

SPIRITUAL DESPONDENCY
AND
TEMPTATIONS

BY

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

To Pious and Devout Souls,

I present you this little book, confident of its value—it is the posthumous work of a Priest who was not only a member of a celebrated society and a Professor of Theology, but was also a pious and enlightened director.

In this book you will therefore find wholesome instruction, great knowledge of the interior life, and of the human heart—the result of years of experience in the direction of souls.

The subject is at once both highly important and very difficult. The author has not confined himself to general principles and vague maxims, but he has entered into the very sanctuary of the soul, into its secret folds and most intricate windings. The thread of *reason*, the light of *faith*, and the torch of *experience* have led him safely through that labyrinth where so many lose themselves, rashly attempting to explore it without the proper guides. A few principles, presented under different aspects, solve all difficulties, throw light upon doubts that are ever recurring, expose all the subterfuges of self-love, sloth, and cowardice, refute their objections, and silence their excuses.

The author has followed the most useful plan for works of this kind. He adopts the method of reasoning and his reasoning is as clear as it is solid. The greater number of persons who profess piety prefer appeals to their imagination and to their heart, rather than to their reason.

They like to be excited by lively descriptions, and by tender and touching language; but in so doing, they are seeking a passing gratification rather than a real and permanent benefit. Such descriptions and sentiments soon fade away, but the fruits of conviction are more lasting. Pure reason and true faith never vary; imagination and feeling are incessantly changing according to the different objects which act upon them.

It is from indolence that feeling is preferred to reasoning. The greater part of mankind are indolent, and hence there are so few who care to reflect and reason. But one who has an earnest love for virtue and duty, who is anxious about his salvation, should not shrink from the mental effort which the exercise of reason and of faith requires. We should remember that no sincere and permanent resolution can be taken without a conviction of its necessity. This is according to the natural order of reason, and to the economy of grace. The understanding must be enlightened before the will can be moved.

This work appears to be specially intended for the instruction of persons living in religious communities, and for seculars aiming at perfection; but in this age of indifference and discouragement all who profess the true faith may here find no little help to undeceive them in their errors, and to strengthen them against the wiles of self-love. We venture to hope that even directors of consciences may discover therein that which will increase their light, and supply for any want of experience in their difficult and dangerous ministry.

Chapter 1

**On the Dangers and Fatal Effects
of Despondency.**

Despondency is the most dangerous temptation that the enemy of our salvation can employ. In other temptations he attacks some one virtue in particular, and shows himself openly: by despondency he attacks them all, but covertly. The snare is readily perceived in other temptations: one finds in religion, often even in reason, principles which condemn them. The knowledge of the evil, to which we cannot blind ourselves, conscience, and the truths of religion which are awakened, serve as helps to sustain us. But in despondency there is nothing to lean upon: we feel that reason does not suffice to enable us to practise all the good that God requires of us. On the other hand, we dare not hope to receive from God all the help we need to overcome our passions; thus we become discouraged and nearly reduced to despair, the very point to which the devil tries to lead the despondent soul.

In other temptations we clearly perceive that it is wrong to allow the mind to dwell upon them; but in despondency, which disguises itself under a multiplicity of forms, we see strong motives for yielding to the feeling which we do not look upon as a temptation. This feeling, however, makes us imagine that perseverance in the practice of virtue is impossible, and it leaves the soul liable to be overcome by

all its passions. It is therefore of the utmost importance to avoid this snare.

Chapter 2

**The Most Fatal Effect of Despondency Is That the Soul
That Yields to It Does Not View It as a Temptation.
Hope and Confidence in God Are As Much a
Commandment As Faith and the Other Virtues.**

The great danger of despondency is that, being deceived by an excessive fear which makes us blind to the truth, and being discouraged at the sight of difficulties against which we find no resource in ourselves, we nevertheless do not look upon this state as the effect of temptation. Could we only see it in that light, we should beware of the suggestions that entertain it, and should get rid of our trouble more quickly and more easily.

Let it, however, be well understood that despondency is a temptation, and bears all the marks of being such; for every feeling that is opposed to the law of God, either in itself or by the consequences it may have, is evidently a temptation. It is thus we judge of every temptation to which we are liable. If we have a thought against faith, a feeling against charity or some other virtue, we look upon it as a temptation; we turn away from it, and try to elicit acts opposed to the thought or feeling which has put us in danger of offending God.

Now, hope and confidence in God are commanded equally with faith and the other virtues. Therefore the feeling which is opposed to hope is as much forbidden as that which is

against faith or any other virtue: it has thus every feature of a real temptation.

The law of God obliges us frequently to make acts of faith, hope, and charity; and hence forbids us all wilful feelings contrary to these sacred and necessary virtues. How, then, can despondency be viewed otherwise than as a temptation, and even as a very dangerous temptation, since it exposes the Christian soul to abandon every work of piety?

To make this danger clearer to you, consider the general course of conduct among men. Is it not the hope of success, of procuring some advantage, of avoiding some evil, or of satisfying some desire or passion, which makes them act, supports them under their labors, and animates them to overcome their difficulties? Take away from them all hope, and they would soon fall into inaction. None but a madman would strive for an object which he despairs of obtaining. In religious life despondency produces the same effect; it is founded on the same principle, the want of means to reach the end which we propose to ourselves.

When we lose all hope of overcoming the difficulties which we may find in the practice of any virtue, we do not try, or but feebly, to make the effort to do so. These insufficient efforts only increase our weakness, and being more than half overcome by despondency, we are easily led away by the passion that sways us. The sense of our weakness first throws us into doubt and into trouble. In that state, occupied only by the difficulty of the combat, we do not distinguish the principles that ought to guide us. The fear of not succeeding prevents us from employing the means

which God has given us, and we are thus defenceless against our enemy. We are like a child who, seeing the approach of a giant, begins to tremble, and forgets that a stone thrown in the name of the Lord may lay him prostrate. In the same manner do we forget that we have a powerful help in the goodness of a tender Father, upon whom we have only to call, to be victorious in all our struggles.

Chapter 3

**Source and Cause of the Impressions Which
Despondency Makes on the Soul of the Christian.**

I shall now proceed to show why despondency makes such strong and fatal impressions on us. We are well convinced of our weakness, for we have often experienced it. We feel keenly the difficulty we have to overcome ourselves, as we succeed but rarely. Filled with these sad and discouraging reflections of our want of strength, and of the little we do to please God, we consider it useless to have recourse to Him, who, we think, will not hearken to our prayer whilst we are in our present state. Sad evidence of the pride of the human heart, that would wish to owe to itself the good which it does, and the happiness to which it aspires! And how opposed to the words of the Holy Ghost, "*What hast thou that thou hast not received?*"¹

In such a state we see and depend only upon our own efforts, so that our despondency diminishes, ceases, returns, or increases, according as we act well or ill. We do not reflect that it is only from the mercy of God we can hope for help, and not by our own merits; that when we have done well it is through the grace of God, which we have not merited, and that, in every circumstance, this mercy is ever ready to dispense to us the necessary grace.

¹ 1 Cor. 4:7

When these desponding souls are told that they ought, after the example of the saints, to put all their confidence in God, they will at once answer that it is not surprising that the saints had confidence in God, since they were saints, and served God with fidelity: but that they have not the same right to feel that perfect confidence in Him which the saints had. They do not perceive that such reasoning is contrary to the principles of true religion.

Hope is a theological virtue, and its motive can be found only in God. These souls make it a human virtue when its source or motive is recognized in man or in his ways. The saints did not hope in God because they were faithful to God, but they were faithful to God because they hoped in Him. Otherwise the sinner could never make an act of hope, and yet it is that very act of hope which disposes him to return to God.

Observe that St. Paul does not say, I have obtained mercy because I have been faithful, but *“Having obtained mercy of the Lord, to be faithful.”*² Mercy always precedes the good which we do; and it is from mercy alone that we have the necessary grace to do any good at all. The saints never counted upon their works to strengthen their confidence in God, for they were ever mindful of the words of Our Saviour: *“So you also, when you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say: We are unprofitable servants.”*³ The greater saints they were, the greater was their humility. Their humility allowed them to see only the

² 1 Cor. 7:25

³ Luke 17:10

perfection to which they had not yet reached. Unlike the Pharisee in the Gospel, they found nothing in themselves to warrant their confidence, but in the mercy of God they sought and found a confidence, the foundations of which could not be shaken. This was what supported them, and this it is which must encourage you, and reanimate your fainting strength. It is of the utmost importance for you to understand this truth, that you may not again fall into the snare which your enemy has so often laid for you.

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