
The Synergy of Ascetic Effort & Grace

Synergy

For the grace of the Spirit gives eternal life and unspeakable joy in heaven, but it is the love of the toils because of the faith that makes the soul worthy of receiving the gifts and enjoying the grace. When a just act and grace of the Spirit coincide, they fill the soul into which they come with a blessed life; but, separated from each other, they provide no gain for the soul.

For the grace of God does not naturally frequent souls which are fleeing from salvation, and the power of human virtue is not sufficient in itself to cause the souls not sharing in grace to ascend to the beauty of life. For it says: 'Unless the Lord build the house and keep the city, he labours in vain that builds it and watches in vain who keeps it.'¹ And again: 'For not with their own sword did they conquer the land; nor did their own arm make them victorious (although they used their swords and arms in their struggles), but it was your right hand and your arm, and the light of your countenance.'²

What does this mean? It means that the Lord from on high enters into an alliance with the doers, and, at the same time, it means that it is not necessary for men considering human efforts to think that the entire crown rests upon their struggles, but it is necessary for them to refer their hopes for their goal to the will of God.³

The insufficiency of human effort alone

So wicked and hard to cure and strong are those things possessed in the depths of our souls that it is not possible to rub them out and to remove them through human efforts and virtue alone unless through prayer we take the power of the Spirit as an ally and, in this way, conquer the evil which is playing the tyrant within us, as the Spirit teaches us through the voice of David: 'Cleanse me from my unknown faults, and from wanton sin spare your servant.'^{4 5}

¹ Cf. Psalm 126:1

² Psalm 43:4

³ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp.131-2

⁴ Psalm 18:13,14

⁵ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.137

Ascetic efforts are “the flowers of labours and the fruits of the Spirit” and not to be credited solely to the individual

It is necessary to endure the toils of prayer and fasting and the other works with much pleasure and love and hope, and to believe that activities are the flowers of labours and the fruits of the Spirit. If anyone imputes these things to himself and gives himself entire credit for them, in the place of the undefiled fruits, there grows up in such a person false pretension and pride, and these passions, like some blight growing in the souls of those easily satisfied, destroy and nullify the labours.⁶

Despite his ceaseless effort, the ascetic never thinks for a minute that he has made himself worthy of God

For the person who desires [the perfect love of Christ] and looks to the promise above does not stand elated because things have been set right by fasting or by keeping watch or by zealously pursuing any of the other virtues. Being full of divine longing and looking anxiously toward the One who is calling, he considers all that he suffers in attaining Him small and unworthy of the prize. He struggles valiantly to the end of his life, matching toil with toil and virtue with virtue, until he establishes himself as an honour to God because of his deeds, not thinking for a minute that he has made himself worthy of God.⁷

“Love of God does not come to us simply or automatically”

It is necessary, indeed, for each of you to put into your souls fear and love as a kind of strong and firm foundation, and to refresh it with good deeds and sufficient prayer. Love of God does not come to us simply or automatically, but through many sufferings and great concern in cooperation with Christ, as Wisdom has said: ‘If you shall seek her like silver and like hidden treasures search her out: then will you understand the fear of the Lord: the knowledge of God you will find.’^{8 9}

⁶ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.155

⁷ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.144

⁸ Proverbs 2:4,5

⁹ *On the Christian Mode of Life* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p.148