

Part I

Our Failings Do Not Surprise Us

Imperfections and defects are always with us

It is both the glory and the torment of fallen man that he cannot get used to having come down in the world. As with a prince reduced to being a commoner, his descent from royal parentage confers on him no advantage whatsoever. But in his heart of hearts he cherishes the memory of his high-born origin and of a lost innocence that ought to have been his noble inheritance. He can scarcely smother an exclamation of amazement at the repeated evidence of his downfall, like one who has incurred some unmerited misfortune.

He is like a Samson who, drained of his power by the wicked hand that has shorn him of his hair, staggers to his feet as the Philistines shout, "Get up!" He is confident as he rises that, as on previous occasions, he will be more than a match for his foes, only to discover that the strength he could call on in the past has now failed him (see Judges 16: 20).

To whatever extent such aristocratic sentiment be present in us, its consequences are unfortunate and have to be combatted. As shall become evident, discouragement means spiritual diminution and loss for the soul. But it cannot overcome us if surprise, which seems inevitably attendant upon a failure, is not allowed to open up a path for it. St. Francis de Sales forewarns us against precisely this danger.

Together with other eminent doctors and perspicacious minds, the saintly bishop was often moved to pity at the spectacle of man's feebleness. "Human misery, human misery . . ." he would repeat, "how we are set about by weakness! What else can be looked for in us but falls?" His words and his writings all show that, from the heights of sanctity he had reached, he perceived with special clarity, and sounded with his penetrating gaze, the abyss of wretchedness and misery that original sin has struck deeply into our being. His open spirit was constantly aware of it in his dealings with souls who turned to him for spiritual direction, and he never wearied of reminding them of their fragile condition. "You live, according to what you tell me," he wrote to a lady, "with a thousand imperfections. It is true, my sister; but do you not try incessantly to make them die? What is certain is that as long as we live weighed down and oppressed by such a corruptible body as we have, there will always be *something* in us that falters. . . ."

Elsewhere he writes: "You complain that many imperfections and defects intermingle in your life, running counter to your desire for the perfection of purity in your love for God. I reply that it is not possible for us to become completely disengaged from self until God carries us to heaven. We shall not carry a treasure of the greatest possible value while we are burdened down with the weight of our own selves. . . . Isn't it generally true that no saint could become so holy had he not always been subject to imperfections?"¹

Self-love remains with us

Faith teaches us, in effect, that evil inclinations remain in us, at least in germinal form, until death. And, in the absence of a special privilege—as in the case of our Lady,

which the Church recognizes—nobody can avoid all venial sins, or at least the non-deliberate ones. In practice, we lose sight of this hard truth, and it would be salutary to review the way our Saint develops it, using simple language. “Let us not imagine that while we are in this life we can live without imperfection. For this is simply not possible, whether we be superior or inferior, since all of us are human. And this is a truth of which we all have to be convinced in order not to be astonished to see ourselves subject to such imperfections. Our Lord commanded us to say every day in the Our Father: *‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’*. The command admits of no exceptions. All of us need to make this same daily petition.”²

“Self-love can be changed in ourselves, but it never dies. From time to time, and on various occasions, it seems to throw out new shoots. Its renewed sprouting shows that even if it has been cut back right to the ground it has not been eradicated. At times it seems inert; but we should not find it strange that it is still alive. Just as the motionless fox appears to be asleep and then suddenly leaps upon its prey, we too must be constantly vigilant and be prepared to defend ourselves against the attacks of self-love with care and patience. And if it does happen sometimes to wound us, the injury will heal if we retract what it made us say, or undo what it made us do.”³

But our cure can be no more than temporary, and will last only until some fresh recurrence of the malady assails us. “Until we are in Paradise,”⁴ adds our Saint, and as long as this life lasts, and no matter how great be our good will, “it will be necessary to be patient, for what we have is a human and not an angelic nature.”⁵ We ought therefore to resign ourselves to living, in the words of a celebrated ascetic, as “incurable spirits” in this world.

Knowledge of self is vital

It is principally for the benefit of souls who are beginning to take the first steps on the road to perfection that St. Francis de Sales points out the necessity for practical knowledge of their weaknesses. They are those who, through inexperience, are more easily disconcerted when they have made a mistake, with apparently disastrous consequences. "To become perturbed and dismayed when one falls into sin is not to know oneself."

With what sensitivity our blessed Doctor reproves and instructs these souls! "You 'still' have, you tell me, this very acute sense of suffering injuries. But, my daughter, what does this 'still' refer to? Have you already vanquished many enemies of this kind?"⁶

"It is not possible for you to become mistress of your soul so soon, as if you were already completely in control of it. Be content with gaining, little by little, some small advantage over your dominant defect."⁷

"Our imperfections will accompany us to the grave. We cannot walk without touching the ground. It is not necessary for us to be down in the mud, but then neither is it necessary for us to think of flying, because we are fledglings and don't yet have wings."⁸

"The 'arrows' that fly to the heights (Ps 90:6) are the vain hopes and presumptions which, at the beginning of their conversion, certain souls desirous of perfection have of arriving quickly at their goal. They feel that in no time at all they are going to achieve the sanctity of a Teresa of Avila or a Catherine of Siena or of Genoa. Fine. This is all very well, but tell me this: 'Just how long a time are you thinking of spending in order to get there?—Three months; less if possible.—You do well to say 'if possible' for otherwise you can be out in your calculations. . . .'"⁹