

How to Acquire Virtues¹

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament
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The subject of this conference is how to acquire virtues. You must become virtuous, evidently, because the holiness of our Lord is nothing other than the practice of his virtues.

First of all, how can one acquire virtues? My Sisters, virtue can be divided into three things, or three states: first, its act, then its habit, and the spirit of a virtue. We must aim at acquiring the spirit of a virtue – this requires some work, and a certain knowledge.

For example, let's take humility. I make an exterior act of humility. Here is an act that draws its merit from my intention. I can say that I made an act of humility, but I don't become humble by one, two, or three acts. To be a virtue, it must become a habit. We must be always humble, at least when the occasion presents itself, in our will. Whenever the occasion is there, the will is disposed to do it, because it loves this virtue. That's why a humble soul will never miss an opportunity. The habit itself is not enough; we must get the spirit, which is the essence of the virtue, while the habit is its form. The more we have the habit of a virtue, the more perfect is its spirit. We will practice it not only on occasion, but when we look for the occasion, when we ask for it. That's what we call the spirit of this virtue. In this way, a humble soul knows how much God loves this virtue, how it is honored. Since it is a great good for her, she sets out by desiring and encouraging the occasion; she looks forward to it, in order that her love might offer something great to God. What people of the world do for pleasure, she does for virtue. These are the three degrees of virtue: the act, the habit that forms it, and the spirit.

How can we acquire the perfection of a virtue, and practice it faithfully? Is there a rule? In his infinite wisdom, the Good Lord has so coordinated the work of the virtues that each one of us can attain them. We can be perfect in our intention, then in the habit – there is a natural act for us, and the grace of God does it through a supernatural act. Good habits are developed by repeated acts. There are some who go immediately to love: but how can you fly if you have no wings? We are terrified, our mind is frightened, our heart is not as pure as we would like it to be, and our will is afraid of sacrifices. Perfection is in the will, completely; in the habit, not at all. It's like any trade; we have to learn it.

You will not immediately succeed in practicing humiliations and loving them. You must begin by exercising the virtue that you desire – any one you want – [by exercising it] in our Lord, **in prayer, with God. What I say about humility is good for all the other virtues.** You must begin in that way; if you don't begin like that, you will never come to love that virtue – it will be only a passing act, an act without roots. On the contrary, if you begin with our Lord, you begin already in prayer to exercise this virtue in your heart, by making promises, promises for the occasion that will come.

You are like a child with its mother. Before doing big things, the mother teaches it little things: they work together, the child works with its mother; it begins like that. Likewise, we tell you: Without prayer, it is not possible to acquire the perfection of virtue. You begin badly if you don't begin with grace and prayer. You must do this for awhile. Whatever virtue that you have chosen: patience, gentleness, charity – you must begin by putting yourself in the grace of our Lord, in his charity that is complete virtue. From

¹ Number 445. *Comment il faut acquérir les vertus.* This instruction completes that of the morning: *We must die to everything with our Lord.*

there, you will be stronger for the battle. Then, you need some time to persist – one or two weeks – until your mind gets used to this thought, that your mind begins to like it. However, during that week, you cannot become distracted: your heart and your will must be there until the habit takes root. That's the first work.

When we really desire a particular virtue, the Good Lord does not place us immediately in the occasion to practice it, because we would be too weak in spite of our good will. As our Lord told St. Peter: ***You promise much, but you will not persevere*** (cf. Jn 13:38). St. Peter denied his divine master (cf. Jn 18:15-27). Our promises are more than what we can do. When we promise, it seems that all is easy; in prayer the Good Lord carries us, giving us consolations in our prayer; he is happy with us, even if he knows our weakness – he does not immediately place us in occasions where we would fall, relying too much on our own strength.

What does the Good Lord do? He prepares us through sacrifice. He does this through temptations and trials – that is why we get strong temptations sometimes during prayer. The Good Lord is strengthening you, because you would have failed in an actual occasion. The Good Lord permits your mind to be frightened, and your will as well. When you start working with the Good Lord, you should not be too frightened by temptations, especially when they come during prayer: the evil is not from the outside – it is better that the struggles take place first within. When your temptations frighten you, especially against the holy virtue [of purity], recognize only one thing: the Good Lord wants to show you your weakness and poverty – he wants to show you the temptation so that, if some day you would be exposed to it in the world, you will not have it within you.

[...]

The Good Lord creates occasions. Two saints make each other suffer – neither of them sins, but the Good Lord allows one to make the other suffer. There is a (natural) antipathy, a thorn between these two hearts – who placed it there? You did not do it; it was the Good Lord. Not only that, you must also see the occasions that the Good Lord gives you in his fatherly love. You will notice very clearly that you are the one missing the occasion, not God. My poor Daughters, if you were more generous, you would look for occasions to give a death-blow to self-love. How happy we are when we have a good opportunity, when the Good Lord has arranged for a striking blow! He gives these only occasionally in our life. Although the Good Lord is generous with his gifts, he is sparing with his graces, because he is afraid of our weakness. Now, I've shown you the way: begin with prayer and ordinary occasions; if you are ready to go further, then ask for some opportunity – ask for what costs the most.

Now, there are three degrees in the practice of virtues.

One must begin by eliminating or lessening our vices. This is called the negative combat. The enemies of humility are pride, vanity, and jealousy: these petty faults vary according to each person. Attack the enemy that is proper to you, that prevents you from moving. Begin by cleansing yourself – one can make more progress in prayer than in combat. In order to fight these occasions in prayer, to fight them without any discussion, take a week – or two weeks if you prefer – with generosity and humility. When you are well disposed, set aside everything else and look for the root cause. When you have found it, remove this worm. If you don't do this interiorly, what will happen? Our heart is so weak and our will so twisted – we will live with it for years.

We must begin with the exterior – this is faster, and more encouraging. Besides, there is another reason: since we can scandalize and cause others to sin, we must begin with what is most urgent. When there is a fire in the house, we begin by cutting out what is feeding it: if the fire has reached a beam or the roof, we must cut everything. When the fire is inside, it cannot be extinguished. Begin, as I said earlier, with prayer, then with combat, and, if we have a little more good will, with a strong blow. Because, my

Sisters, remember this: **the defects of the mind can be corrected by our reason; but the will and the heart are blind faculties that can be corrected only by a strong blow.**

For example, take a timid person, with whom you cannot reason, who says: I see some frightful things; see, there's a lion, a wolf. – Come, come with me. – I dare not. – See, it's only a rock. – Oh! I was so afraid. Sensuality does not reason: we must take it by force, by sacrifice – it is settled in one blow. If you have a tooth-ache, as long as you don't get upset, it will continue. If you get upset, you say: I will have it extracted! [In other words, if you get angry, you act upon it]. You will go to have it extracted, and that's the end. This is what happens in the exercise of mortification: I'm afraid of certain practices of humility, such as kneeling, or kissing someone's feet. – Our Lord did it; the saints did it; you are not a saint. – It's not required. – Whenever you argue with the feeling of fear, you will never succeed. Throw yourself immediately on your knees – you should act right away, and not reason so much.

It's the same with the other practices. It's useless to argue: you will get more upset, since your nerves will become irritated. The angels don't argue. Here's someone you meet in passing: tell him something good rather than something injurious. [...] **Here is the rule: for defects of feelings, we must confront them; for defects of the mind, we must reason them out.** That's the point: the heart cannot reason, it won't work that way – the Gordian knot must be cut, as the ancients would say. There are some who try to reason out, but later they have no courage to act.

Keep in mind that we must correct ourselves. We must never stop, out of politeness [to our human nature!] You would not be good servants. You would simply be enjoying the fruits of your struggles. You must remember that you are working for our Lord. Some imagine that they no longer have any defects, that all has been done, and that they no longer have any dirt on their face, no more stains. What must we do? Acts of virtue to glorify our Lord – may your gentleness and your modesty be fruits of your humility, but (be sure they are) good fruits that will be preserved for everlasting life.

How should we proceed? You must place yourself in the love and the glory of our Lord, in your salvation if you prefer: you can put yourself in the goodness of our Lord. As you cultivate a plant, you must develop the habit of a virtue: that's what we call the purgative way, the illuminative way. There's another, in which you must unite yourself to the mind and heart of our Lord by this virtue, in such a way that you deify it in him, so that you might unite yourself to him through this virtue. He said: *Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart* (Mt 11:29). Therefore, he is humility: hence, by entering into humility, you enter into Jesus humble of heart. Through him, you unite yourself; you get to love this virtue through him. When we reach that point, that's good, because we are attaining union through love.

Concentrate on one virtue: take one; love is [the source of] all the virtues: it crowns them all – love has all the qualities. How will you know that it is our Lord who is working? By his love. Take these branches and eat these fruits: therefore, take humility – if you prefer another virtue, then take it. These rules are simple – I have summarized for you some [long and] discouraging dissertations. But, there is one thing that I cannot include, and that is the grace of God. By your prayers and good will, if you can do that, what joy you will have! I don't know how the devil works: unfortunately, we spend a good part of our life simply cleansing and purifying ourselves – we are so lazy, and the devil keeps us busy with our defects, focusing our attention on specks of dust. Correct your external faults, you must eliminate them as much as possible. **As for the internal, begin rather through love** – for a small evil that you would correct, you would lose an immense good. - Internally, live from love for this virtue, because it is the love of our Lord.



Points for reflection:

This instruction is a summary of the traditional teaching about the spiritual life, “the three ways”: the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. Take note of the phrase: **“Love is all the virtues put together.”**