

The
CHARACTERISTICS
OF
TRUE DEVOTION

BY
REV. J. N. GROU
OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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GULIELMUS PARDOW

Praepositus Provinciae Marylandiae Neo-Eboracensis Soc. Jesu.

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videbitur.

In cujus rei fidem has litteras manu nostra subscriptas, et sigillo officii
munitas dedimus.

Woodstock College,
die Sept. 28, 1894.

GULIELMUS PARDOW, S.J.
Praepositus Provinciae Neo-Eboracensis.

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✠ Michael Augustine,
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A Word to the Reader

This little book has been the most widely circulated of all Father Grou's writings. Forty editions in French, and, including the present version, four translations into English, show that it, indeed, has been well known; yet today there is no reliable edition in print, so that some of those who take it up will meet with it for the first time. A few words about it and its author may not, therefore, be amiss. It was published for the first time at Paris in 1788, and is the second in order of time of Father Grou's ascetic writings, being preceded in 1786 by *Morale tirée des Confessions de Saint Augustin*. It was translated into English by Father Alexander Clinton, S.J., who was chaplain at Lullworth Castle, where Father Grou spent the last years of his life in exile, and was published at London, in 1791, under the title *The Characters of Real Devotion*. A second edition was issued at Dublin in 1795, a third in 1801, and a fourth in 1838. An entirely new translation was published at Baltimore in 1832 by Fielding Lucas, Jr., entitled *Portraiture of True Devotion*. By whom this translation was made we have been unable to ascertain. A third translation into English was published by Thomas Whittaker, New York, 1882. The preface is signed by Ellen M. Fogg, who, we presume, is the translator.

Of these different versions the one by Father Clinton is by far the most reliable. Though the English is antiquated and the version at times too literal, he evidently understood French well and has caught the meaning and the spirit of the author.

The same cannot be said of the other two translations. *The Portraiture of True Devotion* does not aim at a literal rendering of the French, and manifests throughout a lack of simplicity and a search after long words and an exuberant style, entirely unsuited to the character of the work. The translation published by Whittaker is in better style, but there are many phrases which show that the translator did not understand well the French idiom. There are also some omissions, in one case of a whole chapter, which we are told in the preface that the translator “has taken the liberty to omit since they seemed only adapted to the religious, and in no way to the secular.” Though this edition was gotten out for the members of the Anglican Church, it does not bear explicit evidence of “being adapted so as to bring it into harmony with the Book of Common Prayer and Anglican Divinity,” yet it contains expressions which no Catholic would use, and which Father Grou would certainly never have approved. More frequent, however, are the errors arising from a misunderstanding of the language in which Father Grou wrote. For these reasons this translation cannot be recommended.

The editor of the present edition has taken Father Clinton’s version as a basis, and has compared it diligently with the revised French edition of Father Cadres and with the other two English versions. In correcting the translation of Father Clinton, his aim has been to give in modern English just what Father Grou wrote, preferring a literal rendering, even sometimes at the sacrifice of smoothness, to an equivalent paraphrase.

In regard to the title of the book, *The Characteristics of True Devotion* has been chosen rather than Father Clinton's *The Characters of Real Devotion*, as the use of the word "Characters" in the sense employed is today unusual. Since Father Grou uses the word "devotion" in the sense of devotedness, *The Characteristics of True Devotedness* would be a more exact title; but as the work is already known by the name of *True Devotion*, and as Father Grou explains at the beginning of Chapter 2 that all true devotion means a devotedness or a consecration, it has been judged better to keep the name *The Characteristics of True Devotion*.

As to the matter of which the book treats and its importance, the judgement of the censor appointed to examine the first edition leaves nothing to be added. It is prefixed to the best French editions, and we add it here in English for the benefit of our readers:

This excellent book reveals in its pious author a profound knowledge of the inner life of those souls which are working earnestly at their sanctification. He explains, first, what is to be understood by the word "devotion," then he gives the motives for practising it, points out its real object, and indicates the means of acquiring it. From all these characteristics, which constitute a faithful portrait of devotion, those who make it their aim to lead a pious life, even though in the world, can draw the greatest profit for their advancement in Christian perfection. Those, on the contrary, who make their whole life of devotion to consist in delusive practices, will find here infallible

rules to reform their ideas and to undeceive them in regard to what, under the appearance of piety, is only hypocrisy, and to instruct them in a true devotion, which has for its foundation the most complete devotedness of the heart to all which can procure the glory of God, the edification of the neighbour, and their own sanctification.

Woodstock College,
Woodstock, Maryland,
October, 1894.

A Short Sketch of the Author and His Works¹

Jean Nicolas Grou was born at Calais on the 23rd of November, 1751, and at the age of fifteen he entered the Society of Jesus. According to all accounts, he made his first studies in the college of Louis-Le-Grand, at that time under the direction of the Jesuits. He had scarcely finished his course of teaching and his theological studies, when an excellent translation of Plato gave him a distinguished rank among the writers of that epoch. The decree suppressing the Society in France obliged him to seek refuge in Lorraine, where he made his last vows, at Pont-à-Mousson, in 1765 or 1766. Later on, a change of circumstances led him to Holland and gave him leisure to continue his labours on Greek philosophy.

Some years after, having returned to Paris at the invitation of the Archbishop, he was charged with the direction of a religious Community. In 1792 Providence offered him a secure refuge in England from the persecutions of the French Revolution. He was received into the family of Mr. Weld at Lullworth Castle, dear to American Catholics as being the place where our first bishop, the Right Reverend John Carroll, was consecrated Bishop of Baltimore. Here his merits and his well-tried virtue won him the veneration and the esteem of all who had the advantage of knowing him.

¹ For fuller details, both of the life of Father Grou and his Works, see the Sketch of his Life and Works at the beginning of Vol. 1 of *The Interior of Jesus and Mary*. This Short Sketch is only added for those who may not have that work.

He died in 1803, at Lullworth Castle, where the Weld family had so nobly and generously offered him hospitality—a hospitality which he richly repaid by his excellent counsels, and by writing for Mr. Weld and his children some of his most valuable ascetic works.

During the last years preceding his departure from France, Father Grou, obliged to keep in seclusion on account of the Revolution, spent much time in writing on pious subjects. It is to this pronounced taste for retirement and labour that we are indebted for several excellent works that he published before leaving Paris. There appeared successively in the space of six or seven years: *Moral Instructions Extracted from the Confessions of St. Augustin*, *Characteristics of True Devotion*, *Spiritual Maxims, with Explanations*, *The Science of the Crucifix*, and *The Practical Science of the Crucifix*. These were followed, when he had taken refuge in England, by *Meditations on the Love of God*, *The Christian Sanctified by the Lord's Prayer*, *The Interior of Jesus and Mary*, *The Gift of One's Self to God*, *The School of Jesus Christ*. All these works, inspired by an ardent zeal for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls, have already borne abundant fruit, and may be read with great profit by every Christian desirous of perfection. Several of these works have been at various times translated into English, but are now out of print; others have never been translated. That so valuable works may be rendered available for all who read English, the editor, supported by the publishers, is engaged in bringing out a complete edition in English of all the works mentioned above. *The Interior of Jesus and Mary* has already appeared; *The Characteristics of True Devotion* is the second of the

series. The others will follow, three being already translated and awaiting revision.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION—OBJECT OF THIS BOOK

Notwithstanding the general decay of piety, there are many who still profess devotion. Few, however, have a just idea of it, almost all following in its regard their prejudices, their imagination, their inclination, or their self-love. Hence arises that infinite number of defects to which the devout of both sexes, of every age, rank, and condition, are subject, and which are wrongfully ascribed to devotion itself. These defects are not always hurtful to salvation, but they hinder perfection and are obstacles to holiness. To the worldly they are an occasion of raillery and of blasphemy; to the weak, a subject of scandal; to ordinary Christians, a pretext which keeps them in their state of tepidity and deters them from embracing the devout life. What powerful reasons these are to induce pious souls, zealous for the glory of God and for their own and their neighbours' interests, to conceive in the sense of the Gospel an exact notion of devotion, and then to express it in their conduct!

In this little book I purpose to set before my readers a faithful picture of devotion. I invite them to observe all its features with an attentive eye, and then to cast a look on themselves. Self-love is so blind, the human will is so weak, that I dare not hope that they will draw from this comparative view all the advantage which naturally might be expected. For people in general do not see themselves as they really are, or a long habit, become almost a second nature, takes from

many the courage and even the desire of becoming better, while others find the model to be too perfect, and, in the despair of attaining to it, do not even try to approach it.

Be that as it may, I shall think myself happy if a few reap benefit from this book. Besides, I do not write for devout people only. Many Christians hesitate between an ordinary life and an open profession of solid piety. This work is perhaps the means which God chooses to make use of to determine them, and to fix them unalterably in virtue. Sinners daily return to God. They have hitherto been ignorant of the manner of serving him; they will be glad to find a little book to instruct them, the reading of which will require but a few hours. Finally, young people who begin to give themselves to God need to be enlightened and taught the right road that leads to him. As they have no prejudices to fight against, no bad habits to correct, it will suffice to point out to them the path, to engage them to walk in it, and thus preserve themselves from the errors and imperfections of a devotion misunderstood.

To our youth in particular, then, do I recommend this book. Those who are charged with their education may put it into their hands when they judge them fit to understand and profit by it; that is, at the age in which their minds and their hearts are sufficiently expanded. I do not think it advisable for them to read it sooner. The first impression is always the most decisive for the good or bad effect of a work of piety; if once it fails, its credit will hardly ever be established. It is, therefore, better to wait until this impression can be solid and well-grounded.

Chapter 2

TRUE DEVOTION DEFINED

What is devotion? Each one defines it in his own way. To a worldling, devotion consists in believing in God and in holding some principles of religion. To a saint, it consists in being absorbed and lost in God. Between these two extremes there is almost an endless number of definitions, which are more or less exact as they approach one or recede from the other.

To define it exactly, I adhere to the word itself and to the idea which it expresses. The word “devotion” comes from the Latin, and in our language it precisely signifies the state of being devoted or a consecration. Therefore, to be devout is the same thing as to be devoted or consecrated to God. It is upon the idea which the term of “being devoted” offers to the mind that I shall ground whatever I have to say on devotion, after having premised that, when God and our duties towards him are in question, the word should be taken in its most serious and broadest sense.

Now, in English as well as in Latin, we know no expression that is stronger than that of “being devoted,” in order to express intimate attachment, absolute and voluntary dependence, affectionate zeal—in a word, a disposition of the mind and heart of wholly submitting one’s self to the will of another, of anticipating his wishes, of embracing his interests, and of sacrificing everything for his sake. Thus we say of a child, a servant, a subject, that he is devoted to his

father, to his master, to his prince. We also say that a man is devoted to ambition, or to any other passion, when he only thinks of satisfying it; when he seeks every means, directs all his views and enterprises to that purpose, and when it so absorbs him that he hardly can pay attention to any other object.

The being devoted to God comprises all this in the very highest degree; and it adds, besides, a consecration, in virtue of which he who is consecrated belongs no longer to himself—has no longer a right over himself; but belongs by an act of religion, the most sacred and the most irrevocable, to the Supreme Being to whom he has devoted himself.

Such is the idea which I form to myself of devotion, by explaining the word according to its precise signification. The practice of it, I own, has its beginning, its progress, and its perfection; but the act of consecration should be full, entire, and perfect in the will at the very moment in which it is formed. Without going further, and from this simple definition, we may already judge how rare devotion is among Christians, and whether we ourselves be devout.

Chapter 3

**WHAT WE OWE GOD;
THE MOTIVES FOR DEVOTEDNESS**

The devotedness which we owe to God is singular in its kind; it is founded on titles which appertain to him alone, and which he cannot share with anyone else. God is our first beginning and our last end. He has created us, and he preserves us every moment. We are indebted to him for all the advantages we possess both of soul and body: the heavens, the earth, and all the good things we enjoy are the work of his hands and the gifts of his liberal beneficence. He disposes at pleasure of every event, and his providence has only our welfare in view in all its designs and arrangements.

He has made us to know him, to love him, to serve him, and thereby to merit to possess him through all eternity. Enriched, from our very origin, with all the benefits of nature and of grace, a never-ending happiness was attached to the observance of a precept, the most simple, the most just, and the most easy. But having fallen from that supernatural state through the disobedience of our first parents, God has reinstated us in it by an admirable invention of his love: giving us his own Son, and taking vengeance on him for our sins, that he might have only mercy for us.

To the general benefit of redemption, add those blessings which are particular—birth in the bosom of the Catholic Church, the true religion, a good education, so many graces of preservation, so many sins forgiven, the tender reproaches

and secret invitations to return to him, the many marks, in short, of a special love.

God is our sovereign good, and, to speak justly, he is our only good. As we have received all from him, so also do we expect all from him in future, as we can be happy only through him. He is our King, our Lawgiver, our Rewarder, the Supreme Arbiter of our destiny. Add to this what he is in himself, the eternity and the infinity of his being and of his perfections. Crown all this with what he is to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Pause now for a moment; reflect on each one of these titles, which I have barely mentioned; weigh the force of each; estimate its full value; appreciate the claims it has upon you, the sentiments it demands from you, and the obligations it imposes upon you. After having considered each separately, reunite them, and conceive, if you can, the immense extent of the duties which they entail upon you. Measure the capacity of your heart; see if it could discharge the debts which it owes to God, although it were to exhaust itself in respect, love, gratitude, and submission; judge whether your devotedness, how far soever you may carry it, will ever bear any proportion to so many claims upon it.

Chapter 4

**THAT EVERY OTHER DEVOTEDNESS
SHOULD BE SUBORDINATE
TO THAT WHICH WE OWE TO GOD**

That every other act of devotedness, even the most lawful, cannot enter into comparison with this is most evident. But besides, every act of devotedness that should stand in opposition to it, that should in the least trench upon it, or even that were not entirely subordinate to it, would be an outrage which God necessarily must condemn and punish. The homage, the respect, the love, the obedience, which we pay to any creature whatever, are no farther just and pleasing to God than he himself commands and authorises them; no farther than when they keep within the bounds which he has prescribed; no farther than when they are referred to him, and are the expression of the supreme homage, of the infinite respect, of the unparalleled love, and of the absolute obedience which are due to him alone. The true Christian knows but one devotedness, of which all the others are only an extension and an application, namely, that which is due to God. He consecrates to him alone his mind, his heart, and his body; for him alone does he breathe, think, and act; God is the principle, the motive, and the end of all the duties he fulfils towards his fellow-beings.

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