

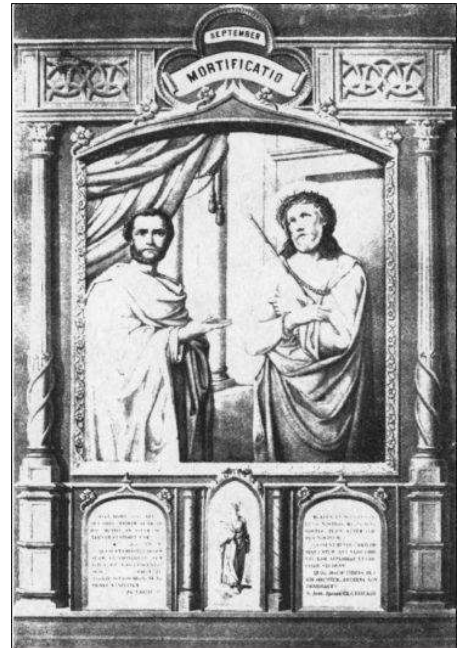
# The School of Christian Perfection

## St. Alphonsus Ligouri

### Chapter 9: MORTIFICATION

“He that hateth his life in this world, keepeth it unto life eternal.”—John 12:25

The virtue of mortification is twofold, exterior and interior. Exterior mortification consists in doing and suffering what is opposed to the exterior senses, and in depriving oneself of what is agreeable to them. In as far as it is necessary to avoid sin, every Christian is bound to practice mortification. With regard to those things which we may lawfully enjoy, mortification is not obligatory, but it is very useful and meritorious. For those, however, who are striving after perfection, mortification, even in things that are lawful, is absolutely necessary. As poor children of Adam, we must fight till our dying day; “For the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, for these are contrary, one to another: so that you do not the things that you would.” (*Gal. 5:17*).



It is proper to animals to gratify their senses; it is characteristic of angels to do the Will of God. From this a learned author concludes that we become angels when we strive to do God's Will, but we become like animals when we seek to gratify our senses. Either the soul must subject the body or the body will make the soul its slave. Accordingly, we must treat our body as a rider treats a wild horse; he draws the reins tight, lest he should be thrown off. A physician at times prescribes medicines that are very distasteful to the patient, and he strictly forbids injurious foods and drinks, though the patient may desire them. He would be a cruel physician indeed who could be dissuaded from administering medicines because his patient objected on account of their being bitter, and who would allow the sick man to eat and drink what he pleased. How much greater is the cruelty of the sensual man who strives to avoid everything that is disagreeable or painful to his body in this life, and thereby puts both body and soul in the greatest danger of suffering incomparably greater pains for all eternity. “This false love,” says St. Bernard, “destroys the true love we should have for our body.”

Such misplaced sympathy is in reality only cruelty; for while we spare the body we kill the soul. The same Saint, addressing those worldly-minded people who ridicule the servants of God for mortifying themselves, makes use of the following words: “Yes, we are cruel, if you will, towards our bodies when we afflict them with penance; but you are far more cruel towards yourselves when you gratify your sensual cravings, for by so doing you condemn both body and soul to an eternity of frightful torments.” Our Lord once said to St. Francis of Assisi: “If you desire Me, take the bitter things of life as sweet and the sweet as bitter.” It is useless to assert, as some do, that perfection does not consist in chastising the body, but in mortifying the will. To this Pinamonti replies: “If the vineyard does not bear fruit because it is surrounded by a hedge of thorns, at least the hedge helps to preserve the fruit, for Holy Scripture says: ‘Where there is no hedge, the possession shall be spoiled.’” (*Ecclus. 36:27*).

St. Aloysius Gonzaga had very poor health. Nevertheless, he was so intent on crucifying his body that he sought for nothing but mortification and works of penance. One day someone said to him that sanctity did not consist in these things, but in the renunciation of self-will. He meekly replied in the words of the Gospel: "These things you ought to have done, and not to leave those undone." (*Matt.* 23:23). By this he meant to say: Although it is necessary to mortify the will, we must also mortify the body to keep it in check and subject to reason. On this account the Apostle said: "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection." (*1 Cor.* 9:27). If the body is not mortified, it is very difficult to make it obedient to the law of God.

### **WE OURSELVES OUR WORST ENEMY**

It is certainly true that the world and the devil are great enemies to our salvation; but the greatest enemy of all is our own body because it is always with us. "The enemy that dwells with us in the same house," says St. Bernard, "injures us most." A fort has no more dangerous enemies than those within, for it is harder to protect oneself from these than from the enemy without. While worldly-minded people are intent solely on gratifying their bodies by the pleasures of sense, souls that love God think only of mortifying themselves as much as they can. St. Peter of Alcantara thus addressed his body: "Be assured of the fact that in this life I will give you no rest; afflictions are your lot; when we are in Heaven we shall enjoy a rest without end." In the same spirit St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi acted, and shortly before her death she could say she did not remember ever having found pleasure in anything except God.

### **SELF-DENIAL**

But, you will say, I have a weak constitution and poor health, and my confessor forbids me to practice works of penance. Very well, obey him; but at least bear patiently with the discomforts and fatigue resulting from your bodily condition; try not to complain of the inclemency of the weather and the excessive heat and cold. If you are unable to practice works of penance, at least abstain occasionally from some lawful pleasure. When St. Francis Borgia was out hunting, at the moment the falcon would seize its prey he used to cast down his eyes, to deprive himself of the pleasure such a sight would afford him. If you deny your body lawful pleasures, it is not apt to seek unlawful ones; but if you indulge in all the lawful enjoyments you will soon cross the line into forbidden territory. A great servant of God, Vincent Carafa, S.J., says that the Lord has given us the joys and pleasures of this world not only that we may enjoy them, but also that we might have an opportunity of making a sacrifice, by depriving ourselves of them for love of Him. Poisons properly compounded, and taken in very small quantity, are sometimes beneficial to the health of the body, but they are and always will be poisons. And so it is with pleasures; they must be indulged in with great precaution and moderation and solely with the view of serving God more faithfully.

Moreover, we must be on our guard lest anxiety and solicitude for our bodily welfare endanger the health of the soul. "The sickness of the body," says St. Bernard, "excites my compassion, but the sickness of the soul causes me greater affliction because it is much more dangerous." We are very apt to make our bodily ailments a pretext for exemption from our spiritual duties. "We omit prayer today," says St. Teresa, "because we have a headache; tomorrow because we had a headache, and the next day because we fear we might get one."

## ADVANTAGES OF MORTIFICATION

It may be profitable to dwell for a moment on the advantages of mortification, for such a consideration is calculated to inspire us with more courage and generosity. By mortification we may expiate the temporal punishment due to our sins. We are aware of the fact that though the guilt of sin is remitted by a contrite Confession, there still remains a temporal punishment to be endured. If in the present life we neglect to make atonement, we shall have to suffer in the fire of Purgatory. "Except they do penance for their deeds," says Holy Scripture, "they shall be in very great tribulation." (*Apoc. 2:22*). St. Antonine relates that the choice was offered to a sick man (by his guardian angel) either to suffer three days in Purgatory or to remain two years longer on his sickbed. The patient chose the three days in Purgatory. He had hardly been there an hour when he complained to the angel that instead of a few days he had already spent several years in terrible torments. "What is it you say," replied the angel; "your body is still warm on the deathbed, and you speak of years?" If therefore, Christian soul, you have anything to suffer, say to yourself: This must be my Purgatory; I shall bear this suffering patiently to atone for my sins, and to gain merit for eternal life.

### IT ELEVATES THE SOUL

Mortification raises the soul to God. St. Francis de Sales says: "The soul can never ascend to God unless the body is brought into subjection by penance." "Souls that truly love God," says St. Teresa, "have no desire for bodily rest and indulgence." But by mortification we may attain great glory in Heaven. "If contestants," says St. Paul, "abstain from everything that might weaken the body and prevent them from winning a perishable crown, with what greater zeal ought not we to mortify ourselves in order to obtain a priceless and eternal crown!" St. John saw the blessed in Heaven with palm branches in their hands. From this it is evident that to be numbered among the elect we must all be martyrs, either by the sword of the tyrant or by mortification. But "The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us" (*Rom. 8:18*), and our present tribulations are momentary and light, but they "work for us above measure exceedingly an eternal weight of glory." (*2 Cor. 4:17*). Let us therefore reanimate our faith. We have but a short time to live on this earth; our true home and eternal rest is beyond the grave. St. Peter says that the blessed are the living stones with which the heavenly Jerusalem is built. But as Holy Church sings in the Divine Office, these stones must be cut and shaped by the chisel of mortification.

### INTERIOR MORTIFICATION

Interior mortification consists in restraining our inordinate self-love and self-will. There is a twofold love of self, the one good and the other bad. The former spurs us on to strive for eternal life, for which God has created us; the latter prompts us to seek for the good things of this earth, to the great detriment of our immortal soul. Christ Our Lord has said: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." (*Matt. 16:24*). Now, all the perfection of a soul consists in this very self-denial, for St. Augustine says, "The less one seeks to gratify the passions, the more one truly loves God, and when one desires nothing but God, one's love of God is perfect." In the present condition of our sinful nature, it is impossible to be entirely free from the promptings of self-love. Jesus Christ alone among men and the Blessed Virgin Mary among women were entirely exempt. As for all the other Saints, they have had to battle with their inordinate inclinations. Interior mortification, therefore, consists principally in restraining and keeping in

check these inordinate inclinations of self-love. The soul has other enemies, it is true, but the worst enemy of all is self-love.

According to St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, "Self-love is like the worm that gnaws at the root and destroys not only the fruit, but even the very life of the plant." The same Saint adds: "The traitor that we have to fear most is self-love, for self-love betrays us as Judas betrayed Our Lord with a kiss. He who conquers self-love has conquered all." Pray, therefore, without ceasing, to the Lord: O God, do not let me fall a prey to my passions, which rob me of Thy holy fear and of reason itself. "Man's life on earth is a warfare." (*Job 7:1*). He who encounters an enemy in battle must have his weapons in hand to defend himself; if he neglects to fight, he is lost. No matter how many victories we may have won, we cannot afford to lay down our arms; for our passions, in spite of repeated defeats, are never entirely destroyed.

They are like weeds, says St. Bernard, that crop out again as often as they are cut off; even when you think you have rooted them out entirely, they soon appear again. In the struggle with our passions, the most we can hope to attain is that their attacks become less frequent and less violent, and we ourselves better able to overcome them. One day a monk complained to the Abbot Theodore that he had fought for eight long years against his passions and had not as yet succeeded in subduing them. The Abbot replied: "My brother, you complain of a war of eight years; I have spent sixty years in solitude and there was not a single day of that time but I was disquieted by some passion or other." The passions, therefore, will always molest us; but, as St. Gregory says, "It is a different thing to see these wild beasts prowling around us and to hear their ferocious howl than to have them in our very heart and to suffer them to strangle us."

### SELF-CONQUEST

Our heart is a garden in which wild and noxious weeds continue to grow. We must therefore have the hoe of mortification always in hand to remove this noxious growth, otherwise the garden will soon be choked with thorns and thistles. "Overcome yourself," was a favorite saying with St. Ignatius of Loyola. It was always on his lips; again and again he returned to it when addressing his religious brethren. "Overcome your self-love; break your self-will," he would say. The reason why so few of those who practice mental prayer become saints is because so few are intent upon over-coming themselves. Of a hundred persons who practice mental prayer, more than ninety follow their own head. Therefore, the Saint placed greater value on a single act of self-denial than on a whole hour's prayer filled with spiritual consolation. "Of what benefit is it to a fortress," says the Abbot Gilbert, "that the gates are closed if hunger, the enemy within, lays low the occupants?" He wished to say: Of what use is it to mortify the exterior senses and perform many exercises of piety if we harbor some passion in our heart and refuse to give up our own will?

St. Francis Borgia said that prayer introduces the love of God into the heart, but mortification prepares the way by removing everything that might prove an obstacle or hindrance to it. If you wish to fill a vase with water you must first empty out the earth that is in it, otherwise there will be a disagreeable mixture. Regarding the relation of interior mortification to prayer, Father Balthasar Alvarez says: "Prayer without mortification is either a delusion, or will soon come to an end." St. Ignatius tells us that a mortified soul is more intimately united to God in one quarter of an hour than an unmortified person in many hours of prayer. And if the Saint heard it said of anyone that he prayed much, he would add: "That is a sign that he is very mortified."

Many Christians perform acts of devotion, go frequently to Holy Communion, fast and spend much time at prayer, but they neglect to mortify their passions, and harbor feelings of revenge and aversion, and entertain dangerous attachments. They make no effort to bear with contradictions, to give up certain associations and to be subject to obedience and the Will of God. What progress can such hope to make on the way to perfection? They always have the same faults, and according to St. Augustine they are outside the right way. "They run well," says the Saint, "but outside the path." "Watch over thyself," says Thomas à Kempis, "stir up thyself, admonish thyself; and whatsoever becometh of others, neglect not thyself. The greater violence thou offerest to thyself the greater progress thou wilt make." (*Im.* Bk. 1, 24).

I have not the slightest intention to underestimate the value of vocal prayer, works of penance and other spiritual exercises; but they must be performed with this end in view, to obtain the victory over your passions. All exercises of piety are nothing else but means to arrive at virtue. Consequently at Holy Communion, during meditation, while visiting the Blessed Sacrament and performing other acts of devotion we must always ask God for the grace to be humble, mortified, obedient and conformed to His holy will. To act only from self-love is a fault in every Christian; but it is a greater fault in him who has received a greater measure of grace and is on that account bound to strive more earnestly after perfection. "By means of self-denial," says Lactantius, "God calls men to eternal life; by the gratification of self-love Satan calls them to eternal death."

St. Joseph Calasanctius used to say: "The day spent without mortification is a day lost." In order to teach us the value and necessity of mortification, our Blessed Lord chose to live a mortified life, a life without sensible consolation, a life of sorrow and shame. "Having joy set before him," says the Apostle, "he endured the cross, despising the shame." (*Heb.* 12:2). "Go through the whole life of Jesus Christ" says St. Bernard, "you will always find Him suffering on the cross." St. Catherine of Siena remarks: "As a mother takes bitter medicine to cure her sick child, so during His life on earth Our Lord drank the chalice of sufferings to cure our poor sick souls."

### SELF-WILL

There is no obstacle more harmful in striving after perfection than the gratification of self-will. "If," says St. Bernard, "you can induce men to give up their self-will, there is no Hell for them to fear." According to St. Peter Damian, self-will destroys all the virtues. "As the will of God is the source of all good," says St. Anselm, "the will of man is the origin of all evil." "He," says St. Bernard, "who constitutes himself a master and follows the suggestions of self-will subjects himself to a veritable fool."

The devil, as St. Augustine remarks, became what he is by self-will. Therefore, in his war against pious souls, his most effective and deadly weapon is their self-will. Cassian relates that the Abbot Achilles, when asked by a disciple what weapons the devil employed in attacking the souls that are consecrated to God, replied: Against the great ones of this world, he uses pride; against men of business, avarice; against the young, incontinence; but against those who are given to piety, his principal weapon is self-will. The Abbot Pastor expresses the same idea in different words: "When we follow our own will, the devil has no need of assailing us, for our self-will then takes the place of the devil, and indeed of the worst that there is." The Holy Ghost admonishes us: "Turn away from thy own will. If thou give to thy soul her desires, she will make thee a joy to thy enemies." (*Ecclus.* 18:30–31). An action has its greatest value from the

obedience through which it is performed. The worst feature of any action is when it is prompted by self-will.

Consequently, says Trithemius, the devil hates nothing more than obedience, for, in the words of St. Teresa, "The devil well knows that on obedience the salvation of our souls depends. This is why he tries so hard to prevent it." It was the custom of St. Philip Neri to exhort all his penitents to practice renunciation of their own will, for in this, he used to say, true sanctity consists. "The more you take away from your self-will, the more you add to virtue," says St. Jerome. "In the sight of God," says St. Coletta, "the renunciation of self-will is more meritorious than the sacrifice of all the riches of the world."

"I wish for very little," says St. Francis de Sales, "and for this little I have but feeble desire." He meant to say that in his desires his own will was never considered, but simply the Will of God; so that he was prepared to give up everything as soon as he saw that it was not in conformity with the divine Will. "O what sweetness," says St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, "there is in the words 'The Will of God.'"

If you, Christian soul, desire to become holy and enjoy uninterrupted peace, strive as often as you can to mortify your will. Do nothing for your own satisfaction, but everything to please God. To this end renounce all vain desires and inordinate inclinations. Worldly-minded people are intent upon following their own will as much as they possibly can; it is the constant aim of the Saints to mortify their will, and they seek opportunities for doing so. St. Andrew Avellino made a vow always to oppose his own will. Make it a practice at least every day to perform a few acts of self-denial.

Let us conclude with the words which Father Torres wrote to a devout person to encourage her in the practice of self-denial: "As God has given you an opportunity to suffer and endure abandonment, endeavor to increase His love in your heart, a love that is as strong as death. May this love detach you from all creatures and from your very self in order that nothing may hinder you in clinging to your Lord with all your thoughts, desires and inclinations. Do all for Him and in union with Him. Before your crucified Saviour make a daily renunciation of all the inclinations and attachments you find within your soul. Protest that you desire no other honor but the shame of Jesus Christ; no other treasure but His love; no other comforts but His Cross; no other object but Himself, your Lord and God."