

WILLIAM LAW ON THE HOLY SPIRIT.

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THE writer of the following pages has never met with so forcible a lesson on cherishing the Presence of the Holy Spirit as William Law offers us in the ninth chapter of his *Christian Perfection*.¹ It may be well to state at the outset that the devout author is not so foolish as to suppose that entire perfection of character can be attained in this life. There are persons who have yielded to this error, and they have usually been undeceived by a grievous fall. Law, on the other hand, remarks "that Christian tempers and virtues must never be regarded as already won by the seeker of them, there will always be need of watchfulness and prayer and effort, or we shall fall back. Life will always be a struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil." But it is our duty to aim at the highest, though here below we can never fully reach it. Christians should maintain a continuous purpose to seek the highest right, in thought, word and action. With this in view it is all-important to desire the constant Presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit for the progressive development of the Christian character. It is not enough to avoid actual sin, an attitude of daily conduct is required that will *invite* the Presence and Grace of the Spirit. Law shows by various racy examples that in his day the usual practice fell lamentably short of such an aim. Can we say that there is no danger for us now?

It is the usual belief of the Church, and the teaching of Scripture, that the Grace of the Spirit is not given once for all, as a provision for the whole of life, but in successive supplies, as we read in St. John, "grace for grace," which means continual accessions of grace.

How are we to obtain these gifts? Of course they cannot be had, as all will admit, by those who live in wilful sins, which grieve the Holy Spirit of God, yet there are people who are regular attendants at Church, and even at Holy Communion, and who would be shocked at the idea of anything definitely sinful, who are unconscious of their defects, and overlook the fact that they are careless of their thoughts and words, and combine worldly habits with their Church Services.

¹ The first of his practical treatises, published 1726.

Now although the Holy Spirit comes at times as a "rushing mighty wind,"¹ yet His usual action is gentle and delicate, "a still, small Voice,"² so as not to force our free will. Therefore any allowed inconsistency, short of actual sin, is unfavourable to the coming to us of His gracious Presence.

Law bases his remarks on the passage, "the wind bloweth where it listeth,"³ etc., and holds that the birth given by the Spirit to the soul is a continuous process, as St. Paul says, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,"⁴ showing that the spiritual sequence of baptism needs to be a progressive development of the Christian character in each individual soul. Shall we place ourselves in an attitude favourable to the influence of the Spirit, or shall we not? If we desire to practise this, what are we to avoid, and at what are we to aim? We may divide the suggestions that Law gives into two kinds: negative on the one hand, positive on the other. It must be our endeavour to remove all hindrances to Divine Grace. Only a few such faults can be indicated here. One of them is self-satisfaction. The prophet Isaiah, when the heavenly vision of the perfect Holiness of God was unfolded to him, exclaimed, "I am a man of unclean lips."⁵ St. Peter, naturally self-confident, cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."⁶ Further, an excessive attention to the cares of this life, as well as unreasonable pleasures, must be avoided. Our Lord mentions both of them together as choking the growth of the soul's life (Luke viii. 14).

Law remarks that we should choose those pleasures that do not soften the mind, or make us less watchful against temptation. The vanity of a mind given up to trifles needs to be cured.

Our ordinary conversation and talk should not hinder the presence in our hearts of the Spirit of God.⁷ We should never say anything against other people behind their backs.

Indulgence in idleness and luxury must be cast out. "Did we desire to set ourselves in the fairest posture for the Devil to hit us, we ought to choose that of idleness and indulgence. We have to deny and renounce the whole corruption of our nature, and resign ourselves up entirely to the Spirit of God."

¹ Acts ii. 2.

² 1 Kings xix. 12.

³ John iii. 8.

⁴ Gal. iv. 19.

⁵ Isaiah vi. 5.

⁶ Luke v. 8.

⁷ Eph. iv. 29, 30.

No words or look or act inconsistent with the constantly pervading element of religion should be allowed.

As regards efforts of a positive kind, we are to consider "whether our ways of life and thought are such as to suit with the Holy Spirit, and invite His assistance." With Law, and all spiritual writers, humility is a primary condition. We are to realize our nothingness in the Presence of an All Holy God, and also of many better and abler Christians than ourselves. Self-deception is easy. "Humility and every other virtue is never in a complete state so that a man can say that he has finished his task in such and such a virtue." For instance, the founder of the Franciscans gave them the title of *Fratres Minores*, as an incitement to lowliness, but the time came when they petitioned the authorities that on account of their deeper humility they should take precedence of the Dominicans in processions.

Again, Christianity calls us to a mortified attitude of soul, to exercise self-restraint and self-discipline and self-denial, which are due from us as a practice of our repentance. And to follow our Lord it is very necessary to take up our Daily Cross. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." ¹ What can be more senseless and absurd, to see a Christian ever acting in any other consideration than as a Christian? He is senseless when he indulges a thought or a motion of his heart where he cannot say, "I do this as a Christian, as suitable to that state in which Christianity has placed me."

"For Devotion, when it is real, is a constant state and temper of the mind, and not merely saying words at special times." We are to conduct ourselves in all our behaviour with such a spirit of wisdom and piety as may make the Holy Ghost delight to dwell in us."

And of course we are not to think only of our own spiritual progress, but to bear in mind how our conduct affects others. Our ordinary temper and manner of common life, as Law reminds us, "affects other people, and either hardens them into sin, or awakens them to a sense of piety. . . . We can neither live well or ill to ourselves alone, but must of necessity do either good or harm to others by our manner of conversation. We have not the powers that belonged to Christ, but it is open to us, and required of us, to live

¹ Luke ix. 23.

in the spirit and temper of His life, and we can all do something for the salvation of souls. Even one who is ever so poor and mean can by living an exemplary life, largely contribute to the salvation of others. And though Christians are not Redeemers of the World, yet they have their part to act, which though it be a different part, must not be performed with a different spirit, but with such obedience to God, such regard to His glory, for such ends of salvation, for such good of others, and with all such holy dispositions, as our blessed Saviour manifested in every part of His life. . . . The Blessed Jesus came into the world to save the world; now we must enter into this same design, and make salvation the greatest business of our lives, and though we cannot, like Him, contribute towards it, yet we must contribute all that we can, and make the salvation of ourselves and others the one great care of our lives."

Much of what has been said may seem depressing; but this is not so in Law's view. Those who have cast the anchor of Faith on the shore of eternity can best endure the sorrows and afflictions of mortal life, and as regards the lesser evils that make up the larger part of our trials in daily existence Law remarks: "Those who do not think it necessary to apply to Religion in all the common and ordinary disquiets of life, make a serious mistake; for had we but learnt to bear troubles and disappointments because we are Christians and children of God, we should find few troubles that would have any great trial in them. We should indeed make it our endeavour to keep ourselves easy, thankful and cheerful, by making religion the measure and standard of all our thoughts and judgments, in all the common chances of life. He that lives in the spirit and temper of devotion, whose heart is always full of God, lives at the top of human happiness, and is the farthest removed from all the vanities and vexations which disturb and weary the minds of men who are devoted to the world."

St. Paul tells us that the "fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace."¹

Shall we take two or three homely instances of how, in the present day, we may fail to invite the Holy Spirit?

Imagine some parishioners meeting at afternoon tea. They are communicants, but they break the injunction, "Speak not evil one of another, brethren"²: they talk of the faults and defects of their fellow churchpeople.

¹ Gal. v. 22.

² James iv. 11.

Or again, books come from the circulating library. There are novels, not only good ones, but some that touch on subjects that Christians should not entertain. Yet suppose they are read. Is this to invite the Holy Spirit?

Thirdly, we read in the Revelation, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day."¹ Yet there are Christians who, when they have attended early Communion, will spend the day in a secular manner. Cannot persons who have some leisure time in the week give one day in seven to the things which belong to their peace, to the study of the Bible and of the great devotional books of the Church? To do this would be to invite the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord declares, "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me."² Through Him and in Him we become partakers of the Holy Spirit. He says, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter (that is, Strengthening Guide), that He may abide with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him, but ye know Him for He dwelleth with you and shall be in you. The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My Name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth. . . . He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you." "Quench not the Spirit,"³ says St. Paul. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."⁴ "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind."⁵

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¹ Rev. i. 10.

² John xiv. 6, 16, 26; xvi. 13, 14.

³ 1 Thess. v. 19.

⁴ Rom. viii. 14.

⁵ Eph. iv. 23.

