

The Predominant Fault

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AFTER treating of the principal sins to be avoided and of their roots and consequences to be mortified, it is fitting that we discuss in a special way the predominant fault that exists in each of us. That we may proceed with order, we must first see in what this fault consists, then how to recognize or discern it, and lastly how to combat it.

DEFINITION OF THE PREDOMINANT FAULT

The predominant fault is the defect in us that tends to prevail over the others, and thereby over our manner of feeling, judging, sympathizing, willing, and acting. It is a defect that has in each of us an intimate relation to our individual temperament. [1] There are temperaments inclined to effeminacy, indolence, sloth, gluttony, and sensuality. Others are inclined especially to anger and pride. We do not all climb the same slope toward the summit of perfection: those who are effeminate by temperament must by prayer, grace, and virtue become strong; and those who are naturally strong, to the point of easily becoming severe, must, by working at themselves and by grace, become gentle.

Before this progressive transformation of our temperament, the predominant defect in the soul often makes itself felt. It is our domestic enemy, dwelling in our interior; for, if it develops, it may succeed in completely ruining the work of grace or the interior life. At times it is like a crack in a wall that seems to be solid but is not so; like a crevice, imperceptible at times but deep, in the beautiful facade of a building, which a vigorous jolt may shake to the foundations. For example, an antipathy, an instinctive aversion to someone, may, if it is not watched over and corrected by right reason, the spirit of faith, and charity, produce disasters in the soul and lead it to grave injustice. By yielding to such an antipathy, it does itself far more harm than it does its neighbor, for it is much more harmful to commit injustice than to be the object of it.

The predominant fault is so much the more dangerous as it often compromises our principal good point, which is a happy inclination of our nature that ought to develop and to be increased by grace. For example, a man is naturally inclined to gentleness; but if by reason of his predominant fault, which may be effeminacy, his gentleness degenerates into weakness, into excessive indulgence, he may even reach the complete loss of energy. Another, on the contrary, is naturally inclined to fortitude, but if he gives free rein to his irascible temperament, fortitude in him degenerates into unreasonable violence, the cause of every type of disorder.

In every man there is a mixture of good and bad inclinations; there is a predominant fault and also a natural quality. If we are in the state of grace, we have a special attraction of grace, which generally perfects first of all what is best in our nature, and then radiates over that which is less good. Some are thus more inclined toward contemplation, others toward action. Particular care must be taken that the predominant fault does not snuff out our principal natural quality or our special attraction of grace. Otherwise our soul would resemble a field of wheat invaded by tares or cockle, of which the Gospel speaks. And we have an adversary, the devil, who seeks to foster the growth of our predominant fault that he may place us in conflict with those who work with us in the Lord's field. Christ Himself tells us: "The kingdom of Heaven is likened to a man that sowed good seed in his field. But while men were asleep, his enemy came and oversowed cockle among the wheat and went his way." [2] Christ explains that the enemy is the devil, [3] who seeks to destroy the work of God by creating disunion among those who, in a holy manner, ought to collaborate in the same work for eternity. He is skillful in exaggerating in our eyes the defects of our neighbor, in transforming a grain of sand into a mountain, in setting up, as it were, a magnifying glass in our imagination, that we may become irritated at our brethren instead of working with them. Considering all this, we can see what evil may spring up in each of us from our principal fault if we are not most attentive to it. At times it is like a devouring worm in a beautiful fruit.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE PREDOMINANT FAULT

Evidently it is of primary importance that we recognize our predominant fault and have no illusions about it. This is so much the more necessary as our adversary, the enemy of our soul, knows it quite well and makes use of it to stir up trouble in and about us. In the citadel of our interior life, which is defended by the different virtues, the predominant fault is the weak spot, undefended by the theological and moral virtues. The enemy of souls seeks exactly this easily vulnerable point in each one, and he finds it without difficulty. Therefore, we must recognize it also.

But how can we discern it? For beginners who are sincere, this is quite easy. But later the predominant fault is less apparent, for it tries to hide itself and to put on the appearances of a virtue: pride clothes itself in the outward appearances of magnanimity, and pusillanimity seeks to cover itself with those of humility. Yet we must succeed in discerning the predominant fault, for if we do not know it, we cannot fight it; and if we do not fight it, we have no true interior life.

That we may discern it, we must first of all ask God for light: "Lord, make me know the obstacles I more or less consciously place in the way of the working of Thy grace in me. Then give me the strength to rid myself of them, and, if I am negligent in doing so, do Thou deign to free me from them, though I should suffer greatly."

After thus asking sincerely for light, we must make a serious examination. How? By asking ourselves: "Toward what do my most ordinary preoccupations tend, in the morning when I awake, or when I am alone? Where do my thoughts and desires go spontaneously?" We should keep in mind that the predominant fault, which easily commands all our passions, takes on the appearance of a virtue and, if it is not opposed, it may lead to impenitence. Judas fell into impenitence through avarice, which he did not will to dominate; it led him to impenitence like a violent wind that hurls a ship on the rocks.

A second step in discerning the predominant fault, is to ask ourselves: "What is generally the cause or source of my sadness and joy? What is the general motive of my actions, the ordinary origin of my sins, especially when it is not a question of an accidental sin, but rather a succession of sins or a state of resistance to grace, notably when this resistance persists for several days and

leads me to omit my exercises of piety?" Then we must seek sincerely to know the motive of the soul's refusal to return to the good.

In addition, we must ask ourselves: "What does my director think of this? In his opinion, what is my predominant fault? He is a better judge than I am." No one, in fact, is a good judge in his own case; here self-love deceives us. Often our director has discovered this fault before we have; perhaps he has tried more than once to talk to us about it. Have we not sought to excuse ourselves? Excuses come promptly, for the predominant fault easily excites all our passions: it commands them as a master, and they obey instantly. Thus, wounded self-love immediately excites irony, anger, impatience.

Moreover, when the predominant fault has taken root in us, it experiences a particular repugnance to being unmasked and fought, because it wishes to reign in us. This condition sometimes reaches such a point that, when our neighbor accuses us of this fault, we reply that we have many bad habits, but truly not the one mentioned. [4]

The predominant fault may also be recognized by the temptations that our enemy arouses most frequently in us, for he attacks us especially through this weak point in our soul.

Lastly, in moments of true fervor the inspirations of the Holy Ghost ask us for the sacrifice of this particular fault.

If we have sincere recourse to these different means of discernment, it will not be too difficult for us to recognize this interior enemy which we bear within ourselves and which enslaves us: "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin," [5] says our Lord. It is like an interior prison that we bear about with us wherever we go. We must earnestly aspire to deliverance.

It would be a great grace for us if we were to meet a Saint who would say: "This is your predominant fault and this your principal attraction of grace which you must follow generously to reach union with God." In this way Christ applied the name, "sons of thunder" (Boanerges) [6] to the young Apostles James and John who wished to call down fire from Heaven on a city that had refused to receive them. We read in St. Luke: "He rebuked them,

saying: You know not of what spirit you are. The Son of man came not to destroy souls, but to save." [7] In the school of the Savior, the Boanerges became such gentle souls that toward the end of his life St. John the Evangelist could say only one thing: "My little children, ... love one another." [8] When asked why he always repeated the same exhortation, he used to reply: "This is His commandment. ... And he that keepeth His commandments, abideth in Him and He in him." John had lost nothing of his ardor, of his thirst for justice, but it had become spiritualized and was accompanied by a great gentleness.

HOW TO COMBAT THE PREDOMINANT FAULT

Because the predominant fault is our principal interior enemy, we must combat it. When it is conquered, temptations are no longer very dangerous, but are rather occasions of progress.

The predominant fault is not conquered, however, as long as there is no true progress in piety or the interior life, as long as the soul has not attained to a true and stable fervor of will; in other words, to that promptness of the will in the service of God which is, according to St. Thomas, the essence of true devotion. [9] In this spiritual warfare, we must have recourse to three principal means: prayer, examination of conscience, and a sanction.

Our prayer must be sincere: "Lord, show me the principal obstacle to my sanctification, the one that hinders me from profiting by graces and also by the exterior difficulties that would work to the good of my soul if I had greater recourse to Thee when they arise." The Saints went so far as to say, as St. Louis Bertrand did: "Lord, here burn, here cut, and dry up in me all that hinders me from going to Thee, that Thou mayest spare me in eternity." Blessed Nicholas of Flue used to pray: "Lord, take from me everything that hinders me from going to Thee. Give me all that will lead me to Thee. Take me from myself and give me to Thyself."

This prayer does not dispense us from self-examination; on the contrary, it leads to it.

And, as St. Ignatius says, it is especially suitable for beginners to write down each week the number of times they have yielded to their predominant fault which seeks to reign in them like a despot. It is easier to laugh fruitlessly at this method than to apply it fruitfully. If we keep track of the money we spend and receive, it is still more useful to know what we lose and what we gain from the spiritual point of view for eternity.

It is also highly proper to impose a sanction, or penance, on ourselves each time we fall into this defect. This penance may take the form of a prayer, a moment of silence, an exterior or an interior mortification. It makes reparation for the fault and satisfaction for the penalty due it. At the same time we acquire more circumspection for the future. Thus many persons have cured themselves of the habit of cursing by imposing on themselves the obligation of giving an alms in reparation each time they fail.

Before conquering our predominant fault, our virtues are often, to speak more properly, natural good inclinations rather than true and solid virtues that have taken root in us. Prior to victory over this fault, the fountain of graces is not yet adequately opened on our soul, for we still seek ourselves too much and do not live sufficiently for God.

In addition, we must overcome pusillanimity, which leads us to think that our predominant fault cannot be eradicated. With grace we can overcome it, because, as the Council of Trent says, quoting St. Augustine: "God never commands the impossible; but in giving us His precepts, He commands us to do what we can, and to ask for the grace to accomplish what we cannot do."
[10]

It has been said that the spiritual combat is in this case more necessary than victory, for, if we dispense ourselves from this struggle, we abandon the interior life, we no longer tend toward perfection. We must not make peace with our faults. Moreover, credence must not be given to our adversary when he seeks to persuade us that this struggle is suitable only for the Saints that they may reach the highest regions of spirituality. The truth is that without this persevering and efficacious struggle we cannot sincerely aspire to Christian perfection, toward which the supreme precept makes it a duty for all of us to tend. This precept is, in fact, without limit: "Thou shalt love the

Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself." [11]

Without this struggle, there is no interior joy or peace, for the tranquillity of order or peace comes from the spirit of sacrifice. It alone establishes us interiorly in order by putting to death all that is inordinate in us. [12]

Lastly, charity, the love of God and of souls in God, finally prevails completely over the predominant fault; it then truly occupies the first place in our soul and reigns there effectively.

Mortification, which makes our principal fault disappear, delivers us and assures the predominance in our soul of our true natural qualities and of our special attraction of grace. Thus little by little, we grow to be ourselves, in the broad sense of the word, that is, to be supernaturally ourselves minus our defects. We do not have to copy in a more or less servile manner another's qualities, or enter a uniform mold that is the same for all. There is a great variety in human personalities, just as no two leaves or flowers are perfectly similar. But a person's temperament must not be crushed; it must be transformed while keeping whatever is good in it. In our temperament, our character must be the imprint of the acquired and infused virtues, especially of the theological virtues. Then, instead of instinctively referring everything to self, as is the case when the predominant fault reigns, we will turn everything back to God, think almost continually of Him, and live for Him alone; at the same time we will lead to Him those with whom we come into contact.