

ON CONSUMMATED PERFECTION

*A brief Dialogue by St. Catherine of Siena*¹

A CERTAIN soul being one day illuminated by a ray of light received from the Author of Life, entered into the consciousness of her own misery and weakness, that is to say, of her ignorance and natural propensity to sin. Borne on still further to contemplate something of the greatness of her God, of His Wisdom, Power, and Goodness, and all the other perfections of His Divine Majesty, she perceived with great clearness how absolutely just and necessary it is that He should be served and honoured with all possible perfection and sanctity. It is *just*, because He is the Creator and Lord of the universe, and has created all things, that all may after their manner incessantly praise His holy name and be directed to His glory ; therefore it is but right and fitting that the servant full of respect towards his Lord should faithfully serve Him and dutifully obey Him. She saw that it is *necessary*, because the good God has been pleased to make man for Himself, a rational creature, composed of body and soul, on this condition, that, if he shall make good use of his free will, and persevere in fidelity to Him until death, he shall be rewarded with an eternal life, rich in every manner of blessing, to which he can in no other way attain. But, notwithstanding this condition of their being, she saw that few indeed are those who fulfil their duties and therefore very few who will be saved ; for nearly all “seek the things which are their own ; not the things

¹ The original Italian Text of this Treatise is not now in existence ; that published by Gigli being a translation from the Latin Copy preserved in the Vatican Library.

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which are Jesus Christ's" (Phil. ii, 21). She saw besides that the life of man is very short, and the hour and moment which will close the brief time in which it is possible for him to gain merit, very uncertain ; that, in the future life, those rewards and punishments will be given to each one in just retribution by an inevitable and irrevocable sentence, which he shall have merited by the tenor of his past life ; and that thenceforward there shall be no more escape from hell for ever ! She saw further, that, though many discourse much and in various ways of the virtues by which God may be faithfully honoured and served, yet the capacity of the reasonable creature is so limited, the intellect so obtuse, the memory so weak, that it can neither apprehend many things, nor faithfully retain those which it has apprehended ; and therefore, that though many are continually trying with all eagerness to instruct themselves, there are very few who arrive at that perfection of life with which God both ought to be and must be served. She saw that almost every one was on this account disquieted by a thousand cares and fluctuating amid a thousand agitations of spirit ; and so living in a state of extreme peril for the soul. At the sight of all these things, that soul was deeply moved ; then with a sudden resolution she prostrated herself before our Lord, and with vehement desire and love besought His Divine Majesty that He would be pleased to teach her some brief rules of perfection in which might be condensed all the truths taught both by the Holy Scriptures and by all kinds of spiritual writings ; by the observance of which God might be served and honoured in a fitting manner, and men might lead so holy and perfect a life, that, after passing through this brief and miserable mortality, they might attain the immortal happiness prepared for them in Paradise. And God, who never fails to accomplish those holy desires He puts into the heart, rapt her in an ecstasy, and making Himself present to her spirit, thus spoke to her :—" My Beloved, these desires are above all things pleasing unto Me ; and My inclination to satisfy thee is stronger than thy greatest longings to be satisfied. It is My good pleasure, since thou so wishest, to pour out upon thee all those favours that may

be necessary, or useful, or even helpful for thy eternal salvation. Listen then, and fix thy mind on what I am about to tell thee. I, the ineffable Truth, condescending to thy request, will briefly explain to thee that which fully contains within itself the sum of all virtues, and the most sublime and perfect sanctity ; which comprehends in itself the teaching of all the masters of the spiritual life and the volumes of the Divine Scriptures ; so that, if thou wilt behold thyself therein as in a mirror ; and wilt persevere in conforming thy practice to it, thou shalt arrive at the perfect fulfilment of all that is contained whether clearly or obscurely in the Holy Books, and shalt be made worthy to enjoy henceforward a perpetual peace and an ineffable and continual joy. Know, therefore, that the salvation of My servants and all their perfection depends upon this one thing, that they do in all things My will only ; and to that end that every moment of their life they use every effort to seek Me alone, to honour Me alone, to please Me alone. The more diligently they apply themselves to this, the nearer do they approach perfection ; because by this means they draw nearer to Me, in Whom by pre-eminence all perfections dwell. But, that thou mayest better understand this sublime truth which I have laid open to thee in few words, look upon the face of My Christ, in whom I am well pleased. He annihilated Himself by taking the form of a servant and being made in the likeness of sinners, that you, who were buried in the thickest darkness and had utterly forsaken the way of truth, might be illuminated with His words, His example, the splendour of His Divine light, and be brought back to the right path. Observe that He continued in one unceasing exercise of obedience even unto death to teach you that your salvation entirely depends on a firm and efficacious resolution to do My Will alone. And whoever will diligently examine and meditate upon His life and doctrine, will see clearly that all perfection and sanctity consists in nothing else than in persevering obedience to My Will. Therefore does He, your Divine Leader, repeat so often : ‘ Not every one that saith to Me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven ; but he that doth the will of My Father who

is in heaven' (S. Matt. vii. 21). And it is not without reason that He twice repeats 'Lord,' since all the transitory conditions of persons in the world may be reduced to two kinds, religious and secular; and He desires to signify by this double repetition, that no one, of whatsoever condition he may be, can attain eternal beatitude by rendering Me any sort of external homage, if he does not also do in all things My Divine Will. So in another place He says: 'I came down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him that sent Me' (S. John vi. 38); and in another place: 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me;' and further on: 'Not My will but Thine be done;' and finally: 'As the Father hath given Me commandment, so do I.' (S. John iv. 34; S. Luke xxii. 42; S. John xiv. 31.) If thou desirest, therefore, in imitation of thy Saviour, to perform perfectly My Will, in which all thy happiness consists, it is necessary that thou shouldst make no account at all of thine own will, but that thou shouldst contradict and crush it in all things, until at last it dies within thee. The more utterly thou diest to thyself, the more perfectly shalt thou live in Me; and the more thou dost empty thy heart of all which is thine own, the more abundantly will I fill it with that which is Mine."

Now when that soul had heard these most salutary doctrines of truth, she replied full of joy:—"It rejoices me more than I am able to express that Thou hast been pleased to instruct Thy most humble servant; and, as much as in me lies, I render thanks for it to Thy most gracious Majesty. Truly, as far as I can comprehend with my limited understanding, the thing cannot be otherwise than as Thou hast taught me and so well explained by the example of my blessed Saviour. For Thou, being the highest good and the only good, Who can'st not will sin, but only that which is just and right, I must infallibly do all that ought to be done if I fulfil Thy Will; and I shall fulfil Thy Will if for Thy love I contradict my own, which Thou wilt not in any way constrain, but dost leave it perfectly free, that I, by voluntarily and constantly subjecting it to Thine, may become dearer and more full in Thy sight. I desire greatly to begin to do that which Thou hast told me; but

as yet I understand not well in what Thy Will is found, and by what faithful service I can best consecrate myself wholly to its fulfilment. I humbly pray Thee, therefore, if I be not importunate, and if my boldness trespass not on Thy condescension, to instruct me briefly upon this also, which above all things I desire to know."

And the Lord said to her :—" If thou seekest to know My Will, that thou mayest perfectly fulfil it, behold in one word that which it is :—that thou shouldst love Me to the utmost of thy power without ceasing ; that thou shouldst love Me with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength. It is on the performance of this precept that all thy perfection depends ; and therefore it is written that 'the end of the commandment is charity,' and that 'love is the fulfilling of the law' " (1 Tim. i. 5 ; Rom. xiii. 10).

To these things that soul replied :—" I understand well that Thy Will and my perfection consists in loving Thee truly as I ought with ardent love and sovereign charity ; but I comprehend not well how I am to do this. I beseech Thee, instruct me also briefly on this point."

And God said to her : " Hear then and be attentive with all the application of thy mind to what I am about to tell thee. If thou desirest to love Me perfectly, thou hast three things to do. First, thy will must be detached, removed, and separated from every carnal and earthly affection, so that in this life thou shouldst love nothing temporal, fading, and transitory, except for Me. And what is yet more and above all, thou must not love Me, or thy neighbour, or thyself for thyself, but thou must love all for Me alone. For Divine love cannot tolerate any other affection with it or any earthly love. Therefore, so far as thou shalt permit thy heart to be infected with any contagion of earthly things, so far thou wilt sin against My love and fail of thy perfection ; for a pure and holy soul should hold in abhorrence all that gives pleasure and enjoyment to sense. Never suffer any of the things My bounty has created for the use of men to hinder thee from loving Me. For to this end have I created all things and given them to man, that he, knowing more fully through them the rich-

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ness of My bounty, may love Me in return with a larger affection. Bridle therefore with a strong hand thy appetites and carnal concupiscence ; keep perpetual guard over thyself ; and courageously resist all those earthly desires which Thy corrupt nature and this miserable mortal life excite in thy heart, that thou mayest be able to sing with the prophet : ‘ Blessed be God, who hath given strength and agility to my feet,’ *i.e.* to the feet of the soul, which are the affections ; ‘ who hath made my feet like the feet of harts, that they may flee from the dogs ;’ *i.e.* the snares of concupiscence of earthly things ; ‘ and setteth me upon high places ;’ (Ps. xvii. 34), *i.e.* raiseth me to contemplation.

“ When thou shalt have fully executed all this, thou mayest proceed to the exercise of the second thing, which is of yet higher perfection. And this is, that thou shouldst direct all thy affections, all thy thoughts, and all thy actions to My glory and honour alone, and employ thyself continually with all earnestness in praising and glorifying Me, by prayers, by words, by example, and in whatever way thou canst. And this thou must endeavour so to do as to excite in all others, as well as in thyself, these same affections and sentiments towards Me. Now this practice is yet more pleasing to Me than the first, because My Divine Will is thereby more perfectly and more directly fulfilled. There yet remains the third thing, which when thou shalt have achieved, thou mayest rest assured that nothing more is wanting to thee, and that thou hast reached perfect sanctity. This is, that thou shalt use thy utmost endeavour to attain such a disposition of spirit that thou mayest become one thing with Me, and thy will may become so entirely assimilated and conformed to My all-perfect Will, that not only shalt thou never desire that which is evil, but not even that which is good, if it be not according to My Will ; so that whatever shall befall thee in this miserable life, from whatsoever quarter it may come, whether in things temporal or things spiritual, nothing shall ever disturb thy peace or trouble thy quietness of spirit ; but thou shalt be established in a firm belief that I, thine omnipotent God, love thee with a dearer love and take of thee more watchful care than thou canst for thyself.

And the more perfectly thou dost abandon and resign thyself to Me, the more will I console thee with My grace, and make thee feel My presence ; and thus thou wilt ever know more and more, and experience more fully, the tenderness of My love for thee. But thou wilt never reach this measure of perfection except by a firm, constant, and absolute denial of self-will. He who neglects to acquire this, neglects at the same time the most sublime perfection ; and he who cheerfully embraces it, executes at the same time My most holy Will, pleases Me in the highest degree, and has Me continually with him. For there is nothing more pleasing to Me than to abide within you and work in you by My grace : 'for My delights are to be with the children of men' (Prov. viii. 31), to transform them into Myself (if only they desire it, for I will in no way do violence to their free will) ; in such a manner that they may become one with Me in the participation of My infinite perfections, and especially My unchangeable peace and My most perfect tranquillity. But, that thou mayest better comprehend how ardent are My desires to dwell with you, and mayest kindle in thyself a more fervent longing to subject and unite thy will with Mine, consider attentively that I have willed that My only begotten Son should become incarnate, that My Divinity, despoiled of every token of greatness or glory, should be united to humanity ; in order that by this great act of benevolence and charity, by this ineffable demonstration of love, I might draw and constrain you in like manner to unite your will to Mine and to remain perpetually bound to Me alone. Consider that I have willed further that this My Son should suffer the cruel, painful, and most fearful death of the Cross, to the end that by these torments He might destroy your sin, that sin which had raised a barrier of division between you and Me so effectually that I could in no way look upon you ; that further in the highest of the Sacraments I have prepared for you a table, too little appreciated, of the Body and Blood of this My Son, in order that by partaking of it you may become transformed and changed into Me. Even as the bread and wine of which you partake is changed into the substance of your body, so you, by feeding under the species of

bread and wine upon this My Son, who is one with Me, shall become spiritually transformed into Me. And this is what I have already spoken to my servant Augustine in these words:—"I am the food of grown men; grow, and thou shalt feed on Me; nor shalt thou convert Me into thee, but I will convert thee into Myself."

And, when that soul had heard what the will of God was, that to execute it faithfully a perfect charity was required, and that this could only be obtained by an entire annihilation of self-will, she spoke thus to the Lord:—"Thou hast manifested to me, O my Lord and God, Thy Will, and hast shown me, that, if I love Thee perfectly, I shall love nothing transitory and earthly, nor even my own self for myself, but all alone for Thee and in Thee. Thou hast added, that, in order to love Thee, I must seek with earnest care to praise and glorify Thee in all things and at all times; and that in such a manner as that others may do so likewise; that I must endeavour further to bear with a peaceful, cheerful, tranquil heart whatever may befall one in this miserable life. And now, since I gather from what Thou hast hitherto said that all these things are to be done by the abnegation of my own will, since the more I die to myself, the more perfectly I shall live in Thee; I beseech Thee to teach me in what manner I may acquire this great virtue of the perfect abnegation of myself."

And God, who is so good that He can deny nothing to the pious desires of His servants, thus replied to her:—"It is certain that everything depends upon the perfect abnegation of thyself, since the more thou dost empty thyself of thy own will, the more will I fill thee with My grace. And all thy perfection comes from the participation of My Divine goodness by means of grace, without which the human creature, in all that concerns its true dignity and perfection, is absolutely nothing. If thou dost indeed desire to attain this perfect abnegation of self, thou must prostrate thyself before Me in the most profound humility, with a thorough conviction of thine own poverty and misery; and thou must at all times eagerly seek this one thing, to obey Me alone and to do My Will only. And to this end thou must make in thy soul as

it were a little spiritual cell, closed in with the material of My Will, in which thou must enclose thyself and make therein thy constant dwelling-place ; so that, wherever thou goest, thou mayest never go forth from it, and, wherever thou lookest, thou mayest never see anything beyond it ; but My Will must so encompass every faculty of thy body and soul, that thou shalt never speak of anything but what thou deemest pleasing unto Me, nor think, nor do anything, but what thou believest agreeable to My Will. And it shall be that the Holy Spirit shall teach thee what thou shalt do in all things. Moreover thou mayest attain this abnegation of thine own will by another road, if thou canst obtain those who are able to guide and instruct thee according to My Spirit ; namely, by subjecting thy will to them, by obediently following their counsels, and by trusting thyself and thy concerns fully to them ; since he who hears My faithful and prudent servants "heareth Me" (S. Luke x. 16). But I desire further that thou shouldst consider with firm faith and profound meditation that I, thy most glorious God, I, who have created thee for eternal beatitude, am eternal, sovereign, omnipotent ; that I can do with you whatever pleaseth Me ; and there is none who can oppose himself in the least degree to My Will ; that no good can happen to you unless sent by Me ; nor can any evil befall you except by that same Will of Mine, as I have already told you by My Prophet Amos : "shall there be evil in a city which the Lord hath not done ?" (Amos iii. 6), that is, which I have not permitted. In the second place, I wilt that thou seriously meditate that in Me, thy God, dwell the most perfect intelligence, and knowledge, and infinite wisdom ; that, therefore, I behold all things with the utmost clearness and acutest penetration ; so that in My government of thee, the heavens, and the earth, and the entire universe, I cannot be deceived in any way or misled by any error. Were it otherwise, I should neither be all wise, nor should I be God. And, that thou mayest acknowledge the more the power of My Infinite Wisdom, know that even from the evil of guilt and punishment I am able to draw a good greater than the evil. In the third place, consider attentively

that, as I am thy God, so am I infinitely good, yea, charity itself by My Essence ; that, therefore, I cannot will anything but that which is useful and salutary to thee and to all men ; nor can I wish any evil to My creatures ; that, as man was created by My bounty, so is he loved by Me with inestimable charity. When with a firm faith thou shalt have received and pondered in thy mind these truths, thou shalt see that I only suffer tribulations, temptations, difficulties, sicknesses, and all other forms of adversity to befall men for the greater advantage of their eternal salvation ; that through the very things which to you seem evils, the true evil of your bad habits may be corrected, and firm resolutions made to attain that virtue which can alone guide you to that true and ultimate good which as yet you know not. Thus illuminated by the living light of faith, thou wilt perceive that I, thy God, have infinitely more knowledge, power, and will to advance thy happiness than thou hast ; and further, that thy own knowledge, power, and will for thine own good depends entirely on My grace. For this cause, seek with all diligence to submit thyself totally to My Will ; so shalt thou take thy rest and abide in continual tranquillity of spirit, and shalt have Me for ever with thee, for My “place is in peace” (Ps. lxxv. 3). Nothing will then agitate or irritate thee ; nothing shall be to thee an occasion of sin or scandal, for “much peace have they who love My law ; and to them there is no stumbling-block” (Ps. cxviii. 165). For they so love My law, that is, My Will, which is My law by which all things are directed, they are so intimately united by it to Me, and experience such great delight in observing it, that (sin only excepted, which is offensive to God) nothing has power to disturb them, from whatsoever quarter it may come, or of whatsoever weight or quality it may be. For the eyes of their soul are clear and undefiled ; and therefore they see that from Me, the sovereign Ruler of the world, Who govern all things with infinite Wisdom, Order, and Charity, nothing but good can spring ; and that I can take care of them and their affairs far better and more successfully than they could of themselves. And thus considering that I and none other am the Author of all that

they have to endure, they are strong with an invincible patience, and suffer all things, not only with resignation, but with cheerfulness and joy, tasting in all things which befall them externally or internally the sweetness of My ineffable charity. And this is to "think of the Lord in goodness" (Wis. i. 1), that is, to believe, and meditate with a cheerful and grateful spirit, even in the midst of tribulations and difficulties, that it is I who sweetly dispose all things, and that whatever happens springs from the inexhaustible fountain of My goodness. But the great good which this holy consideration and blessed disposition of heart would effect, is hindered, corrupted, and destroyed solely by this one thing, the love of yourselves and of your own will. If you destroy this within you, there shall be no more hell for you, neither the eternal torment of body and soul prepared for the damned, nor that other hell of interior turmoil which you make for yourselves and suffer during your mortal life, through your perpetual agitations and anxious cares about many things. If, therefore, thou wouldst live in grace in this world which passes rapidly away, and if thou wouldst live in glory in that world which has no end, seek to die to thyself, denying thyself and laying down thine own will. For "blessed are the dead who die in the Lord" (Apoc. xiv. 13), and "blessed also are the poor in spirit" (S. Matt. v. 3), since they already see Me in a manner in this their pilgrimage by reciprocal love, and shall behold Me hereafter in glory and honour in their true home.

SO BE IT.