

Chapter 5

GROWING WITH YOUR ANGEL



In the Old Testament's book of Tobit, we meet the angel Raphael, whose name means "God has healed." When he reveals himself to Tobit, the archangel says, "And so, when you . . . prayed, I brought a reminder of your prayer before the Holy One; and when you buried the dead, I was likewise present with you. When you did not hesitate to rise and leave your dinner in order to go and lay out the dead, your good deed was not hidden from me, but I was with you" (Tob. 12:12–13). This demonstrates that the angels rejoice in our good works and present them to the Lord as offerings of worship and prayer.

And in the book of Revelation, at the end of the New Testament, we also read that the angels of God participate in our prayers being lifted up to the Most High. In Revelation 5:8 we meet the four angels who fall down before the Lamb, each with a harp and golden bowls full of incense, "which are the prayers of the saints." Later, in chapter 8, we see a similar instance: "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the

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golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God” (8:3–4). The meaning of these images is unmistakable: The angels offer our prayers to God. They join their praise and worship to ours.

Every day at Mass, when priests pray the Roman Canon (also known as Eucharistic Prayer I), we ask that the Lord’s angel may come and take this sacrifice to God’s altar of Heaven, so that in turn we might receive Christ’s blessings and graces. The prayer of an angel is like a flame; he is consumed by it, not in the sense that he is *destroyed* by it, but in the sense that his entire being *becomes* prayer. And so, if we want to grow in the life of prayer, we do well to turn to the angels and ask them to pray with us and for us, taking our prayers up into theirs, so that our prayer becomes richer in charity and our obedience to the Father’s will becomes more complete.

In their ministry, the angels are conscientious and faithful. When they stand by our side, God sees us joined to them. And so, we can hardly do better than to ask the Lord to help us to draw closer and closer into the fidelity that characterizes the life of the angels.

Echoing the many instances of the symbolic groupings of seven angels or spirits in the book of Revelation, we may infer that there are seven habits and seven “spirits” we can nurture that will bring us closer to the Lord through His angels.

Respect for Truth

The most basic first step to growing in relationship with God and His angels is to cultivate a great respect and love for all the truths of our Faith. The Lord wants to reveal more and more of His richness to us, but we must first be open to it. Uniquely among the bodily creatures (but in common with the angels), we have the

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ability to ponder the absolute sovereignty of God and the place of Christ as the center of all creation—and so to place Him at the center of our hearts. In exercising this capacity in ways great and small, such as through spiritual reading and prayers for understanding God’s truth, we predispose ourselves for the Holy Spirit’s gift of understanding, one of the seven gifts poured out on us in the sacrament of Confirmation.

We waste so much time each day letting ourselves be bombarded by information, imagery, and entertainment of all kinds that has no lasting value, and may even be harmful to our faith. We can easily let our minds and our souls become desensitized and coarsened, weakening our free will and losing our appreciation for spiritual truths as well as our ability to examine and to process the experiences of our lives in the light of faith and eternal truths. Critical thinking (in the positive sense), our sense of humor, and even our sense of music can all become debased and isolated from who we think ourselves to be. We must look within ourselves honestly and bravely in order to purify our minds and hearts.

Regular Sacrifice

Respect for the truth is just the beginning. It is also necessary for us to make sacrifices—to offer our work, our labor, our challenges, our daily crises, big and small—in union with the sacrifice of Christ. To do this, we have to live in the presence of God and be aware of Him so that we can act *intentionally*. This supernatural awareness gives us a sense of inner peace and gives meaning to all our actions. When the Angel of Peace appeared to the children at Fatima to prepare them for the coming apparition of the Mother of God, he said, “Make of everything you do a sacrifice.”

All too often, we think that we can offer only painful or unpleasant things to God as sacrifices; but God is the giver of all our

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blessings and happiness, too. When we remember this truth, we can lift these things up as a spiritual gift that is very pleasing to Him. We offer our joys to the Lord as well as our sorrows, as what is called a sacrifice of praise. When we give Him such an offering, we not only sanctify that moment, that particular happiness, but also transform the capacity that we have for happiness so that we can indeed become a constant sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God and prepare ourselves for the endless joy of His presence in Heaven. When we practice this way of sacrifice *and* praise—concepts that seem contradictory but are essential to one another in the Christian life—we dispose ourselves for God’s gift of wisdom.

Purifying Our Conscience

We must also consciously train ourselves to be faithful to the Lord. The good habits of mind and body that form us in virtue don’t just happen: We have to purify our conscience with the intention that all that we do might be for God’s greatest glory, and therefore for our highest good. In this way, again, we can act in imitation of and in collaboration with the angels.

We accomplish this purification by submitting ourselves to the guiding light of the Magisterium—that is, the teaching authority of the Church. We look to the Church to help us and to guide us so that we can live our lives as God intended. So many people today, and even many Catholics, wander in darkness and confusion because they do not look to the living Magisterium of the Church for guidance on issues that determine their happiness in this life and in the next. The angels possess all this knowledge perfectly; we can grow in it through our efforts and the grace of the Holy Spirit’s gifts of understanding, counsel, and wisdom.

If we are going to overcome the culture of sin and death that so dominates our world, we have to steep ourselves in the culture

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of life that is the Church. The resources at our disposal are nearly endless: the encyclicals and other instructions of the popes, the guidance of our local bishops, the writings of the saints, the commentaries of the great Catholic scholars through the ages, and so on. We need to reflect upon these treasures and ponder them prayerfully so that we can acknowledge and be faithful to the truth about God and about our own selves. This is how our conscience is formed and reformed—how we become informed practically and how we grow in grace. It is only by doing these things that we can learn to accept and to embrace God’s will in our own lives and in the lives of others. It is only in this way that we can accept and do good with the experience of suffering, illness, and aging here on earth. This is how we come closer to the mystery of Jesus’ Cross and experience its saving power. This is the school of the gift of knowledge, also called the “science of the Cross.”

Choosing the Good

Knowing what to do is one thing; choosing it is quite another. The next step to growing in Christ through the angels is in the choices we make every day. Quite simply, we need to pattern our lives on Jesus. This is important to remember: We do not imitate the angels as an end in itself; rather, we ask the angels to assist us in imitating Christ Jesus. We imitate the angels to become more like Christ—true God and true man, the perfect fullness of spirit and matter.

Mother Alexandra, a famous Romanian Orthodox nun, wrote these beautiful words in her book *The Holy Angels*:

The choirs each successively reflect and channel the perfection flowing from the Godhead. The angelic orders impart the holy light one to another and it reaches us and

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enlightens us according to our several capacities. One could then liken the choirs to a threefold waterfall falling in three consecutive cascades, bringing clear mountain water to the thirsting plain below. At the same time they can be likened to an ascending ladder by which we may reach ever higher, even unto “Deification.”²⁵

That is our goal: to be so conformed to Christ that we can be called “deified.” The holy angels assist in this work, so that we can drink of the “living Water” and ascend by the ladder of their choirs. And so, by looking to the Lord, by turning to Scripture each day, and by pondering the Word of God that is given to us in the Bible and the Church’s Sacred Tradition, we come to grow strong in the ways and the means of fidelity. Through following Christ day after day, denying ourselves, and imitating Him in the little things of life as well as in the great, we ascend step by step. Even when we find the climb demanding, we find ourselves at peace—at peace with God and at peace with ourselves, for our angel is by our side, encouraging us along the way.

Acts of Kindness

Every day our imitation of Christ should express itself in the practice of kindness. Kindness is an expression of generous love that goes beyond and exceeds the duties of justice. In the words that we speak and the smiles that we offer to others, we express the peace of God within us and give a gift whose impact cannot be measured. In these little things, we show the delicacy of our spiritual life and our attention to the will of God. As the Letter to the Hebrews notes,

²⁵ Mother Alexandra, *The Holy Angels* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1989), p. 159.

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“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2).

Many of the saints demonstrated such acts of kindness by their words and their example. St. Camillus de Lellis, the reformed mercenary soldier and gambler, founded his Ministers of the Sick as an army of nursing priests and brothers in service to the suffering. As he went through the wards, seeing needs that others could not see, he would invoke the guardian angels of his patients and frequently whisper into the ear of one of his eager but maladroit disciples, “*Più cuore nelle mani!*” (Put more heart into what your hands are doing!) The same spirit filled the heart of the Spanish Blessed Speranza (+1983), foundress of the Sanctuary and Congregations of Merciful Love. This mystic, who lived in great intimacy with the angels, would often tell her Sisters, “Before you do any work of kindness for anyone, look at them with love. That is the most important thing you can do.”

A kind word of charity overcomes many temptations and actually banishes the Devil. Every act of kindness that we perform is like a little exorcism moving away the power of darkness, pushing back the shadows of our pride and establishing the reign of light in our world. Remember: The saints and angels show themselves in the little things as well as in the great. Most people experience the help and presence of their guardian angels in the “small services” they offer us in day-to-day life that simply make things easier. As Jesus taught us in the Gospels, “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). So, if we can practice kindness in the ordinary encounters of daily life, we will be ready for those difficult moments when we are tested and find ourselves having to call upon the love of God and to implore the graces of the Holy Spirit. But we will possess that love of God already through the fire of divine charity within. “Jesus, I want what You want for me.”

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The Way of Prayer

To walk constantly in the presence of God and in the company of the holy angels, we must also cultivate a spirit of prayer, consistently and patiently lifting up our mind and our heart in dialogue with the Lord. One of the ways we can do this is by adopting the prayers of the Mass that are associated with the angels in everyday life. If we pray the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy), for example, at the beginning of a time of mental prayer, we will unite ourselves with the praise of all creation, and our prayer will begin on a firm foundation. For people who do well with calmly repeated prayers, we can say the Sanctus nine times, thinking one by one of each of the choirs of angels and “climbing their ladder” to the very presence of God Himself. This reminds us that prayer takes effort; it is a journey and an ascent to God. And so on the pilgrim way, we will be praying not only with our guardian angel but with all the hosts of Heaven.

In his book *The Angels and the Liturgy*, Eric Peterson speaks in great depth of the importance of this triple cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” in the book of Revelation. He points out that it is not only the seraphim of the prophet Isaiah who shout forth this hymn, but also the Four Living Creatures—angels who represent the Gospels and the life of the Church—whom John hears.

The whole description of the heavenly court culminates in the Sanctus cry of the living creatures. The eternal world blossoms out in the praise of God. . . . Because the eternal world is utterly imbued with the praise of God, (the four living creatures) cry day and night without ceasing: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God . . .” In Isaiah 6 we do not yet hear about the ceaselessness of the cry of praise. If the Apocalypse emphasizes that the cry of “Holy” goes on day and night, this is connected with the fact that here it is the divine

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throne-bearing angels and not the seraphim who utter the Sanctus, so that it is as representatives, as it were, of that eternal world in which God Himself sits enthroned, that they send up their cry of “Holy” forever without interruption.²⁶

Our prayer opens us to the Lord’s will, to the enlightenment and the encouragement that God wants to give us. When we leave our prayer, then, we can go back to our daily life refreshed and renewed, strengthened for what lies ahead, better able to give witness in our actions, in our choices, in our words, and in our works to the presence of Christ within us — His abiding love and His constant grace.

Ceaseless Rejoicing

Finally, if we would be faithful to the Lord and to the mission of the holy angels—to their work, to the presence in our lives, to their guardianship—it is important for us to rejoice in our loving God. St. Teresa of Avila is said to have quipped, “From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us.” We are to radiate joy—the joy that is ours in recognizing that we are children of God, the joy of realizing that Christ has won the victory, the joy of knowing that every day is not simply a day of bearing a cross but of bearing witness to the Resurrection.

Many of the saints were known particularly for their joy. St. Philip Neri, who was called “Philip of the Joyful Heart,” drew many to Christ through his radiant personality. He even had a special gift of healing those suffering from depression. What was his secret? Certainly, he had particular personality traits that made him a lovable friend. But above all, it was his trust in Christ Jesus our Savior that filled him with peace and overflowed from his heart.

²⁶ Eric Peterson, *The Angels and the Liturgy* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1964), pp. 3–4.

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Another outstanding example of such “joy in the Lord” is Blessed Edward Poppe, a diocesan priest from Belgium who died in 1924 at the age of thirty-three. After a very active first few years of ministry, he developed a heart condition that would lead to his early death. While convalescing at a village convent, he became known to the children as “the priest who smiles when he prays.” Father Edward would spend his holy hours before the Blessed Sacrament renewing his acceptance of God’s plan for him, often smiling silently at the invisible Friend who dwells in the Tabernacle. His days and nights were heavy with all the burdens of illness and infirmity; but deep within, he was at peace. Deep within, he knew that he possessed a joy that would not be taken away from him. This is the kind of truth we must all learn, usually over time; it is vitally important for our spiritual lives, for our life of prayer, and for our discipleship.

Let your heart always be joined to the Heart of Mary—Mary who rejoiced in the Lord and magnified Him by her words and by her works. Mary *stood* beneath the Cross of her Son; she did not swoon or faint. She is an icon of strength and quiet courage, sharing our pains and showing us how to remain constant, asking us always to say, “I am the servant of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to Your word” (see Luke 1:38). In this way, you will be not only enriched with the presence of Christ but filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and able to give that joy to all whom you meet.

These steps unite us to the angels and bring us to God’s love. But there are also seven essential traits of character, seven habits of virtue, that we should develop in the company of the holy angels if we want to imitate these great servants of God and, with their help, deepen our discipleship of the Lord.²⁷

²⁷ These seven characteristics are found in the spirituality of the *Opus Sanctorum Angelorum*, which means “Work of the Holy Angels.” The meditations that follow are my own composition for this introduction to the spiritual life.

Spirit of Fidelity

The only trial the angels went through was one of faithfulness. There were those who remained constant in their love of God and their obedience to His will. And there were those who turned away, who cast themselves out of God's presence and focused their attention and their love only on themselves and their idiosyncratic idea of goodness and happiness.

For ourselves, fidelity is expressed in our obedient and loving trust in God and in our confidence in the Church as our mother. This begins in our thoughts. We must guard ourselves against temptations against the Faith. Sometimes, these temptations cannot be dismissed simply by reasoning them away; we can become confused or just unable to access the information we need at the moment. Sometimes it's better just to flee from them, as we would from temptations of the flesh, offering a prayer and putting down or turning off whatever is troubling us. (Occasions of sin can just as easily be intellectual as physical.) In all things we want to express that loyalty to God that is essential to our happiness and our salvation.

That is why I recommend that every day, when we begin our time of prayer, especially mental prayer, we should renew our acts of faith, hope, and charity. These simple prayers that many of us learned in our first catechism classes are often overlooked today, but they are very important because each day brings with it objections and temptations against the Faith, whether in media and pop culture or among colleagues, friends, and even family members.

So, let us resolve to begin our prayer by saying, "My God, I believe in all that You teach, in all that You have revealed through Your Church because You are the source of all truth and Your Church can neither deceive nor be deceived." If we do so, we will receive a special gift from God to remain open to wisdom, to understanding, to counsel—indeed, to all the gifts of all the Holy

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Spirit. And we will be steeled in our resolve to choose fidelity every day, as the angels did during their trial of faith.

Our fidelity must also extend to the way in which we live out the other virtues of life: loyalty to our family and friends, patriotism toward our nation, and responsibility to our word, to our work, and to our other obligations and duties. To have an interior life means that we strive to be constant, long-suffering, and true. Fidelity is the foundation of all these qualities, and therefore of true character.

The Spirit of Humility

This fidelity then expresses itself in humility. Humility is one of the most misunderstood of the virtues. All too often, it is mistaken for a lack of self-confidence or a negative self-image. Humble people are easily ignored but may, on the other hand, attract bullies and others who seek to prey on their goodness. When we are confronted with true humility, we realize that there is a winsomeness and a graciousness about it. If we are not prepared to encounter this virtue, it can make us very uncomfortable. And yet, we all recognize its absence—at least in others. The proud or arrogant person is always talking about himself—when it would be much more interesting if he talked about us!

So, what is humility all about? The word comes from the Latin *humus*, which refers to “soil” or “earth.” The humble person recognizes that, like everybody else, he or she has been created from the dust of the earth, but also from the breath of God’s mouth. In other words, all creation is made up of the same microns and subatomic particles, but we have been given a human soul with its human endowments by God Himself. Indeed, all we have that is good comes from God. God is the source of all life, all truth, all beauty, and all goodness in the universe and in each of us. And even if we have developed these original God-given gifts and capacities

through our own efforts, nonetheless we must give God the glory that is due to Him.

Jesus Himself spoke of this virtue, which so characterized His incarnate life on earth, when He said, “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt. 11:29). These words are the key to understanding humility as the virtue that prepares for and protects all the other virtues that we strive to acquire and to practice here on earth. Even the virtues of faith, hope, and charity require humility: We cannot believe in God and His Holy Church if our pride and self-importance blind us to His truth and will. We can only hope and trust in the Lord’s promises by recognizing that He is infinitely good and that He loves us more truly and more effectively than we love ourselves. Humility is absolutely necessary for divine charity, for it makes it possible for us to love God above all things and in all things, to choose Him for Himself because He is “all good and deserving of all our love.”

Humility is also essential to our faithful and growing love for our neighbor, which involves the overcoming of selfishness and the sacrifice of our ego for the sake of another person. It helps us to overcome what I sometimes call the “unholy trinity”: I, Me, and Myself. It is this “triune ego” that locks us up in the little hell of our own making, the isolation and loneliness of pride and self(ish)-sufficiency. When humility and fraternal charity are united, we can practice Christlike forgiveness in an ever-fuller way.

To speak about the saints “excelling at humility” may seem to be a strange turn of phrase, but it is unquestionably true. Examples from their lives abound and are often among the things we remember most clearly from their biographies: Consider St. Francis, who gave up wealth, family, and station to serve the poor and the forgotten, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who wrote the magnificent doctrine of her “little way” with a pencil and a few schoolgirl’s notebooks. Think of the simplicity of the Curé d’Ars—St. John

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Vianney—the man all France talked about; the heroic service of Mother Teresa; or the strange and charming lives of St. André Bessette or Blessed Solanus Casey, both of whom answered doors, swept floors, and worked miracles with an almost routine regularity.

We can be grateful too for the refreshingly dry humor of St. Bernadette Soubirous, whose patience was often tried by visitors to her convent. When confronted by a lady who marveled at her modest responsibilities, the saint answered with a humility rooted in realism, “What do you do with a broom, madam, after you have finished sweeping? You put it behind a door until it is useful again, no? And that is exactly what the Most Blessed Virgin did with me!”

My own favorite teacher of spiritual humility is not yet beatified, though we may certainly hope for that day to come: Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val (1865–1930), an extraordinary man of exceptional gifts. The son of the Spanish ambassador to England, he was brought up in English public schools (what we would call private schools), entered the Diplomatic Corps while still a seminarian, and was made a Monsignor before even being ordained! Handsome, multilingual, and a talented horseman (and a fine dancer, before the seminary!), he seemed destined for great things. At age thirty-eight, he was secretary to the conclave that elected St. Pius X as pope in 1903. The new pope recognized all his talents and made him his secretary of state and cardinal. For eleven years, he worked at the side of a saint who became a second and beloved father to him, and so he became the second most powerful man in the Church.

Even after the death of Pius X, Merry del Val retained important positions as the archpriest of St. Peter’s and secretary of the Holy Office. But he also poured all his money into an orphanage and boys’ club in the poorest neighborhood of Rome, wore a hair shirt, and frequently used the discipline on Fridays in memory of the Passion. Why did he do all this? The cardinal was acutely

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aware of the temptations to pride and selfishness that were constantly around him. He knew his own talents, gifts, and responsibilities—and he knew that if he did not live entirely for Christ, he would be the unhappiest of men. He composed the Litany of Humility²⁸ as his own profound expression of prayer as he did battle against what is fleeting in order to win what is eternal.

The invocations in this litany are the words of someone who is very aware of the temptations of power and influence, as even a few lines demonstrate:

From the desire of being honored, *Deliver me, Jesus.*

From the desire of being consulted, *Deliver me, Jesus.*

From the fear of being forgotten, *Deliver me, Jesus.*

From the fear of being suspected, *Deliver me, Jesus.*

That in the opinion of the world, others may increase,
and I may decrease,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

That others may become holier than I, provided that
I become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

The cardinal made this litany a part of his daily private prayers; it was discovered only after his sudden death at the age of sixty-five. When first published, it made a profound impression on people

²⁸ See the appendix in this book for the full version of the Litany of Humility. I am happy to note that Nicolas Diat, who collaborated with Cardinal Sarah on his book *The Power of Silence*, has included the litany in his introduction to the book. Silence bears fruit in humility.

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around the world. You have only to read it through to have some sense of how much it meant to the man who wrote it, and what it cost him to come to such a place in his own spiritual life. What courage he had to put the thoughts of his mind and heart down on paper in these words! After you have read it, try to *pray* it according to your needs and your vocation. You may not be able to pray the whole litany at once, but it will bring you to a different place in your prayer and in your relationship to Our Lord.

You can ask your guardian angel to help you to understand this litany in relation to your life, for here again the angels go before us as models and examples. They are spiritual beings with nearly unimaginable power, and yet they use that power solely to glorify the Lord and to cooperate in His will—all with perfect joy. Their trial of faith involved the willingness to look beyond their own perfections and marvel before the infinite perfections of God—to choose His will for them rather than create a false world out of their own vanity. Ultimately, they would find their greatest likeness to the Word and participate in the mystery of His Incarnation by *servng*—think what that word means—as our guardians here on earth. This plan of God cannot help but amaze us, whenever we think of it. Surely we, with much more mundane talents, can aspire to do the same.

The Spirit of Magnanimity

St. Thomas Aquinas and many of the great teachers of the Middle Ages said that the virtue of humility must be paired with another virtue called magnanimity, or liberality of heart. The virtue of magnanimity expresses the desire to do great things for God and neighbor because God has done so much for us. To respond to the Lord with generosity means to give back to Him, in whatever ways our circumstances will allow, for all that He has given us. If we

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live in this way, practicing magnanimity together with the virtue of humility, then our offering to God will be whole and complete and our lives will be lived with a special joy—the joy of serving the Lord in truth and in goodness, with unity of heart and a spirit of wholehearted trust in His providence for each one of us.

Magnanimity is often associated with philanthropists and others who give generously to charities or projects to help those in need. But in fact, magnanimity is most often found among the poor, among those who share the little they have with a truly generous heart, who give “without counting the cost.” We ought to practice this virtue not only toward the Lord directly by our worship or through works for the Church, but also and especially toward our neighbor, whom He commands us to love even as we love ourselves. This generosity is expressed in compliments and kind words, in praising others rather than blaming, in finding something good to say about even the most frustrating people. Generosity in forgiving others disposes us to receive the merciful forgiveness of Christ. Jesus taught, “The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you” (Matt. 7:2; Mark 4:24, NABRE). Even more important are the words Jesus teaches as part of the Our Father: “Forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive those who trespass against us.” That small word, which indicates degree or amount, may be critical to our salvation.

The Spirit of Obedience

As we grow in the practice of humility and magnanimity, we realize that there is no room for pride or for envy. Pride and envy would be foolishness. They would not fulfill us; rather, they would destroy the works of God within our hearts because humility and magnanimity lead us toward wholehearted obedience to God. The obedience Jesus practiced so perfectly to His Father’s will is not simply an

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exterior obedience—an obedience of activity or of “doing”—but an interior obedience—an obedience of mind and of will. To practice this kind of obedience, we need to see it as an expression of justice to God, Who is the All-Mighty One Who sustains us and to Whom we owe everything; and of the virtue of religion, which moves us to reverence and worship. These virtues gradually move us toward an ever-more-perfect charity (love) for God in Himself. We do what He wills out of love, a love that increases in power and in its embrace of all that He loves. As we love more and more perfectly, so we practice obedience ever more joyfully. We do not obey out of fear or subjection: as St. John teaches in his first epistle, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Like Edward Poppe, we learn how “to smile at the will of God,” and to fulfill it in peace.

We ought to obey when we are sure of the Lord’s will, even when it goes against our own insights and preferences. When we do this, the grace of humility will join itself with the grace of obedience to bring the matter to the good end that God desires. St. Teresa of Calcutta, for example, found it easy to offer all kinds of difficult personal services and care to the most outcast among the poor, but she found it very difficult to allow herself to be photographed over and over wherever she went. She spoke about this to various priests and bishops, who all told her that she had to allow the photography. Finally, she made a deal with Our Lord: for every photo she had taken, He had to release a soul from Purgatory! With this thought in mind, she became remarkably patient with all her photographers, professional and amateur—and she must have tens of thousands of heavenly friends who were former poor souls! Though I am sure that only Mother Teresa could cut that kind of deal with Our Lord, we can advance in patience and grace in our own ways.

In our practicing obedience, the Lord certainly does not want us to be robots; rather, He wants us to dedicate our free will totally

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to Him—and that can take place only when and to the degree that *we trust that God loves us more than we love ourselves* and that He cares for us and desires our happiness, and the happiness of those whom we love, more perfectly than we do. Then we can be obedient to the Lord, handing over to Him the cares and concerns that lie upon our heart.

The practice of obedience, therefore, requires us to purify our will and our memory. To do this, we must learn to eliminate criticism, rebellious thoughts, indignation, spitefulness, bitterness, and so on from our memories and our way of thinking. As we get older, we realize how much of our memory is devoted to “bad memories.” We retain all the thoughts of past hurts, disappointments, and wounds we have suffered from others. We may also spend too much time thinking of our past sins. We brood over them consciously, and all too often they unconsciously influence our ways of thinking and of judging others, diminishing our love for Our Lord.

It is vitally important to work through all these memories, entrusting them to Our Lord and leaving them in His Sacred Heart—a heart that was wounded so that we could find understanding and healing in Him. Each of us has memories of hurts and wounds over the years that we cannot ever seem to understand, no matter how much we try. We remain baffled at how things happened the way they did or why someone treated us in such a cruel way. The angel who walks by our side has seen all these things more clearly than we have, but it may not be in God’s plan that He reveal his knowledge to us in this world. We may simply have to turn them over to Our Lord, trusting that He will explain all things to us in Heaven. That is something that we can do in prayer, formally willing not to give ourselves over to such endless considerations and reconsiderations.

Lord Jesus, here in Your Presence, with my angel at my side,
I turn over to You these memories, hurts, and confusions

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from my life. I entrust them to Your infinite wisdom and Your loving Heart. I do not want to become lost in their entanglements any longer. I believe that You will one day explain all things to me in Your Heavenly Kingdom and that I will be at peace in the truth. When such memories return to me, I ask You to help me to be strong by remembering this act of trust I have made. Give me Your grace to break away from the power of such memories, to eliminate all bitterness in my thoughts, and to do Your Holy will in that moment and always. Amen.

In learning to forgive those who have hurt us or who have made themselves our enemies by their actions, we must follow the same path. Forgiveness can be very, very difficult, especially when we have been hurt by someone whom we loved, and may still love. In today's world, there are few among us who do not belong to broken families or who have not known the pain of a broken heart. Forgiveness is a process that has many steps, and most of them are painful—like peeling an onion, which brings new tears with every layer exposed.

We have to remember that forgiveness is a matter not of our emotions but of our will. What has happened to us was real, and it may hurt us for a long time to come when we remember or think about it. But forgiveness is a choice we make. *We have to will to forgive. We do so because it is the right and best thing for us to do: That is why Jesus asks it of us.* It is right and best for us because it restores our freedom, liberating us from the domination of another's evil, expressing our self-determination and free will, and affirming our faith in the justice and mercy of God.

There are times, on the other hand, when others who are ready to be forgiven desire and seek out our forgiveness. These are sweet moments and consolations that penetrate our souls, though there

may still be hard times to come. But all too often, the person who has hurt us is not ready to be forgiven, nor even ready to change or to repent. There may be real physical or emotional danger involved; psychological illness, addictions, and substance abuse can seem to split one person into two (or more). Situations like these may require a spouse to flee in the night, to take the children away to safety, or to exclude a family member from the home. And even when these grave dangers are not present, a long-suffering person may know that trust is lost, and there will always be the real and present danger that this once-beloved, still-loved person will repeat the same or worse actions—if not to oneself, then to other innocent victims.

Forgiveness does not mean that the person is restored to the same level of trust or friendship that was once enjoyed. We may have to accept the painful but real truth that the relationship is now forever changed, and that we have to maintain a safe distance in the future. St. Aelred of Rievaulx, a great English Benedictine monk, spoke of this as “unstitching a friendship.”

So, how do we forgive in these situations? How do we obey the Lord, Who asks us to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven times (see Matt. 18:22)? To listen to the words of Jesus is to find peace and freedom, and so we come back to that same difficult but necessary first prayer:

Lord Jesus, I will what You will. I want to will it with all my heart. Hear me and heal me, help me to let go of the hurt that N. has done to me. Let me leave them in Your arms and in Your heart. In Your time, in Your wise and perfect ways, make them understand what they have done and give them the grace of repentance, change and conversion. Help me to be strong now, to go forward in my life as Your friend, Your faithful disciple. Free me from bitterness and be with me in

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my solitude. Fill the empty places in my heart and my days with Your divine love. Amen.

If possible, it is good to speak about this forgiveness to a priest in confession or perhaps during a retreat, particularly if we believe we have to limit access to or end all contact with a person. This does not mean that our forgiveness was not real, only that the harm done still requires a “separation in peace.”

The Spirit of Love

Any book on the spiritual life—and certainly any book on the angels—must repeat the word “love” again and again. Love is always in the center of our life of faith. The goal of everything we do is to be united to God in eternal love.

First of all, we must remember that love is not just a feeling that comes and goes, but, like forgiveness, it is an act of the will—a choice. Whereas the angels now spend eternity loving God, we have both the challenge and the privilege of being able to *choose* that love. But that relationship of love, just like any relationship, must be regularly renewed. We can’t declare our love for God and then go on as if nothing has changed any more than we can say “I do” at our wedding and then ignore our spouse.

Every day we are challenged with decision points when we can choose to love God and our neighbor, or choose to love ourselves with a disordered love that looks only to our own needs, wants, and demands. True love sees excellence, goodness, beauty, and truth in the other person and delights in these qualities. We want that relationship to continue and to expand forever. We want to share in these delights, not by taking them into ourselves but *by giving ourselves* to the other person. This is “gift love.”

Perfect love of God recognizes that we have been created for absolute truth, utter goodness, and happiness without end; all human

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beings by our very nature seek these goods, even if we cannot name them. We learn, however, that even the happiest of lives cannot supply these ultimate, transcendent goods because they are to be found only in God. He is absolute truth, perfect goodness, and infinite beauty. Only He can make us completely, eternally happy. Frustration comes when we look for these goods in all the wrong places here on earth, especially by means of sin. Sin always deceives, disappoints, and frustrates.

The Son of God was born into this world to strip away the lies and deceptions of sin, to take away the guilt of the world, and to be for us the God who never fails. He reveals the face of the Father as all merciful and all loving, overthrowing the falsehoods of the Demon and his fallen ones. He reveals the truth about man, about us men and women created in the image and likeness of God and called to an eternal inheritance. He breathes forth the Holy Spirit upon the Church and into our souls so that we can cooperate and collaborate in lifting up our world to the Holy Trinity.

How do we live such truths? How do we respond to such an extraordinary plan of grace? We must do so according to our own personalities and gifts, our own strengths and capacities, our own attractions and circumstances—healed by His wounds, washed by His blood, enlivened by His Spirit. We seek to love God as much as we can at every minute of the day, doing our duties, working at our jobs, caring for our families, reaching out to our neighbors. We must not wait for great opportunities to love God; we have to begin with “the heroically humble” moments of daily life: Give the first moment of your day to Christ (a heroic act!) and make your own bed! It sounds deceptively simple, perhaps even annoyingly so, but that is the case with many of the lessons that our holy angel tries to communicate to us day after day.

Blessed John Henry Newman, that great intellectual and convert, wrote something similar when asked for a plan of how to be

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perfect. Though he himself was a great scholar and theologian, he remarked one day that he would be very content in Heaven to shine his beloved St. Philip Neri's shoes. The image might seem to be an odd one, but its meaning is clear: Nothing is too little or too great for the sake of the one we love. In a similar way, we must learn how to practice a love of God that expresses itself in *delighted obedience* in words, thoughts, and deeds. St. Gerard Majella kept a sign on his door that read, "Here the will of God is done as God wills and as long as God wills." Though he was a simple Redemptorist lay brother, he helped many of his more learned confreres reach the perfection of charity and the heights of prayer—which should be our goal, too.

The Spirit of Silence

There are many kinds of silence. Silence may be calming or healing; it can be restful at the end of a day or expectant as we wait for the first note of an orchestra or the sound of a loved one's voice. Silence may also be cold and foreboding, vast and empty, mocking and rebuking. It can be as poignant and uplifting as the pause following a well-spoken address before applause breaks forth or as crushing as stillness following a cry for help or the confession "I love you" that receives no reply.

But the silence that I am thinking about here is different from all of these. A holy silence—a supernatural silence—is a dimension of the soul's response to God. It is made up of humility, wonder, and gratitude joined to memory, delight, and longing. This is a deeper kind of silence than we usually experience—a silence that is not simply the absence of words or of noise but one that prepares us and empties us out so that we might be ready to hear the word of God and keep it in our hearts.

Cardinal Robert Sarah has written an extraordinarily beautiful book on this subject, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship*

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of Noise. His profound analysis of the deep meaning of silence expresses this mysterious reality:

At the heart of man there is an innate silence, for God abides in the innermost part of every person. God is silence, and this divine silence dwells in man. In God we are inseparably bound up with silence. The Church can affirm that mankind is the daughter of a silent God; for men are the sons of silence.²⁹

St. Joseph is perhaps the best model of this silence. There is not a single word recorded of St. Joseph in the pages of the Gospels, but that is not because he had nothing to say. It is rather because Joseph had so much to listen to. He lived in the presence of the Word Made Flesh. He felt the beating of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as he held the Christ Child against his chest. He dwelt with the Immaculate Conception. Joseph, then, shows us that silence is not wordlessness; silence is the preparation for God's speaking and for our understanding our mission and vocation. These words speak to me of what St. Joseph might have felt whenever he bent down to pick up the Christ Child:

God carries us, and we live with him at every moment by keeping silence. Nothing will make us discover God better than his silence inscribed in the center of our being. If we do not cultivate this silence, how can we find God? Man likes to travel, create, make great discoveries. But he remains outside of himself, far from God, who is silently in his soul.

²⁹ Robert Cardinal Sarah with Nicolas Diat, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), p. 22.

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I want to recall how important it is to cultivate silence in order to be truly with God.³⁰

Silence is the preparation for action, as active people soon come to realize:

Every day it is important to be silent so as to determine the outlines of one's future action. The contemplative life is not the only state in which man must make the effort to leave his heart in silence. In everyday life, whether secular, civil, or religious, exterior silence is necessary.³¹

Cardinal Sarah also distinguishes the role of silence in spiritual transformation, the growth of our interior life:

The episode of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary, related by Saint Luke (Lk 10:38–42), eloquently illustrates the priceless character of silence in everyday life: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things” (Lk 10:41). Jesus rebukes Martha, not for being busy in the kitchen—after all, she did have to prepare the meal—but for her inattentive interior attitude, betrayed by her annoyance with her sister. Since the days of Origen, some commentators have tended to heighten the contrast between the two women, to the point of seeing in them respectively the example of an active life that is too scattered and the model of the contemplative life that is lived out in silence, listening, and interior prayer. In reality, Jesus seems to sketch the outlines of a spiritual pedagogy: we should always make sure to be Mary before becoming Martha. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming literally bogged down in activism and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, p. 31.

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agitation, the unpleasant consequences of which emerge in the Gospel account: panic, fear of working without help, an inattentive interior attitude, annoyance like Martha's toward her sister, the feeling that God is leaving us alone without intervening effectively. Thus, in speaking to Martha, Jesus says: "Mary has chosen the good portion" (Lk 10:42). He reminds her of the importance of "calming and quieting the soul" (see Ps 131:2) so as to listen to one's heart. Christ tenderly invites her to stop so as to return to her heart, the place of true welcome and the dwelling place of God's silent tenderness, from which she had been led away by the activity to which she was devoting herself so noisily. All activity must be preceded by an intense life of prayer, contemplation, seeking and listening to God's will.³²

In Heaven, we will delight in the conversation of St. Joseph, the memories of Martha and Mary, and the voice of Our Lady singing an everlasting *Magnificat*. But to prepare ourselves for that day, let us ask for the gift of their attentive silence.

The Spirit of Temperance

From such an experience of inner silence, then, we learn to practice temperance in all our actions. Like the other cardinal virtues, temperance is what I like to call a "structural virtue" — one that is not usually seen or recognized in distinct acts, but is hidden behind many. It is an essential element of the skeletal structure of character and integrity. Temperance affects the ordering of our interior and exterior lives so that we grow in holiness, *striving for the things that are above* (see Col. 3:2), according to our state of life (vocation),

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

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in our particular circumstances (relationships and responsibilities), and in fidelity to our personality, *united to and transformed by Christ Jesus*. Just as practical experience is the “fertile ground” in which we cultivate the virtue of prudence, so too is temperance developed over time as we mature and integrate our experience with self-knowledge and the understanding of faith. Temperance brings rationality and measured judgment to our desires, wants, and needs. It involves not only renunciation but also abstinence, fasting, and judicious patience in making our choices. Temperance grows out of silence because it requires self-awareness and self-reflection.

As one of the cardinal virtues, temperance gives order, harmony, and measure to our desires for pleasure, especially the powerful natural bodily pleasures such as food, drink, comfort, and physical love. It also has a role in our acceptance of sadness and sorrows, assisting us to keep our eyes and hearts on the goal without being shattered by life’s blows, but rather strengthened by them. Temperance is not a “negative” virtue, but a conscious and conscientious practice of restraint and moderation that allows us to live lives of harmonious purpose, tending toward our goal—union with God—through the perfection of charity (love of God and neighbor), realized through habits of strength (virtues) that allow us to do what is good *promptly, habitually, and joyfully*. Temperance allows us to control impulses and dominate our own selves. It is both sword and shield against selfishness, gluttony, lust in all its forms, undue curiosity, and a host of other evils.

In an essay on this theme, Father William Wagner, ORC, has written:

The virtue of temperance, strictly speaking, deals with the dominion of the most basic emotions of joy (pleasure) and sadness, insofar as they are related to the sense of touch, including the sense of taste. Temperance tames man’s

non-rational, sensual appetites for food, drink and sexual activity. It has the humble but important task of moderating and bringing these appetites under the sway of reason. How wisely God has so created and ordered the universe and man's nature that the more natural an action is, the more pleasurable it is. Moreover, among the natural actions, those which are most necessary are simultaneously those which include the greatest pleasure. And by contrast, the more an action deviates from nature, the more it brings sadness. As temperance increases, pleasure is better and more easily ordered by the intellect and integrated into the divine plan. Under the guidance of temperance, delights become moral goods that are proper and fitting to the well-being of man. Sadness, too, is moderated and virtuously integrated into one's life. The emotional life is more than ever humanized and ennobled.³³

You may be picturing the image of *tempered or fire-tried steel* when thinking of this virtue. The image has merit since it calls to mind the hammer blows of the blacksmith, who creates a strong, powerful metal that can withstand stress and pressure. In a similar way our souls too must be strengthened to withstand sudden blows and the corrosion of vice and the violence of sin. However, we must remember that temperance is a living virtue, and, as such, it must grow in us throughout our lifetime; it is not something that is simply achieved, once and for all. Furthermore, temperance involves flexibility as well as resistance; for a virtuous and reasonable person makes use of prudence and grace in judging the situations and choices that present themselves. Our daily life should lead us

³³ Father William Wagner, ORC, "Temperance: Restraining Strength that Beautifies the Soul," *Opus Sanctorum Angelorum*, http://opusangelorum.org/oa_spirituality/seven_char_docs/Temperanc.html.

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not to insipidity but rather to strength in purity of heart, tranquility of conscience, clarity of mind, and sanctity of soul.

The Imitation of Mary

The model of faith and discipleship for the Church and for every individual is Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin. Throughout the pages of Scripture, she is presented to us as the all-holy and ever-obedient Woman who tabernacles the Child in her womb, ponders the unfolding of the divine plan in the events of His birth and infancy, and accompanies Him in the consummation of His mission as she stands at the foot of the Cross. She does not need the sign of water changed into wine in order to believe in Him, like his other disciples at Cana: She knows that He is flesh of her flesh and yet “True God from True God, consubstantial with the Father, by Whom all things were made.” She is present at prayer in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles and the others in tongues of flame and rushing wind (Acts 1:14; 2:1–3). She is the Mother and image of the Church, as the Second Vatican Council proclaimed her, the archetypal handmaid of the Lord, to whom all men and women must look if they would seek Christ and adore Him.

We come to know the virtues and perfections of our Mother Mary as we contemplate her in relationship to God’s plan: She is truly Daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, and Bride of God the Holy Spirit. And yet, even as we come to understand more deeply her sublime privileges and singular gifts, she calls us closer to her so that we can know her as pure maiden and loving mother. She is Queen of Angels, but Mother to us, no matter how little we are. She is near to us in our joys and in our sorrows; she knows what it is to be a widow, what it is to lose a child, and what it is to go on with a pierced heart. She

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is Mediatrix, Advocate, and Refuge because she is Mother. She comforts, heals, and teaches.

“Do whatever He tells you” (John 2:5). Sometimes I think that that one word, “whatever,” is among the most important words in the Fourth Gospel. And when I reflect on the love with which the Blessed Mother spoke it, I understand that it must be one of the most important words I ever listen to.