

HOLY ABANDONMENT¹

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ST ALPHONSUS said, 'Lord, I am poor, but I give thee as much as I can; having resigned to thee my will, I have nothing more to offer thee.'

To give the will unreservedly, in generous love, to God, is to give him all. The wise man said, 'My son, give me thy heart', but before the heart can be given, the will must choose to give it, for the will is always the prime mover. In yielding it to God one seeks deliberately to negate the effects of the fall, and ally oneself with the creator's original plan for mankind. One shoots an arrow back into Paradise, with a string attached to it that leads one, as Theseus in the maze, through all the intricacies of life straight to union with God.

Christ, to redeem the disobedience of Adam, became himself obedient unto death, and if we identify ourselves with this obedience of the second Adam, we partake of his merits and pass, by means of the pathway of the cross, from earth to heaven. The essence of what makes a man a human being is his free will. To present this essence to God, in loving docility and trust, is to give him the meaning of one's manhood, and to restore the integrity that was part of man's soul before Eden was lost.

All things exist in accordance with God's will. In order to permit man to be what he is, a creature of free will, God works within these confines to bring about the ultimate good of all things. His will is the good will, and to unite oneself with it is to be identified with absolute good, with that all-perceptive intelligence which penetrates behind appearances that deceive the limited human mind, to the eternal realities and the true meanings.

The way of holy abandonment is the way of complete submission to this will, and it leads unerringly to sanctity—for the divine will is holy, and that which is possessed by it is likewise filled with its holiness. Thus the spiritual life is reduced to a marvellous simplicity. Self-abandonment to divine providence has been called the short cut to sanctity, and the saints have

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proved that it is so. Based on unquestioning love of God and audacious trust in his fatherly care, it results in humble acceptance, from moment to moment, of all that he sends.

God chooses—the soul accepts. That is the core of holy abandonment. ‘Not my will, but thine, be done. . . . Let it be unto me according to thy word. . . . What wouldst thou have me do, Lord? . . . Into thy hands I commend my spirit. . . . Yea, though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. . . . Thou art my God, my fate is in thy hands. . . . Fear not—it is I. . . . Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. . . . In thee will I trust. . . . To do thy will, O my God, is all my desire. . . .’

These are the attitudes, the cries, the prayers, the comforts, of the self-abandoned soul.

God knows all. God ordains or permits all that happens. The essence of God is love. Hence all that happens to us is an expression of his love. To seek and clasp this love, to believe and trust in it, throughout every event in life, is the way of the self-abandoned soul.

It sees divine providence as a river, in which it lies relaxed in tranquil love, allowing the flow to bear it wherever it will. Or like the vast ocean itself, crossed and recrossed by tidal ebb and flow and the huge, swirling movements of the mighty currents—and the soul gives itself, like a piece of driftwood, to this constant motion, borne here and there at the will of the waters.

It can be seen that this entails a marvellous docility, meekness and pliability on the part of the soul. It must submit to being tossed in contrary currents, heaved about in storms, cast on strange shores and left apparently forgotten till some high tide washes it away again, exposed to all extremes of temperature, and borne this way and that at the whim of the waves so that all sense of direction is lost.

‘Whatever is for my good God will send me, and whatever comes to me God has sent me for my good’, says the soul.

It was that perfect abandonment of Christ’s will to divine providence that led him into a way of trials, agony, humiliation, darkness, loneliness, death and *apparent* defeat. Out of all this, because it was the perfection of a will obedient unto death, God contrived the salvation of the world. Outward appearances of failure and of being forsaken by God are no true indication of the divine work, that is being perpetrated through this very tragedy

of circumstances that the self-abandoned soul permits God to visit upon it.

The way of holy abandonment is the way of trust—usually in a darkness that encompasses bitter trial after bitter trial of faith. ‘Lord, I believe—help thou my unbelief’, becomes the cry of such a soul on whom God casts his ‘cloud of unknowing’, involving it in apparently senseless contradictions, defeats and inconsistencies. One day he appears to cherish and console it, the next to abuse and forsake it. One moment it is certain it is pleasing to him, and the next it is as if he had turned away his face forever.

It has to become like Thérèse, who contented herself with being the child Jesus’ ball that he could throw away and forget, toss about as he pleased, kick or embrace—and still it always remained his possession, dumb, unresisting, content to be merely whatever and wherever his whim dictated.

So the self-abandoned soul accepts uncomplainingly what look like the whims of divine providence. It does not fret itself to understand the mysteries of God’s ways, but in faith and love blindly believes that they are the ways of absolute goodness and perfect charity. ‘God’s will hath no why’—and so this soul does not torment itself asking ‘Why?’ but says simply, ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord’. It never pauses to calculate the cost, to bargain, to reserve prudently certain things for itself, to make a trading centre of the temple of love.

All problems are simplified, because they are all contained in one—loving submission to God’s will as each moment reveals it to the receptive soul.

Jesus said to St Catherine of Siena, ‘Think of me, and I will think of thee’, and so the soul in this state forgets itself in adoring the divine will.

However, this is anything but a state of inactivity as far as the practice of virtue is entailed. The self-abandoned soul exercises all virtues. It practises patience, detachment, meekness, humility, trust, just by waiting, in poverty of spirit, until God sends it what he wants it to have. Whatever this is, and although the heart cries out at the loneliness, deprivations and sufferings, the will remains at peace, accepting all as from his hand, and therefore as a disguised blessing. After all, was not our Lord’s divinity hidden within his human flesh? To the abandoned soul all is grace. With St Thérèse it can say, ‘I always have my own way’, because

its way is God's way, and it moves with each of his movements, and makes none of its own.

St Francis de Sales's well-known maxim, 'Desire nothing, ask nothing, refuse nothing', is not meant to be applicable to the practice of the virtues. 'It is always better to have no desire, but to hold ourselves ready to do whatsoever obedience may demand of us', he says, but he makes it clear that we are to desire the very summits of virtue. His counsel inevitably implies, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and the rest shall be added unto you'.

That it *is* added, is proved by the spiritual joy of the saints, and their reiterations that they find perfect peace in whatever it is that God has ordained for them.

This apparent passivity conceals an unyielding and constant activity—the keeping of the will steadily afloat in the current of God's will, the firm checking of every impulse to edge towards some sheltered cove or to dally peacefully in a quiet backwater, or to exchange the hazards of the wide, ever-moving ocean where courage and watchfulness are constantly needed, for the deceptive torpor of some lagoon or harbour where there appear to be no dangers, and no superhuman efforts are required.

To abandon oneself completely one thus needs to exercise all the virtues, beginning, continuing and ending, with an heroic degree of charity.

Consider St Bernadette in the quiet, uneventful years at St Gildard, beset by interior and exterior trials, and finally existing in physical torture from hour to hour, uncomplaining, docile, full of charity, completely abandoned. 'My soul, rejoice at having one trait of similarity with Jesus, to remain hidden in helplessness' She who considered herself just a broom the Blessed Virgin had used for a while, and then put back in its place hidden behind the door, suffered as a victim to save souls, and took all that God sent her as a sign and proof of his love. 'Oh Jesus, release all my affections and draw them upwards! Let my crucified heart sink forever into yours and bury itself in the mysterious wound made by the entry of the lance. . . . When my feelings are too strong, recall the words of our Lord: "Fear not, it is I." When despised or humiliated by my superiors or my companions, thank our Lord at once as though for a great grace.'

'Fear not, it is I.' With supreme trust that is what the abandoned soul reminds itself in all trials and terrors. It sees Christ walking

on the tempestuous waters, and affirms that here is the master of the universe and of all the elements, allowing them their hour of play, but all the while manipulating them to his own ends. 'Trust me; let me work', he is saying, and whatever its fear and repugnance on the natural level, on the supernatural level the soul, in faith, allows the elements (which are himself disguised) to have their way with it.

Such a soul also develops an heroic degree of detachment. 'I accept before it happens whatever will be the outcome of this work' is its attitude before undertaking any work for God. Then it does all that it can to co-operate with the will of God as it appears to be manifesting itself, and leaves the results in his hands.

However, this by no means ensures a merciful inability to feel pain, or to recoil in horror from what God ordains. Even our Lord endured such feelings in the garden of Gethsemane—but at no time did his will make any movement of rebellion against the divine will.

St Francis de Sales says, 'Let us not be concerned about what we feel or do not feel. Nor must we imagine that in these states of indifference and abandonment we shall never have desires contrary to the will of God, or that our nature will not feel a repugnance to the events ordained by his good pleasure, for such involuntary sentiments shall often occur. The virtues dwell in the superior part of the soul. The inferior part commonly remains outside their influence. We must make no account of this; but without paying any heed to its desires and in spite of its remonstrances, let us embrace the will of God and unite ourselves thereto.'

Thus we must detach ourselves not only from the results of our labours, but from all emotions that rise up contrary to the direction of our God-centred will. This conflict between the feelings and the will is one of the most terrible to endure, and God provokes it again and again in the soul, that it may learn non-attachment to all things.

This detachment through renunciation of self-will is a progressive affair. Once God recognizes the desire of the will to be immersed in his, he sets about training it, as it were. It must become so docile that it relinquishes immediately an apparent good it has just been given, if God so desires it. 'The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away—blessed be the name of the Lord.' When it can say this tranquilly in the face of the cruellest

deprivations and contradictions that God sends, then it is perfect in detachment and renunciation. St Thérèse reached this perfection near the end of her life, when she could say, 'All is grace'.

To the perfectly self-abandoned soul, all is grace. Its holy indifference is such that it clings to nothing but God, and desires nothing but God, and God gives it its desire.

As Schryvers says in *The Gift of Oneself*, 'She lives in the plenitude of her God, who gives her all that she is able to take, at every moment of the day. She has nothing more to desire. She is like a vase which the ocean has filled.'

This description perfectly fits St Thérèse, who, having given herself as a victim of divine love, withdrew nothing. Her gift had been absolute, and her acceptance of what followed was unconditional. Her sufferings were very great, but so was her peace and her bliss. Only those who love God exorbitantly are capable of such complete self-surrender, and of the continued acts of self-renunciation that must follow, day by day, in all manner of things, great and small, for the rest of one's life. Such poverty of spirit means that all has been given irrevocably to God, nothing is retained for self, and no merit is ever ascribed to self.

This generosity in loving blesses, praises and thanks him for everything, and adores him with the unquestioning trust of a tiny child at its mother's breast. In response, he pours his graces into the soul, and this state of reciprocal love, and union of wills, produces an inner peace such as the world can never give, a sense of completion that no human love can bestow, and the perfect liberty of those who live and move and have their being in God.

As Caussade, that master of the doctrine of self-abandonment, says, 'O holy detachment! It is this that makes room for God. O purity, O blessed annihilation, O submission without reserve! This is what attracts God into the depth of the heart. . . . Not a single moment of my life is of my own ordering; all belongs to thee, I have neither to add nor subtract, to enquire or reflect! Sanctity, perfection, salvation, direction, mortification, is all thy affair, Lord. Mine to be content with thee and to choose for myself no action or condition, but to leave all to thy good pleasure. . . .

'God instructs the heart, not by means of ideas, but by pains and contradictions. The science of this state is a practical knowledge by which one tastes God as the sole good. In order to possess it,

we have to be disentangled from all particular goods, and to reach that state of disentanglement we have to be really deprived of them. Thus, it is only through a continual self-contradiction and a long series of all kinds of mortifications, trials and strippings that one can be established in the state of pure love. We have to arrive at the point at which the whole created universe no longer exists, and God is everything.'



BL. ANTHONY NEYROT, O.P., MARTYR
(10 April 1460)

WALTER GUMBLEY, O.P.

THE story of Bl. Anthony's capture by pirates, of his apostasy, recantation and glorious death, comes to us from two very trustworthy witnesses who both knew the saint. One was his fellow-captive and an eye-witness of his martyrdom, the other was the Dominican provincial in Sicily, from where Anthony had sailed to imprisonment and death. The first of these was a Jeronymite hermit, Fr Constantius of Capri, who had been carried captive to Tunis some considerable time before the arrival of Anthony. Shortly after the latter's martyrdom on 10 April 1460 he wrote a long account of all that had happened to him, and sent it to the Dominicans in Sicily, whose provincial, Fr Peter Ranzano, had welcomed Anthony to the island three years before. Fr Ranzano embodied this account in a letter he wrote to Pope Pius II, and added details of his own which he had evidently learned from the Genoese traders in Tunis on their visits to Sicily. Later writers have embellished the story of Anthony without adding to its dramatic value or historical accuracy, and we can safely neglect them.¹

From Fr Ranzano's statement that Anthony was a man of about thirty-five, as far as he could judge, when he left Sicily in 1458, we can place his birth somewhere about the year 1423-

¹ One of them, perhaps, deserves mention. This was John Lopez, O.P.; born in 1524, he was made a bishop at the age of 71, resigned when he was 84, and spent the next twenty-four years writing a history of the Order in four volumes. He died in 1632, at the age of 108.