

FENELON

For piety, and talent, and real saintliness of character, few names have ranked so high as that of Fenelon, the celebrated Archbishop of Cambray, or Cambrai, in France. Although the Pope, the King of France, and the greatest literary genius of the period combined and conspired to ruin Fenelon, his sweet Christian spirit and commanding genius triumphed over all and made him one of the most loved of men. Not only in France but throughout the world, his name is today a household synonym for piety.

Francois de Salignac de la Mothe Fenelon was of noble birth. He was a younger son of Count Pons de Salignac, a Gascon nobleman, and was born in the Castle of Fenelon, in Perigord, France, in 1651. He was carefully trained at home until twelve years of age, when he was sent to the University of Cahors, and afterwards to the College of Plessis at Paris. His mind was very early turned to the subject of religion, and at the age of fifteen he preached his first sermon. His theological studies were continued at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, the Principal of which was the celebrated and pious Abbe Tronson, a man renowned for his piety, talents, and learning. Francois became a favorite pupil of Tronson's, who gave him the most careful intellectual and spiritual training. From Tronson, who is often classed among the great Mystics, he doubtless imbibed many of the views concerning inward Christian experience and real consecration to God which afterward made him so eminent a champion and exponent of the higher Christian life. In 1675, at the age of twenty-four, he was ordained a priest, and for three years he ministered in the parish of St. Sulpice. Before his ordination he was strongly inclined to go as a missionary to Canada or to the Levant, but his uncle kept him from doing so, although he seems to have visited Canada for a brief period.

Early in life Fenelon's remarkable genius and talents began to display themselves in devotional, philosophical, and educational books and writings. Some of his books on educational subjects are greatly prized even at the present time. The King of France, Louis XIV., was so attracted by the qualifications of Fenelon that in 1689 he was entrusted with the education of the young Duke of Burgundy, grandson of the King and heir apparent to the throne of France. The Duke was very headstrong, self-willed and passionate; but through the instruction and influence of Fenelon he gained the mastery of himself, and would doubtless have been a great and good king had he ever mounted the throne. After serving five years as tutor of the Duke, Fenelon was made Archbishop of Cambray, in 1694.

At a time when he was honored by the King of France, and rapidly rising to fame, Fenelon became acquainted with Madam Guyon, and through her prayers and conversation he was led into a deeper,, richer, and fuller Christian experience which made him willing to sacrifice anything in the service of Christ. He had often heard of the piety and talents of Madam Guyon, who was suffering great persecution from members of the Roman Catholic Church on account of her teachings concerning a real crucifixion of the self life and absolute acquiescence in the will of God. While passing through the old home of Madam Guyon, on his return from a mission to the Protestants of Poitou, he made many inquiries concerning her, and heard so much about her piety that he determined to visit her, although he knew that it might cost him the King's favor and also his reputation and position to do so. No doubt the Lord put it into his heart to visit her under such trying circumstances. He met her first at the village of Beine, at the home of the Duchess of Charost. They conversed for some time on the subject of inward experience, the subject which interested them most. The experience of Madam Guyon made a deep impression upon the mind of Fenelon. Next day he visited her again at the home of the Duchess of Bethune, in Paris. They spent some time in prayer together, but Fenelon was not yet filled with the Spirit, although his eyes were opened to see more clearly what the Lord had in store for him.

During the next eight years a great burden of prayer for Fenelon rested upon the heart of Madam Guyon, and then the agony of soul passed away and she found inward rest. Near the end of this period of travail of soul, she wrote Fenelon a letter dated Paris, November, 1688, telling of her burden of prayer for him and urging him to make a complete surrender of his will to God. In this letter she says, "For seven days past I have been in a state of continual prayer for you. I call it prayer, although the state of mind has been somewhat peculiar. I have desired nothing in particular. But my soul presenting continually its object before God, that God's will might be accomplished and God's glory might be manifested in it, has been like a lamp that burns without ceasing." Later, in the same letter, she says, "It seems to me that the designs of mercy, which God has upon you, are not yet accomplished. Your soul is not yet brought into full harmony with God, and therefore I suffer. My suffering is great. My prayer is not yet heard. The prayer which I offer for you is not the work of the creature. It is not a prayer self-made, formal, and outward. It is the voice of the Holy Ghost uttering itself in the soul, an inward voice which man cannot prevent or control. The Holy Ghost prays with effect. When the inward voice ceases, it is a sign that the grace which has been supplicated has been sent down. I have been in this state of mind before for other souls, but never with such struggle of spirit, and never for so long a time. God's designs will be accomplished upon you. I speak with confidence; but I think it cannot be otherwise." The next day she wrote him again. "So deeply absorbing has been the application of my soul to God on your account that I have slept but little during the past night. And at this moment I can give an idea of my state only by saying that my spirit, in the interest which it feels for your entire renovation, burns and consumes itself within me. "I have an inward conviction that the obstacle, which has hitherto separated you from God, is diminishing and passing away. Certain it is, that my soul burns to feel a spiritual likeness and union with yours, which it has not previously felt."

Fenelon was humble in spirit, and hungered for a deeper spiritual experience. Although a giant in intellect, he was willing to learn from a little child. His first great struggle was to be absolutely willing to utterly abandon himself to the will of God; for as Madam Guyon says, "A will surrendered is not always a will abandoned." Many who have surrendered their wills to God are still anxious to carry out their own plans and ambitions, and are greatly vexed when their plans are thwarted. Fenelon seems finally to have abandoned himself completely to the will of God, but he struggled long before realizing the experience for which his soul was hungering and thirsting. He sometimes met Madam Guyon, and frequently corresponded with her concerning the experience which he so much desired. Finally Madam Guyon wrote him a letter concerning the steps necessary for the entire crucifixion of the life of self. Fenelon seems to have grasped them intellectually very clearly, as we learn from his summary of them in a subsequent letter to Madam Guyon. In this letter he says, " I think, Madame, that I understand in general, the statements in the paper which you had the kindness to send me; in which you describe the various experiences which characterize the soul's return to God by means of simple or pure faith. I will endeavor, however, to recapitulate some of your views, as they present themselves to me, that I may learn whether I correctly understand them.

"I. The first step which is taken by the soul that has formally and permanently given itself to God, would be to bring what may be called its external powers — that is, its natural appetites and propensities, — under subjection. The religious state of the soul at such times is characterized by that simplicity which shows its sincerity, and that is sustained by faith. So that the soul does not act of itself alone, but follows and co-operates with, all its power, with the grace that is given it. It gains the victory through faith.

"II. The second step is to cease to rest on the pleasures of inward sensibility. The struggle here is, in general more severe and prolonged. It is hard to die to those inward tastes and relishes, which make us feel so happy, and which God usually permits us to enjoy and to rest upon in our first experience. When we lose our inward happiness, we are very apt to think that we lose God; not considering that the moral

life of the soul does not consist in pleasure, but in union with God's will, whatever that may be. The victory here also is by faith; acting, however, in a little different way.

"III. Another step is that of entire crucifixion to any reliance upon our virtues, either outward or inward. The habits of the life of self have become so strong, that there is hardly anything in which we do not take a degree of complacency. Having gained the victory over its senses, and having gained so much strength that it can live by faith, independently of inward pleasurable excitements, the soul begins to take a degree of satisfaction, which is secretly a selfish one, in its virtues, in its truth, temperance, faith, benevolence, and to rest in them as though they were its own, and as if they gave it a claim of acceptance on the ground of its merit. We are to be dead to them, considered as coming from ourselves; and alive to them only as the gifts and the power of God. We are to have no perception or life in them, in the sense of taking secret satisfaction in them; and are to take satisfaction in the Giver of them only.

IV. A fourth step consists in a cessation or death to that repugnance which men naturally feel to those dealings of God which are involved in the process of inward crucifixion. The blows which God sends upon us are received without the opposition which once existed and existed oftentimes with great power. So clear is the soul's perception of God's presence in everything; so strong is its faith, that those apparently adverse dealings, which were once so exceedingly trying, are now received, not merely with acquiescence, but with cheerfulness. It kisses the hand that smites it.

"V. When we have proceeded so far, we may say with a good deal of reason, that the natural man is dead. And then comes, as a fifth step in this process, the new life, not merely the beginning of a new life, but a new life in the higher sense of the terms, the resurrection of the life of love. All those gifts which the soul before sought in its own strength, and perverted and rendered poisonous and destructive to itself, by the seeking them out of God, are now richly and fully returned to it, by the great Giver of all things. It is not the design or plan of God to deprive His creatures of happiness, but only to pour the cup of bitterness into all that happiness, and to smite all that joy and prosperity which the creature has in anything out of Himself. There is a moral law of happiness, which is as unchangeable as the unchangeableness of moral principles. He smites the false happiness, or happiness founded on false principles, which is only the precursor of real permanent misery, in order that He may establish the true and everlasting happiness, by bringing the soul into perfect communion and union with Himself, and by enabling it to drink the living water from the Everlasting Fountain. And the soul has this new life, and all the good and happiness involved in it, by ceasing from its own action (that is to say, from all action except that which is in co-operation with God), and letting God live and act in it.

"VI. And this life, in the sixth place, becomes a truly transformed life, a life in union with God, when the will of the soul becomes not only conformed to God practically and in fact, but is conformed to Him in everything in it, and in the relations it sustains, which may be called a disposition or tendency. It is then, that there is such a harmony between the human and divine will, that they may be properly regarded as having become one. This, I suppose, was the state of St. Paul, when he says, 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' In such a soul which IS described as the Temple of the Holy Ghost, God Himself is the dweller and the light. "This transformed soul does not cease to advance in holiness. It is transformed without remaining where it is; new without being stationary. Its life is love, all love; but the capacity of that love continually increases".

Although Fenelon had so clear an intellectual understanding of the steps necessary to attain to a life of complete consecration and abandonment to the will of God, it was some time before he obtained the experience described by him in the words just quoted. But finally he seems to have laid hold on the

truth with his heart as well as with his intellect, and his whole life and character were completely transformed. He became so great an example of Christian love and piety that his name carries with it a sweet savor of Christ wherever he is known; and this notwithstanding the fact that many attempts are made to justify the Pope's treatment of Fenelon by disparaging the character of the latter.

It was well for Fenelon that he "put on the whole armour of God," for he had a great battle to fight on behalf of the doctrine of entire death to the self life which he had espoused. He was to become the greatest champion of the doctrine in the annals of the history of his time. Arrayed against him were the dissolute King, Louis XIV., and Bossuet, the greatest literary genius of his day, and many of the most corrupt among the priests and people of the Romish Church. Madam Guyon's teachings concerning the interior life had already aroused their opposition when Fenelon took up the gauntlet on her behalf. The doctrine of entire death to the self life, or of pure or disinterested love, was spreading over the world so rapidly that worldly and formal professors of religion became alarmed, and resolved to crush it out. Father Lacombe was thrown into prison and so cruelly tortured that his reason became affected, as already mentioned. Madam Guyon was also thrown into prison, by direct order of the King. Fenelon, who was now foremost in teaching the doctrine of pure or disinterested love, was not thrown into prison, because his influence was so great that even the King feared to imprison him.

Bishop Bossuet the greatest literary genius of the day, wrote a book against the teachings of Madam Guyon and sent it to Fenelon for his approval. The influence and standing of Fenelon were so great that Bossuet knew that his approval of the book would mean much to the masses of the people, and he thought that Fenelon would fear to displease him and the King by withholding his approval. But the book was so personal against Madam Guyon that Fenelon felt he could not give it his approval, and he wrote Bossuet to this effect. Fenelon knew that he would have to defend himself for not endorsing Bossuet's book against Madam Guyon. He therefore wrote a great work in reply to Bossuet. It was entitled, "Maxims of the Saints Concerning the Interior Life." In this work he showed that the greatest and most spiritual saints all down through the ages had believed and taught the interior life of self-crucifixion and pure love. Many of the most eminent saints were quoted to this effect, including St. Francis de Sales, St. Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, Father Alvarez, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard, St. Theresa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory Lopez, and many others. Many decisions of ancient church councils concerning the subject were also quoted. There was nothing personal in the book, but it stirred the anger and indignation of Bossuet to see how the people received it. He had been accustomed to swaying the multitudes by his writings, and it was a great trial to him to see that Fenelon's books were becoming more popular than his own. He had not the sweet Christian spirit of Fenelon, and could brook no opposition. He determined to crush Fenelon at any cost, and for this purpose wrote book after book against him. Great and masterly as were the works of Bossuet, the replies of Fenelon seem to have been still more masterly and decisive, and were certainly written in a more Christian spirit, and public opinion was more favorable towards them. Speaking concerning Fenelon's victory over Bossuet, Charles Butler, one of Fenelon's biographers, says : " Never did virtue and genius obtain a more complete triumph. Fenelon's reply, by a kind of enchantment, restored to him every heart." Bossuet, finding that he was no match for Fenelon in argument, determined to take the more direct method of appealing to the Pope to condemn his writings as heretical. The Pope, Innocent XH., had been a great admirer of the genius and writings of Fenelon, and had expressed himself favorably towards him. It was a matter of great grief to him that the controversy had been brought to Rome. He did not want to condemn the writings of Fenelon, neither did he wish to offend the King of France or Bishop Bossuet He delayed his decision for many months, and it was only after the most urgent appeals and almost commands from the King of France, that he finally pronounced a mild condemnation on some of the expressions used by Fenelon. The commission of cardinals appointed by the Pope to examine the writings of Fenelon were

divided in their opinion concerning them. The cardinals Alfaro, Fabroni, Bouillon, and Gabricellio, and some of less note, took the side of Fenelon. They were men of great learning, and they maintained that the doctrines taught by Fenelon were held by the great and pious men of the church in all ages, including such illustrious saints as Clement, Cassian, Dionysius, Thauler, Gerson, De Sales, John of the Cross, Saint Theresa, the Bishop of Bellay, and many others. They also claimed that these doctrines were supported both by the Scriptures and by reason. For two years the board of cardinals continued to discuss the question without coming to any decision. Louis XIV., King of France, then became so impatient for the condemnation of Fenelon that he decided to take a step that would intimidate the Pope and cardinals and hasten their decision. For this purpose he banished Fenelon to his own diocese of Cambray, and also began a series of persecutions against the friends of Fenelon. Urged on by Bossuet, he wrote again and again to the Pope, asking him and almost commanding him to condemn the teachings of Fenelon. Finally, in 1699, the Pope issued his mild condemnation of some of the expressions used by Fenelon, because of the wrong construction which might be placed upon them. But he did not condemn them in the sense in which they were intended by Fenelon.

From the time of his banishment to his own diocese until his death, Fenelon confined his work to the diocese of Cambray, where he was greatly beloved by the people, most of whom were Flemish peasants. Many anecdotes are related concerning his love for these simple country folk. One day, during one of his rural excursions, he met a poor peasant grieving over the loss of a cow. He gave the poor man enough money to buy another cow, but noticed that he was still sad. This was because he was so fond of his cow that he thought there was no other cow like her. Fenelon continued his walk, and found the cow the peasant had lost. Although the sun had set and it was quite dark, he drove her back to the peasant's cottage. Although his revenues as Archbishop of Cambray were considerable, Fenelon spent all in making others happy. During his absence one time, before his banishment to his own diocese, word was brought to Fenelon that his archepiscopal palace at Cambray had burned to the ground and that his fine library was destroyed. His friend, the Abbe de Langeron, seeing him conversing with some friends, thought he had not heard the sad news, and started to break it to him gently. Fenelon, noticing the solicitude of the good Abbe and surmising the cause of it, informed him that he was already acquainted with the news of what had happened. His faith in God and resignation to His will and providence were too great for such a thing to deeply affect him.

For six days before his death, Fenelon listened constantly to the reading of the Scriptures, and the greatest part of his last two nights on earth were spent in listening to the reading of his favorite texts. He died January 7th 1715, and was buried in the cathedral at Cambray.

In personal appearance Fenelon was very imposing. "He was a tall, thin man, well made, pale, with a large nose, eyes whence life and talent streamed like a torrent," says St. Simon, his contemporary and biographer. His educational writings rank so high that they are in great demand even at the present day. His political views were far in advance of his times, and doubtless this was one of the main causes of the King's opposition to him. His devotional writings, especially his "Letters to Men," and "Letters to Women," rank among the world's best Christian literature. They will doubtless continue to exert a mighty influence in the building up and deepening of Christian character and experience until the end of this dispensation.