

1:19). As we said before when we were speaking about the motives for believing, it may be because the bad conscience little by little causes the understanding to be blinded, so that it looks for a doctrine that does not contradict its wickedness. Or it may be because the sovereign judge, in punishment for their sins, allows them to fall into heresy. Whatever the reason, it is a thing to fear and to take care to avoid.

This does not happen to all bad Christians since, even if they are in mortal sin, they do not lose the faith for that reason, as we have said. But in a thing of such importance, what may have happened to only one person is a reason for all to take care and to fear in order to flee from that occasion. Certainly, the hearts of the eleven apostles were quite far from handing over Jesus Christ our Lord to death. But because he said that one of them was going to betray him, they all feared and said, "Is it I, Lord?" (Matt 26:22). They were afraid that they could fall through weakness into betraying him, an action that, in the present, they felt themselves free of.

For all of this, the passage that we have in hand will be very beneficial: "Incline your ear," obeying God and his church with faith and not having an inquisitive understanding "that may be oppressed by Majesty," as is threatened in scripture (Prov 25:27). Some desire to measure the ineffable things of God with the smallness of their understanding and reason. What happens to them is what happens to those who look fixedly at the sun. Not only do they not see it, but, to the contrary, they lose their sight. The excessive light they look at is too much for the eyes with which they are looking. It is the same with those who seek satisfaction along the path of understanding and inquiry but meet doubts and disquiet. This is because the wisdom of God is only communicated to the little and the humble who approach him with simplicity, "inclining their ear" to him and to his church. These receive very great gifts from his goodness that leave the soul satisfied and beautiful with faith and with works as the lovely Rebecca, to whom Isaac gave earrings for her ears and bracelets for her wrists (cf. Gen 24:22).

So that this simple subjection of our understanding might commend itself more to us, the Holy Spirit was not content with counseling us in the first passage by saying, "Listen, O daughter." Rather, he counseled us in this other one that says, "Incline your ear." He did this so that men might know that, since God does not say idle words, when he speaks a saying with several words, he greatly desires to commend this simple and humble believing, the principle of our salvation. If love is joined to it, we possess salvation in all its perfection.

B. DISCERNMENT OF FALSE REVELATIONS (CHAPS. 50-55)

CHAPTER 50

It is not right to go on without warning you of a great danger that comes upon those who travel along God's way and has caused many to fall. The principal remedy against it consists in the advice that the Holy Spirit gives us through this word, "Incline your ear." The danger consists in the revelations, visions, or other spiritual sentiments offered to some devout persons. Many times the devil, by God's permission, brings these things about for two reasons: one is to discredit true revelations from God by these deceptions, just as he has managed false miracles in order to discredit true ones; another is to deceive a person under the appearance of good since he is unable to do so in another way. We read about many such things in the past and have seen many in the present. They ought to serve as a lesson and a warning to any person desirous of his salvation so that he will not easily believe in these things. The very ones who previously gave such credit to them, after having been freed from such deceptions, have advised others to guard themselves from falling into them. Gerson says that many of these deceptions happened in his time and that he had known of many who said and held as certain that God had revealed to them that they were going to be popes. One of them had written of this and, by conjectures and other proofs, affirmed that it was true. Another had the same persuasion that he would be pope, and then afterward, the thought settled in his heart that he would be the Antichrist, or at least, his messenger. Later, he was grievously tempted to kill himself in order not to bring such great harm to the Christian people. Finally, through God's mercy, he was drawn out of all these deceits and left an account of them in writing as a warning and teaching for others.¹⁰⁴

There have not been lacking in our time persons who have held it as certain that they were to reform the Christian Church and bring it to the perfection it had in its beginning, or to another greater. Those who have died without doing this have been enough proof of their deceived hearts. It would have been better for them to have dedicated themselves to their own reform. That is a thing that, with God's grace, would have turned out to be easy, rather than, forgetting their own

consciences, to set the eyes of their vanity on a thing that God did not want done through them.

Others have desired to search for new paths that seemed short and quick for arriving soon to God. They thought that, by surrendering themselves perfectly to him and abandoning themselves in his hands, they were so taken by God and directed by the Holy Spirit that everything that came to their minds was nothing but a light and an impulse from God. This deception reached such a point that, if this interior motion did not come, they would not move themselves to do any good work, no matter how good it was. But if the heart moved them to do any work, they had to do it, even if it were against God's commandment. They believed that their heart's desire was an impulse from God and the freedom of the Holy Spirit who was freeing them from all obligations to the commandments of God. They said that they loved him so truly that, even breaking his commandments, they did not lose his love.¹⁰⁵ They did not consider what the Son of God had preached contrary to this with his own mouth: "He who receives my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me." Again, he said: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my words," and, "He that does not love me, does not keep my words" (John 14:21-24). He teaches clearly that whoever does not keep his word has neither his love nor his friendship. As Saint Augustine says, "No one can love the king if he hates his commandment."¹⁰⁶

Saint Paul says: "The law is not imposed on the just man" (1 Tim 1:9), and, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor 3:17). This is not to be understood as saying that the Holy Spirit frees anyone, no matter how just he may be, from keeping the commandments of God or his church or those of superiors. On the contrary, the more this Spirit communicates himself, the more love does he place within them. When love grows, care and desire for keeping ever more perfectly the commandments of God and of his church also grow. Since this Spirit is entirely efficacious, he makes a man love the good truly and fervently. When the Spirit is given abundantly, it places such a disposition in the soul that the keeping of the commandments is not a heavy burden but very easy and delightful. As David says: "How sweet are your words to my palate! They are sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps 119:103). The Spirit places in man's will a most perfect conformity with God's will, making it to be "one spirit with him" (cf. 1 Cor 6:17). This means, as Saint Paul says, that he holds it the same to will and not to will. Necessarily, keeping the will of God must be delightful for a man because to do what one likes is delightful for

everyone. Therefore, if the law of God were lost, it would be found written by the Holy Spirit on their hearts. As David says, "The law of God is in the heart of the just man" (Ps 37:31), which means, in his will insofar as it is conformed to God's will. God himself had said, "I will place my law in their hearts" (Jer 31:33). From this it follows that, even if there were no hell to threaten, no paradise to invite, no commandment to compel, the just man would do what he does solely for the love of God. In man's relationship with God, the Holy Spirit works what human generation works in the Son's relationship with his Father, since through him and his grace, we receive the adoption of sons of God. Thus, a man comes to reverence and serve God through filial love, with which there come perfect hatred for all sin and the perfect hope that casts out sadness and fear, as much as they can be cast out during this exile. All this makes a man suffer difficulties patiently and joyfully. Because of the freedom he has with regard to sins and trials, hating the one and loving the other, he is called "free," and on such a just man, "the law is not imposed." It is similar to the case of a mother who loved her son very much and did a lot for him. The law commanding her to do for her son what she does through her maternal heart would not be a burden to her. Thus, such a mother would not be under the law or its burdens, but would be above the law, as a free woman, since she does with delight what the law commands with authority. Those we have been discussing act in the same way when they fulfill the law with love. Many even do things for which they have no obligation, because their hearts burn with a fire of love greater than the obligation the law imposes. In this way we are to understand Saint Paul when he says that "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal 5:18). Since they hate sin and are full of love with regard to the law and joyful in difficulties (all of which come from being guided by the Spirit), the law is not a burden to them, as has been said.

But, if anyone breaks even one of the commandments of God or of his church, in that instant the Spirit departs. As it is written: "He withdraws himself from thoughts that are without understanding, and will leave the soul when iniquity enters it" (Wis 1:5). Since these men are not led by the Holy Spirit, they must remain subject to the affliction that the law imposes on those who do not love it, weak in supporting troubles, and subject to falling into sin. Let no one, then, say that, breaking a commandment of God or of his church, he can possess justice or liberty or love for him. The Lord declares that "the one who commits sin is a slave," not free (cf. John 8:34). As "there is no participation between light and darkness" (cf. 2 Cor 6:14), there is none

between God and the one who works iniquity. As it is written: "The wicked man and his wickedness are hateful to God" (Wis 14:9).

I have told you about this blind error as an example from which you may draw many other examples just as foolish and senseless. Into such errors those of past and present have fallen, who have indiscreetly believed that the sentiments and impulses in their hearts were from God.

CHAPTER 51

Desiring that your soul not be one of these, I recommend strongly that, as they say, you learn your lesson in the head of another. Be very careful not to allow in yourself any desire, small or great, for singular and supernatural things, because this is a sign of pride and dangerous curiosity. Saint Augustine was once tempted with this. These are his words: "With how many crafty temptations has the enemy tried to get me to ask you, Lord, for some miracle! But I beg you, through the love of our king Jesus Christ, and of our chaste and simple city, the heavenly Jerusalem, that just as consent to this temptation is now far from me, so it may be ever farther and farther away."¹⁰⁷ Saint Bonaventure says that many have fallen into madness and errors as punishment for having desired the things already mentioned. He adds that these things should be feared rather than desired.¹⁰⁸ If they come to you without your wanting them, be afraid, and do not give them credence. Instead, run immediately to our Lord, begging him to be pleased not to take you by this road, but to let you "work out your salvation in holy fear of him" (Phil 2:12) and by the ordinary and level path of those who serve him. You have to watch especially when such a revelation or impulse invites you to admonish or inform a third person of something secret, all the more if the person is a priest, prelate, or someone similar, to whom particular reverence is due. Expel these things then from your heart, and depart from them saying what Moses said: "I beseech you, Lord, to send the one you will to send" (Exod 4:13). Jeremiah said, "I am a child, Lord; I do not know how to speak" (Jer 1:6). Both considered themselves inadequate and fled from being sent to correct others. Do not fear that you will offend God by this humble resistance or that he will be angry or absent if the affair is his. On the contrary, he will approach and clarify the matter. The one who "gives his grace to the humble" (cf. Jas 4:6) will not take it away for an act of humility. But if the thing is not of God, the demon will flee, "wounded by the stone" of humility, a blow that "breaks his head" like that of Goliath (cf. 1 Sam 17:49).

It happened to a desert father that, when an image of the Crucified appeared to him, not only did he refuse to adore it or believe in it, but he closed his eyes and said: "I do not want to see Jesus Christ in this world. It is enough for me to see him in heaven." At this response the demon, who had wanted to deceive him under another form, fled. Another father responded to one who said that he was an angel sent to him by God: "I have no need of messages from angels, nor am I worthy. Therefore, look for the one to whom you were sent, for it is not possible that you were sent to me, and I do not want to listen to you." At this humble response the proud demon fled. Through the way of humility and by wholeheartedly rejecting these things, many persons have been freed by God's hand from very strong bonds that the devil had forged for them. So they experienced in themselves what David says: "The Lord keeps the little ones; I humbled myself and he delivered me" (Ps 116:6). On the other hand, if the false revelation or impulse of the demon finds any desire or vain satisfaction in the heart of the one who receives it, it takes root there and gathers strength to deceive him completely. God's judgment is just in permitting this for, as Saint Augustine says, "pride deserves to be deceived."¹⁰⁹

You, then, ought to be so free from vain satisfaction and from thinking that you are something because of these revelations, that your heart is not moved in the least degree from the humble place where you were before, under the holy fear of God. Conduct yourself in them as though they had not come to you. If when you respond in this way the thing continues, give an account to one who may counsel you what you should do. It would be better for you to give this account immediately after it happens to you. Also, you should help the one who is to counsel you by prayers, fasting, and other good works, so that God may clarify the truth to him, since the matter is full of difficulty. It is a great blasphemy for us to take the good spirit of God for the evil spirit of the demon. In that case we are like the miserable Pharisees who contradicted the truth of God and attributed to the evil spirit, the works that Jesus Christ our Lord was doing through the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 12:24). But if we credulously accept the impulse of the evil spirit as a thing from the Holy Spirit, what greater evil can there be than to follow darkness as light, deception as truth, and what is worse, the devil as God? On both sides there is a great danger, either taking God for the devil, or the devil for God. No one, no matter how blind, fails to see the great need of being able to distinguish and value each of these things for what it is. But as the necessity is clear, so is certainty and light in this doubt fraught with difficulty and hidden. Not all prophesy

and perform miracles and other similar graces, but only those to whom they are distributed by the Holy Spirit. So it is not given to the human spirit, however wise, to judge certainly and truly the difference of spirits, unless it is in some very clear thing against the scripture or the church of God. Necessary then in every case, is the light of the Holy Spirit, which is called *discernment of spirits*. By this profound inspiration and illumination, the man who has this gift judges without error which is the spirit of truth and which that of the lie. If the matter is of substance, it ought to be told to the bishop and his determination accepted as certain.

CHAPTER 52

Yet another thing to consider is what benefit or edification these things leave in your soul. I do not tell you this so that by these or other signs you may judge what takes place within you. My purpose is rather that, when you give an account to the one who counsels you, you give it more particularly, so that he may better be able to understand with certainty and to show you the truth.

Consider, then, whether these things benefit you as a remedy for some spiritual necessity or as something of outstanding edification for your soul. If a good man does not speak idle words, even less will God speak them. He says, "I am the Lord who teaches you profitable things, and I lead you along the way that you walk" (Isa 48:17). When it is seen that there is nothing of profit, but only tangled and unnecessary things, take it as the fruit of the demon. He goes about trying to deceive the one to whom he brings them, or to make that person waste his time, and the time of others to whom they are told. When he can do no more, he is content with this waste of time.

Among the things worked in your soul that you are to consider, the principal one is whether they leave you more humble than before. For, as a doctor says, humility puts so much weight in the spiritual coin that it sufficiently distinguishes it from the lack of weight of the false coin. As Saint Gregory says, "The most evident sign of the elect is humility and that of the reprobates is pride."¹⁰ See, then, what trace remains in your soul from the vision or consolation or spiritual feeling. Do you see that you are left more humble and ashamed of your faults and with greater reverence and fear of the infinite greatness of God, and that you do not have frivolous desires of communicating to others what has happened? Do you avoid occupying yourself a great deal in looking at it or paying it a lot of attention and forget about it as a thing that can bring you self-esteem? If at times it comes to your memory, do you

humble yourself and marvel at God's great mercy that gives such gifts to those who are so base? Is your heart more tranquil in its self-knowledge than you were before it came to you? It has some sign of being from God if it is in conformity with the Christian teaching and truth that a man is to be humbled and despised in his own eyes, recognizing himself as more obliged and ashamed for the goods that he receives from God and attributing all glory to the one from whose hand comes all good. Saint Gregory agrees with this when he says, "It is fitting to know that the soul, filled with divine understanding, has truth and humility as its most evident signs."¹¹ If these two are joined perfectly in a soul, it is well-known that they give testimony of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But, with a deceit of the demon, it is completely the reverse. At the beginning or the end of the revelation or consolation, the soul feels lighthearted and desires to tell what it is experiencing. It possesses some esteem for itself and its own judgment and thinks that God is going to do great things in and through it. The soul does not feel like thinking about its defects or of being corrected by others. Instead, the only thing it does is talk about its experience and turn it over in its memory. It would also desire that others would talk about it. When you see these and other signs that demonstrate frivolity of heart, you can say without doubt that the spirit of the demon is walking there.

However good a thing that happens to you may appear (tears, or consolation, or knowledge of the things of God, or even that you have ascended to the third heaven), if your soul does not remain in profound humility, do not trust in or receive it. The reason is that, the higher the thing is, the more dangerous it is, and it will cause you a greater fall. Ask God for his grace so that you may know and humble yourself, and above all this, that he grant you what would be most pleasing to him. But, if this is lacking, all the rest, no matter how valuable it may seem, is not gold but tinsel, and is not flour that sustains but ashes without substance. Pride has this evil, that it despoils the soul of the true grace of God. If it leaves any of its goods, they are falsified so that they do not please God and are the occasion for a greater fall for the one that possesses them. We read that our Redeemer, when he appeared to his disciples on the day of his ascension, first "upbraided them with their incredulity and hardness of heart" (Mark 16:14), and afterward commanded them to go preach, giving them power to perform many great miracles. By this, he showed that the one he is going to lift up to great things he first humbles, giving him knowledge of his own weaknesses. This is so that, even if they soar above the heavens, they may remain

rooted in their own lowliness, without power to attribute anything to themselves except their unworthiness.

The summary of all this is that you should take account of the effects that these things work in you, not in order that you be the judge of them, but so that you may inform the one who is going to counsel you, and that you may follow his counsel.

CHAPTER 53

You must realize that many feel within themselves their own vileness and nothingness, and they think that they attribute to God alone the glory for all their good, and they perceive many other signs of their own humility. But with all this they are filled with pride and trapped in it in the measure that they think that they are freer. The cause is that, since they live in the truth by not attributing good to themselves, they live in deception by thinking that their goods are more and better than in fact they are. They think that they have such light from God that they are sufficient to direct themselves and others along the way of God. In their eyes there is no one competent to direct them. To a large extent they are friends of their own opinion, and they even hold in little regard what saints of the past have said, as well as the opinion of servants of God living in their own time. They boast of possessing the spirit of Christ and being directed by him and of not needing human counsel, since God and his unction satisfy them with such great certainty in their prayers.

They think, as Saint Bernard says, "of the houses of others, but that only in their own does the sun shine."¹¹² They distrust and despise all wise men, as Goliath did the people of God (cf. 1 Sam 17:8-10). The only one who is good in their judgment is the one who is conformed to them, and nothing annoys them more than to be contradicted. They want to be masters of all and believed by all, but they are not willing to believe anyone. The cautious discretion of people with experience they call tepidity and fear; unbridled passions and novelties full of singularity and causing riots they call liberty of spirit and fortitude from God. They have in their mouth almost continually: "My spirit tells me this," "God satisfies me," and similar words. At other times, they quote the scripture of God, but they refuse to understand it as the church and the saints understand it. Instead, they understand it as it seems to them, believing that they have no less light than the saints of the past. They even believe that God has taken them as an instrument for greater works than those saints. So, making idols of themselves, and, with abominable arrogance, placing themselves above

all heads, their deception is so miserable that, although they are extremely proud, they take themselves to be perfectly humble. They believe that only in them does God dwell. But God is very far from them. What they think is light is the deepest darkness. Of these, or of those like them, Gerson says:

There are some who are pleased to be directed by their own opinion, and they walk amid their own inventions, guided, or better said, driven by their own opinion, which is a most dangerous guide. They mortify themselves excessively with fasts and keep many vigils; they disturb and confuse their brain with too many tears. In the midst of these things, they do not consider the admonition or the counsel of anyone. They are not careful to ask counsel of those wise in God's law, nor do they care to listen to them, and when they do hear them or seek counsel, they despise their words. The cause is that they have come to think of themselves as being already something, and as knowing better than all others what is fitting for them to do. Of such as these, I declare that they will soon fall into the illusion of demons. Soon they will fall on the stumbling block because they are carried along with blind haste and excessive levity. Therefore, be suspicious of anything they may say about unusual revelations.¹¹³

CHAPTER 54

You are to understand that some that I have mentioned in the last chapter are people without learning and cordial enemies of the learned. They may, by chance, know a little Latin so as to read and carry with them the New Testament. They believe a great deal in themselves while they think they believe in God. They rely upon some very superficial ideas and tangle themselves up in them so blindly that, however clear the ideas are, these people do not know how to shake themselves free of them. They are so bold and so beyond persuasion that, as scripture says, "it is better to meet a bear robbed of her whelps, than a fool trusting in his own folly" (Prov 17:12). They keep very much in mind and on their tongues the saying of Saint Paul: "Knowledge puffs up; charity builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). With this, they think they have a license to despise the learned as people who are puffed up, and to pride themselves on being people full of charity. They do not notice that they are puffed up with pride in their own sanctity. This is more dangerous than pride in learning, because it arises from something better and is, therefore, worse. Indeed, neither learning nor good works of themselves produce this destructive moth, but the wickedness of the wicked that seizes the occasion of the good to swell with pride. Since this is so, they