

## All My Liberty

### Chapter 8: Contemplation for Obtaining Love

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The Contemplation for Obtaining Love is the masterpiece of the Spiritual Exercises. It offers an insight into Christian perfection at once so simple and yet profound as to escape the average retreatant unless he makes an effort to understand its theological implications.

Much as the Principle and Foundation anticipates in preview all the subsequent meditations, so the Contemplation epitomizes in retrospect and coordinates everything which precedes. But more significantly, where the Foundation describes the love of God for man in creating him for the Beatific Vision, the Contemplation should elicit a corresponding love for God in self-sanctification and labor for His greater glory.

Viewed in this light, the Contemplation becomes more than just another exercise of the retreat. Its function is to give a practical method for living out the “Contemplation in Action,” which St. Ignatius so effectively promoted in his asceticism. By whatever name we call it: recollection, the presence of God, purity of intention, prayer in action, union with God—for Ignatius these were almost synonyms for something very specific. He identified them with the habitual practice of supernatural charity, not only during formal prayer or in the silence of the cloister, but in every action of daily life no matter how apparently trivial. What St. Paul urged upon the Corinthians, “Whether you eat or drink, or

anything else you do, do all for the glory of God,” Ignatius reduced to a simple form in his Contemplation for Obtaining Love.

He was not immediately concerned with evoking sentiments of affection for God. These he presumed to be present or at least not hard to arouse in a generous Christian soul. His main interest was to offer a plan of life for loving God in all creatures and them all in Him, not just occasionally but habitually, as a permanent disposition of heart. He wished to pass on to others what he had learned for himself, that “the only lawful ambition is to love God, and the price of this love is to love Him more,” that “it is an extreme punishment to remain so long on earth, unless love causes us to live more in heaven and with God than on earth and with ourselves,” that, finally, “he lives happily who, unceasingly, as far as he can, has his mind on God and God in his heart.” [1] His plan was straightforward. He took the bare principle that love is active, and gave it universal application. “Do you want to love God in all things?” he asks the retreatant. “Then see the Love of God manifest for you in every creature you touch, and you cannot help loving Him in return.” The result is a spirit of recollection which transcends the attention to sensible and temporal affairs demanded by contact with the world and the work of the apostolate.

Since the Contemplation was meant to be practical, it may seem to have only a tenuous connection with speculative theology. Yet its foundations are rooted in dogmatic principles. We shall therefore first analyze the Church’s teaching on the subjective love of God, that is, our love of God in response to His love for us, and then see where the present exercise fits into the concept of theological charity.

## Theological Analysis of the Love of God

Charity as a theological virtue may be summarily described in terms of its relation to God, who may be loved egotistically or with perfect generosity. *Self-interested love of God* is also called the love of concupiscence, not because of any reference to the sense faculties but because God is loved for the benefits we desire rather than for Himself alone. When this love looks to the future it can be equated with the virtue of hope, which may co-exist with supernatural charity but is really a distinct perfection of the will.

*Disinterested or selfless love of God* is technically the love of benevolence and so termed because it wills good to the one loved without looking for any advantage to self. In human relations, there may be true love of benevolence on one side only, where the love of one person meets no requital from the other. But in man's love of God this is impossible. Here the love is mutual since God always responds in kind to make our relationship the love of friendship, where the benevolence becomes effective in communicating from one to the other whatever can be freely exchanged.

The *motive* of supernatural charity (in the love of friendship) most clearly distinguishes it from all other virtues and, in practice, even from acts of charity which are not the perfect love of God. By way of parenthesis we may explain that the motive moves a faculty to action and determines its distinctive quality. Where, as in this case, the will is involved, the moving force must be goodness, whether real or apparent, created or divine. As defined by Catholic theology, the motive of supernatural

charity is the absolute divine goodness, i.e., the goodness of God as it is in itself and not as beneficial to the person loving.

The divine goodness as an object of charity is nothing esoteric. It comprehends all the divine perfections: His infinite wisdom, power, liberality, mercy, magnanimity, beauty ... whether taken together or (as most theologians teach) even taken singly.

These attributes may be considered under two aspects: *absolutely*, as they are in God, and *terminatively*, in so far as they produce some benefit in creatures. However, this does not mean that divine perfections like mercy and liberality cannot be the object of the love of benevolence, although certainly they bear a relation to the world outside of God. It all depends on the aspect under which we consider them. Viewed as perfections proper to God, as emanating from Him, as deriving from their source in His goodness, they are adequate motives for making an act of perfect love of God. But taken from the creature's viewpoint as benefits to me, either individually or as a member of society, God's liberality and mercy are the objects of hope or gratitude, but not formally of theological charity. Charity may indeed arise from hope and gratitude, and these may be present along with charity, but the latter is itself motivated by no personal benefit accrued or desired. Its motive is the divine perfections *in so far as they are God's*. Some theologians deliberately avoid using the term "relative" as distinct from "absolute" divine attributes, in order not to leave the wrong impression that such realities in God as mercy and magnanimity (though evidently related to creatures) are outside the scope of perfect charity. The adverbs *terminatively* and *respectively* are preferred, to describe the divine perfections

when viewed from their *terminus ad quem*, or the creatures who are benefited. Under this aspect, they fall short of being proper objects of the love of benevolence, since they are rather motives for the love of concupiscence which looks to self-advantage.

*The material object* of disinterested charity, though primarily God Himself, also includes the person loving as well as his neighbor. Indeed, everything which increases the divine glory is indirectly related to the secondary object of charity. This follows logically from the perfect love of God. If I love Him, I must love what He loves, and for the same reason. Among the objects of His love are myself and my neighbor. He loves us with complete selflessness, out of sheer liberality. Therefore within the ambit of theological charity are included, besides God, all the objects of His beneficent will – notably myself and my fellowman. Yet the motive even in loving myself is not self-interest but God, here seen in the exercise of liberality towards me.

A problem inherent in this question may be solved by the distinction between objective fact and psychological motivation. Objectively, no doubt, by loving God I benefit myself; since inevitably my love for Him tends to an ultimate union with God and eternal beatitude. But psychologically or subjectively the motive that moves my will to love God with perfect benevolence is not self-perfection. It is the goodness of God for itself, not for the profit which I derive.

*Our love for God is naturally demonstrative*, since genuine charity cannot remain sterile and our benevolence towards the Creator will not be unproductive. It manifests itself internally by acts of affection and eternally by effective deeds.

Internal acts of affection are called “internal” with reference to the will, and comprehend all the elicited acts of volition, which begin and terminate in the will faculty. Thus *joy and complacency* are stimulated by reflecting on the perfection of God: His holiness and beauty, His infinite wisdom and power, His boundless mercy and liberality. According to St. Francis de Sales, “when we have brought our understanding to consider the greatness of the goods that are in the Divine object, it is impossible that our wills should not be touched with complacency in this good. Then we use the liberty we have to provoke our heart to redouble and strengthen its first complacency by acts of approbation and rejoicing.” [2] In a word, we are pleased to see the greatness of God and, without envy, join with Him in rejoicing over His perfections.

Along with complacency arises the *desire to increase the divine goodness* as far as possible, since benevolence means just that; except that God is infinite and cannot be enriched by anything we do. If there is question of God’s intrinsic perfections, then, except by a fiction of the mind, we cannot desire to increase them.

But there is no imagination or hypothesis when it comes to desiring an increase in God’s external glory, which consists in the knowledge and love that created souls have for Him on earth, in purgatory, and in the Beatific Vision. And here we come to grips with the important problem of whether and how it is possible to desire union with God in heaven as an object of perfect charity. The most authentic answer to this question has been given by St. Alphonsus Liguori, and needs to be quoted verbatim:

*Debium:* Is the desire to enjoy God the object of charity?

*Response:* Yes, it is. For charity tends to God as the final end, and therefore to desire to enjoy Him who is our final end is not only a proper act of charity, it is the most perfect because fruition is consummate charity. That is why the Apostle's desire to die and to be with Jesus Christ was a perfect act of charity. St. Augustine expressly says the same thing: 'I call charity the movement of the soul tending towards the enjoyment of God for His own sake.' Neither does this make the object of charity the same as the object of hope, which also seeks to enjoy God. For while charity tends to the same enjoyment for the glory of God Himself, hope reaches for the possession of God as an advantage to us. Moreover, when a man is enjoying God he becomes oblivious of himself and loves Him with all his powers. Consequently, if a man looks upon the divine benefits as a communication of the goodness of God, he places a real act of charity, because what he loves in these benefits is not the advantage of the creature who receives them, but the goodness of God who dispenses them. [3]

Finally, among the internal acts of supernatural charity, *sorrow for sin* follows spontaneously on the desire to see God duly honored and loved. When I reflect on my own sins and those of others, I am grieved at the injury done to the Divine Majesty and wish to make amends for the offenses committed against God.

External acts of the love of God are the effective counter-parts of internal affection. They are called "external" in relation to the will and include every type of activity, of whatever faculty, that may be commanded or

directed by the power of volition. As conceived by Christian asceticism, they are an essential part of any genuine love of friendship, which consists precisely in the exchange of any goods that are separately possessed. Fundamentally these acts are of two kinds: those involving labor for the glory of God and those concerned with reparation for sin. On the first level, the desire to advance God's glory is manifested (beyond mere affection) by using every means at our disposal to *grow in personal sanctity*, and doing everything in our power to increase the knowledge and love of God in the souls of others through the *apostolate*. And obversely, the sorrow we feel over sin urges us to the practice of *penance and mortification* to expiate these crimes and offer satisfaction to the Divine Majesty.

Following St. Thomas, theologians require four conditions to acquire the perfect love of God:

*Recollection of God's benefits*, since all that we have, in body and soul and eternal possessions, has come from Him. Consequently to love Him with a perfect heart, we must earnestly reflect on everything He has given to us.

*Meditation on the divine perfections*. For God is greater than our heart; and though we study Him with all our heart and strength, yet we do not exhaust His greatness.

*Detachment from things of this world*, since the heart of man is too small where God is concerned. If you take in creatures, you drive out God.

*Avoidance of all sin*. For no one can love God while living in (mortal) sin, as Christ tells us, "You cannot serve God and mammon." If you are in sin, you do not love God. [4]

There is a difference, however, between the first and second pair of conditions given by St. Thomas. The first two are normal psychological requisites for obtaining and increasing divine love; the last two are essential qualities without which charity does not exist. In order to make an act of the perfect love of God, I must love Him above all things, i.e., I must be ready to lose everything, even life itself, rather than offend Him by mortal sin – which corresponds to the first mode of humility in the Spiritual Exercises.

## Ascetical Application

Against the background of the preceding analysis of supernatural charity we are in a better position to evaluate the *Contemplatio ad Amorem*. Since the latter is essentially practical and intended to serve as an ascetical method of growing in the love of God, we should not expect St Ignatius to touch on every phase of charity as outlined in manuals of theology; although he makes a remarkably full coverage of the subject, even in the few paragraphs of the Contemplation. What he does, however, and what can be very useful to know in directing (or making) the Exercises is the aspects which he emphasizes and the coloring he gives to certain features. In this way, the principles of divine love are reduced to an easy and more effective practice.

*Two Principles of Love:* The two principles which St. Ignatius sets down at the beginning of the exercise summarize the accent he wants to place in cultivating the love of God. First is an insistence on effective charity as distinct from the merely affective. “Love” he says, “should manifest itself in deeds rather than in

words.” A number of reasons suggest themselves for making such a distinction.

Since the love of God finds its best analogy on earth in human relations, say, in the love of husband and wife, it is imperative to see the latter in its substance and cleared of accidentals. Among these the most liable to be taken for true love are emotionalism and sentimentality, expressed in beautiful words and melody, but lacking the generosity of true sacrifice.

History is filled with examples of men and women who professed to love God, but their actions belied their words. Ignatius recognized that the human will can deceive itself into believing it loves God because it repeats a verbal formula, the while indulging in certain practices that are incompatible with true affection. “If you love Me,” Christ said, “keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

St. Ignatius does not deny that love consists also in words. But actions speak louder than words. In fact, they are words, thundering declarations which prove more eloquently than speech where a man’s affections really lie.

The basic principle of asceticism involved here is the relative emphasis on grace and free will. To love God in word may be perfectly sincere. “No one can say, ‘Lord Jesus,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (I Cor. 12:3). There may be no question of masking a false interior behind affectionate sentiments. It does make a difference, however, where we concentrate our efforts. It is not at all impossible, as Reformation theology proved, to stress faith and love so much that good works are overlooked or even despised. But we are not mere pawns in the almighty hands of God. We

have to work out our salvation: with divine grace, of course, but work it out no less. And if we ask where human effort is more required: in verbal statements or in actual deeds, the answer is rhetorical.

St. Ignatius' second principle stresses the mutuality and communication in true love of friendship, which consists in sharing what each one possesses. This clarifies the difference between love of concupiscence and the love of benevolence. "Love of concupiscence," says Francis de Sales, "is founded on a hope of deriving some benefit from the object of our affection; love of benevolence produces affection for a person with no reference to our interests. To have a love of benevolence for anyone means to wish him well, to desire him every blessing and happiness." [5] Therefore even our love for God, who has everything, must be disinterested to be perfect; must seek rather to please Him than satisfy ourselves, although objectively we derive the highest self-satisfaction in giving ourselves to God.

A further clarification of St. Francis de Sales explains the two kinds of benevolence we may have towards a person:

If the one to whom we wish good already possesses it, then we wish it to him by the pleasure and contentment we have to see him possessed of it, and hence springs the love of complacency, which is simply an act of the will by which it is joined and united to the pleasure, content and good of another. But in case the person to whom we wish good has not yet obtained it, we desire him to have it and consequently that love is termed the love of desire. [6]

Both are verified in our love of God. We have the love of complacency as regards His intrinsic perfections, and the love of desire as regards His external glory.

*Purpose of the Contemplation:* According to St. Ignatius, the purpose of the contemplation is fourfold, where each preceding end becomes a means to the further end that follows. The exercitant should ask "for an intimate *knowledge* of the many blessings received, that filled with *gratitude* for everything, I may in all things *love* and *serve* the Divine Majesty." First is knowledge of God's benefits, which leads to gratitude, inducing love that terminates in the service of God.

This sequence corresponds exactly with St. Thomas' first two requisites for obtaining charity. The last two, detachment from creatures and avoidance of sin, are amply treated by St. Ignatius in the Principle and Foundation, the Three Classes and the Modes of Humility. Moreover St. Thomas, in common with Christian tradition, holds that reflection on divine blessings is a *necessary* condition for arriving at the perfect love of God. In fact, he makes this reflection the first condition required. Consequently, in the ordinary disposition of providence, unless there is a previous consideration of God's goodness in my regard, I will not rise to the perfect love of true friendship.

I am instinctively grateful to God once I realize how good He has been to me. But the next step, from gratitude to love, is the most crucial in the whole Contemplation. The question is how gratitude to God for His benefits becomes an act of disinterested charity. Or put differently: in what sense is the

love of gratitude a pre-condition for the love of benevolence? Suarez gives the answer by distinguishing an imperfect and perfect love of gratitude. In imperfect love, we are grateful to God for the profit accrued to us. However:

When God is loved perfectly for His benefits, He is rather loved because He loves us. This is true charity and friendship, since the objective reason for the act is not outside the divine goodness. For the love by which God loves us is God Himself, and one of His highest perfections. Furthermore, He loves us because He is good; so that when we love Him for loving us, we love Him because of His goodness. [7]

We may add that psychologically it is quite impossible to reflect on God's blessing without becoming conscious of His goodness, from which the benefits proceed. Spontaneously, under the influence of grace, the will is drawn to complacency at the source of this bounty and places an act of perfect love.

The final stage from love to service is the familiar Ignatian stress on effective charity which goes beyond internal sentiment. Also any obscurities about the nature of service on which St. Ignatius insists throughout the Exercises, from the Principle and Foundation on, are clarified in the present context, where the service of God becomes the highest degree of theological charity, animated by the purest love of God.

*Four Aspects of God's Benefits:* St. Ignatius has the exercitant review God's benevolence towards man under four aspects, each offering a new insight into the divine goodness and calling forth a corresponding love in me.

At the broadest level, I am told to "recall to mind the blessings of creation and redemption, and the special favors I have received." Significantly, God does not love me with mere affection *ad intra* (within Himself) but effectuates His love *ad extra* (outside Himself), by bringing me out of nothing into existence, raising me to a supernatural destiny, restoring me after I had fallen, and in a thousand ways showering me with His gifts and graces. On my part, this should evoke a responsive desire to give all that I can to God and not remain satisfied with interior sentiments of love. Hence the *Suscipe* is my answer to the *Suscipe* of God. He has exhausted His generosity to me, so I want to exhaust mine towards him praying:

Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all that I have and possess. Thou has given all these to me; to Thee I restore them. All are Thine, dispose of them all according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is enough for me.

The second reflection rises to a higher plane, recalling how God not only gives me so many gifts, including myself, but literally dwells in the creatures He donates, "in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring on them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence, and makes a temple of me." Again a *corresponding* desire should be educed in me, not only to give to God all that I have and do, but as far as possible to give myself along with my gifts. There is such a thing as "putting my heart into what I am doing," intensifying the generosity and fervor of my donation, and so equating in analogous

fashion the presence of God in His blessings to me.

But God does more than communicate His presents, and more than dwell in them. I should further consider “how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth.” As far as it can be said, God “exerts” Himself in giving me the blessings of nature and grace, which He proved conclusively in becoming man for my salvation; and laboring, suffering and dying to show His love for me. Once more, this should produce a *similar* response in me. In the spirit of the third mode of humility – which now becomes the third mode of love – I should not only be generous towards God in working for His glory, and not only put myself wholeheartedly into what I am doing, but I should work “as one who is laboring,” with real exertion and effort and, if need be, at the cost of suffering and pain.

Finally, at the highest level, St. Ignatius tells me to “consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, my justice, goodness and mercy, descend from above as rays of light descend from the sun, or as the waters flow from their fountains.” What, we ask, is the real purpose that God has in giving me so many gifts, in which He dwells and continues to labor? To give me Himself. His benefits are all creatures, and intended to lead me to possess the Creator. If I am in His friendship, this possession on earth is enjoyed as “through a mirror in an obscure manner,” but in heaven “face to face.” As the rays of light descending from the sun unite the sun and earth by means of their common light, and as waters flowing from their fountains join the remotest tributary with its primal

source, so in the order of grace by means of His gifts God wishes to join Himself to me. The mystery is that even here I am free to make a voluntary response in kind, giving to God what I have, with generosity and sacrifice, while intending these gifts as projections of myself towards an eternal union with God.

*Contemplation in Action:* The Contemplation offers a clear synthesis of St. Ignatius’ most distinctive contribution to the science of asceticism. Having in mind people like himself, who were living the mixed life of prayer and the external apostolate, he proposed as the guiding star of Christian perfection “to see God in all creatures, and them all in Him.” In this way, the apostle or the man in the world, in spite of a welter of activity, can remain in contact with God. The secret is to put into practice the Contemplation not only as an isolated and formal prayer but as a constant attitude of mind and disposition of heart.

Inevitably the man of action, priest, religious or layman, will have creatures impinge on his consciousness every moment of the day. The way in which he uses them will determine how much of an active contemplative he becomes. If he has trained himself to look upon creatures as vehicles of the Creator, in which He dwells and labors, and through which He communicates His gifts and Himself, creatures will cease to be obstacles and become instead the very means by which the soul remains united with God.

Ignatius assumes, however, that I have learned two simple but very profound truths: that nothing happens by chance with God because He wills or permits every creature that enters my daily life, no matter how transient; and

that God's purpose in sending these creatures is precisely to evoke a realization of His activity in my favor and a corresponding reaction on my part "in favor of" God. When making the Contemplation in retreat time, I try to have this conviction sink deep into my deposit of faith – that creatures and Creator are related as means to end, being used by God to manifest His love for me and intended by Him to stimulate my love for God.

## Chapter 8 **References**

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- [1] Xavier de Franciosi, *L'Esprit de Saint Ignace*, Paris, 1948, pp. 24-38.
- [2] St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Westminster, Md., 1942, p. 196.
- [3] St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Homo Apostolicus*, Regensburg, 1862, Vol. I, tract. 4, cap. 1, pp. 117-118.
- [4] St. Thomas, *De Duobus Praeceptis Caritatis* (Opuscula Omnia), Paris, 1927, Vol. IV, p. 420.
- [5] *Treatise on the Love of God*, p. 51.
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] Francis Suarez, *De Caritate*, Disp. I, Sect. 2, num. 3.

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