation. This applies even more strongly to those who give themselves entirely to God, and do their utmost to avoid even venial sin. In contrast, anyone who deliberately remains in a state of mortal sin and yet hopes for salvation is in a perilous state, for he relies on this hope, but neither forsakes his sin nor submits himself humbly to God and Holy Church.

### CHAPTER 22: *On a firm and whole-hearted intention*

THE third thing that is essential at the outset is a firm and wholehearted intention; that is, a sincere resolve and desire to please God. For this is love, without which all your efforts are valueless. Make it your intention always to learn and labour to please Him, and never willingly to abandon good works, whether corporal or spiritual. Do not set any limits to them, telling yourself that you will serve God for a certain time, and then deliberately allow yourself to relapse into trivial thoughts and unprofitable occupations in order to obtain rest and comfort by indulging the senses and enjoying worldly pleasures. You may do this under the impression that such recreation will enable you to resume your spiritual exercises with renewed fervour, but I am sure that this is a mistake. I do

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not say that you can always fulfil your intention in practice, because your bodily needs – such as food, sleep, conversation, and natural frailty – will often intrude themselves and hinder you, however active you may be. Resolve never to be idle, and always be engaged in some spiritual or bodily activity, constantly, raising your heart's desire to God and the joys of heaven, whether you are eating, drinking, or performing any other outward action. Hold to this resolve as closely as you can, for with it you will always be ready and eager for your work. And if through frailty or negligence you lapse into any useless occupation or unprofitable conversation, it will prick your heart as sharply as a needle, and make all such foolishness so irksome that you will quickly return to meditation on Jesus Christ or to some good occupation. With regard to your bodily needs, it is good to use discretion in food, drink, sleep, and in all kinds of bodily penance, as well as in the matter of long vocal prayers or feelings of fervent devotion accompanied by tears and heightened imagination. If you lack the grace for these things it is wise to observe discretion, for restraint is best. But in fighting to destroy sin by a guard over the heart, in constant desire for virtue and the joys of heaven, and in fostering the interior knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, cast aside restraint; the more you aspire to these the better. For you must hate sin, together with all the worldly loves and fears in your heart without ceasing, and if possible have a boundless desire and love for virtue and purity. I do not say that this is essential to salvation, but I am sure that it is valuable. And if you persevere in this resolution you will make greater progress in virtue in a single year than you would in seven years without it.

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### CHAPTER 23: *A summary of the previous argument, and its application*

Now I have already told you of the goal that you must bear in mind: exert all your energy to attain it. I have also told you how to begin and what factors are necessary, namely humility, a firm faith, and an intention directed wholly towards God. On this foundation you must build a spiritual temple by prayer and meditation, and other spiritual virtues. I now add this: whether you pray or meditate, or whatever else you do – whether it is rendered good by grace or spoiled by your own frailty – whatever you feel, see, hear, smell, or taste, whether physically or mentally; and whatever you learn or perceive by reason, submit it all to the truth and judgement of Holy Church. Cast it all into the mortar of humility, grind it small with the pestle of the fear of God, throw its powder into the fire of desire, and offer it to God. I assure you that this offering will be pleasing to the Lord Jesus, and the smoke of its burning will be acceptable before Him. My meaning is this: test all your feelings by the truth of Holy Church, and submit yourself humbly to it. Offer the desires of your heart to the Lord Jesus alone, longing to possess Him and nothing but Him. If you do this, the grace of Jesus Christ will enable you to overcome every assault of the devil. Saint Paul teaches us this when he says: *Sive manducatis, sive bibitis, sive quid aliud facitis, omnia in nomine Domini facite* (1 Cor. x, 31). Whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Forsake self, and offer it up to Him. The principal means that you must use, as I have already said, are prayer and meditation. I shall begin by showing you something of prayer, and then of meditation.