

On the Predominant Fault

There is, in everyman, a vice of evil inclination which is called the Predominant Fault (St. Ignatius) or Ruling Passion (St. Francis de Sales). This is the cause and root of all other faults within us.

It's as though it wages war against even the most confirmed virtues, and it is the greatest obstacle to purity of heart and perfection. If you can discover the master passion of your life—that which rules all the other affections and passions, then you will have made a real step in the interior life. And if you can begin to strike at the heart, or the root of that passion, then you will make great progress in the interior life. But first, here are two things you will need to do for the long run:

1. Do not put any limit on the duration of your struggle. Some are tried at the beginning, others are tried in the middle, others tried at the end, and some are tried their whole lives, according to the providence of God.
2. Do not despair of success. The enemy hopes to accomplish at least one thing in all temptations, viz., discouragement. He'll do anything to get you to give up trying.

That's for the long run. Here are some things for the short run:

1. Try to acquire the habit of a daily examination of conscience. Concentrate your examination on your ruling passion. Use the exam to study the means to know, control, subdue, and eradicate it. Try not to omit looking at that one fault, with every examination. When I say study it, there many things I could bring up, but here is one that you might not have considered. Look at your position from the point of view of the enemy. If you were in your Enemy's shoes, where would you strike?
2. Look at your other faults too, until the whole gamut of your battle in the spiritual combat is examined. Look at the battle from every angle, swiftly, but deliberately. Size it up quickly like a military commander, or getting ready for a Rugby match. As you progress, you will learn which faults need more attention, and which faults should be laid aside for a time. No one can correct every fault at once.

One of the things we need to remember in this battle is that the enemy cannot do anything to us, unless he has obtained permission by God. And when the enemy tempts us, or does anything against us, it is always by the just use of power. Strange isn't it, that the devil can exercise power only in justice? St. Gregory the Great writes in his Commentary on the Book of Job, "But we must know that the will of Satan is always evil, but his power is never unjust, for his will he derives from himself, but his power he derives from God. For what he himself unrighteously desires to do, God does not allow to be done except with justice." (I. 11. 17)

3. Not contenting ourselves with reviewing only our actual sins, we examine our weaknesses. We learn that halfway measures in this fight rarely succeed. The saints did some rather extreme things in order to fight the good fight.
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4. After looking at the weakness, look at the progress of the opposite virtue of that great

fault, and see how you are doing in it, rejoicing in the grace God gave you for some success.

5. Look how your strategy is doing. Strategy is long-term planning, tactics are the decisions made in the field. Ordinarily, your strategy should be planned with advice, in spiritual direction. Again, put no limitation on the duration of the war. This war is for the rest of your life. Your Predominant Fault will not go away, any more than your bones will go away.
6. Remember that persistent method and perseverance will work miracles. Just one fault eliminated per year will give tremendous progress. Just think of the progress to heaven you will make if you just get rid of one fault per year.
7. Earnestness, sincerity, simplicity, generosity, and humility in the particular examination will bring down a flood of grace from God. By the same token, God will resist the proud, the cynical, the skeptical, the stiff-necked, the arrogant, and the contemptuous.
8. Do not dwell on your failures very long. The daily examination of conscience should take no more than a minute.

Lastly, how do you determine what your predominant fault is? There are several questions we can ask to determine it:

1. What weakness in my character do I most strive to conceal, and which pains me the most to bring to the light?
2. To what object does my thought turn most frequently, when it is not turned toward God? What involuntary thoughts present themselves most frequently to my mind?
3. What is the weak point in me which would most likely and easily give way under the pressure of temptation?
4. Above all, what does the Holy Ghost tell me of myself in time of meditation, retreat, thanksgiving for Mass or examination of conscience, by urging me to correct such-and-such a defect?

God grant us all the grace to fight against the Predominant Fault, and by so doing make an excellent Lent.