

Public Enemy #1: The Predominant Fault



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During Lent, it is easy to focus a great deal on fulfilling your resolutions, but what is the purpose of these resolutions? If we lose sight of their proper end, we risk wasting our time and effort in the spiritual life. This article will discuss the aim we must have for the Great Fast of Lent, in order that our efforts may not be in vain but produce the necessary fruit in the spiritual life.

Growth in Charity

The aim of the spiritual life, and thus the goal of Lent, is growth in charity. Garrigou-Lagrangé writes:

Christ incessantly reminds us that the supreme precept dominating all others and all the counsels is the precept of love[.] ... Charity is the bond of perfection because it is the highest of the virtues which unites our soul to God. It ought to last forever, and it vivifies all the other virtues by rendering their acts meritorious, ordaining them to the last end, that is, to its object: God loved above all else. [1]

Thus the chief aim of all our Lenten practices must be the growth in charity. If we spend our time in Lent in everything else but this, our whole time will have been wasted. This is why on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday the Church proclaims these sublime verses from the Apostle:

If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing (I Cor. 13:1–3).

In other words, if you fast perfectly throughout Lent and pray for hours, wearing a hair shirt, sitting in ashes all day long, but do not grow in charity, you have wasted your time. What is

worse, you may have acquired the pride of demons instead of the humility of saints. We must keep this aim in mind for all our practices for Lent.

The Chief Enemy of Charity: The Predominant Fault

The supernatural virtue of charity (with the other virtues) is given in holy baptism. Mortal sin destroys charity in the soul, but absolution restores charity with the other virtues. So if we truly have these virtues, why are we not virtuous?

The virtues present within a soul in a state of grace are blocked by the effects of Original Sin. Therefore, the more the pious soul overcomes these effects by the power of grace, the more the virtues can show their effects. Above all, the predominant fault is the thing that prevents growth in charity and the other virtues. In a [previous article](#), we mentioned the predominant fault as one of the [three pillars](#) in the spiritual life. Garrigou-Lagrange defines it this way:

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[.] ... The predominant fault is so much the more dangerous as it often compromises our principle good point, which is a happy inclination of our nature that ought to develop and to be increased by grace[.] ... 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. [\[2\]](#)

Thus, in order to grow in charity, we must focus on our predominant fault. This is the weak point keeping us from advancing in the spiritual life. In confession, we may feel

overwhelmed with all of our sins and faults and think we need to focus on all our habitual sins at once. But this is a trick of the Devil, who seeks to turn you to despair if you do not advance on every front of the spiritual life at the same time.

Thankfully, we need not focus on every sin at the same time, but above all on our predominant fault. This is why the spiritual writers identify the predominant fault as one of the three pillars of the spiritual life, together with prayer and spiritual reading. If we focus on this, our other sins will also be overcome. This is because it is the special fault to which we are particularly inclined by our natural temperament. As Garrigou-Lagrange continues, “a person’s temperament must not be crushed; it must be transformed while keeping whatever is good in it” [3]. Thus, the first step in finding out your predominant fault is being aware of your individual temperament.

Temperaments

The spiritual writers follow the ancients in identifying **four temperaments. A temperament is the manner in which God created you to be especially inclined.** It is like your personality, but it can also be changed, and other temperaments can be acquired by habit. The goal is to acquire the good qualities of all the temperaments while avoiding the defects of each [4].

The temperament is the tied to the predominant fault because the Devil uses our natural temperaments to turn us away from our principal virtue and toward excess in sin:

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. [5] Getting to know your temperament is a clue to identifying your predominant fault. **Here is a summary of the four temperaments and their predominant faults according to Ripperger:**

Sanguine: inflammable emotions — affable, energetic, enthusiastic, popular, expressive, insincere, noisy.
Predominant faults: lust, gluttony, pusillanimity.

Choleric: ardent emotions — daring, direct, decisive, insensitive, fearless, tactless.
Predominant faults: anger, envy.

Melancholic: deep emotions, disposition to sorrow—perfectionist, accurate, detailed, diplomatic, thoughtful, cautious, critical.
Predominant faults: fear, aversion, despondency, despair.

Phlegmatic: no strong emotions — kind, caring, gentle, soft-spoken, timid, relaxed, peaceful.
Predominant faults: sloth, effeminacy.

To find out our predominant fault, Garrigou-Lagrange adds fervent prayer to God to know our predominant fault, observing our chief likes and dislikes (“Toward what do my most ordinary occupations tend? What is generally the cause of my sadness and joy?”) as well as asking your spiritual director. You may also ask your spouse or a trusted friend, who will often have a better knowledge of you than you yourself.

How to Overcome the Predominant Fault

Once we have identified our chief vice, we must refocus all of our spiritual energy on combatting this one thing. This is the task of Lent. This will be our key to the growth in charity. This begins with prayer. Offer your morning offerings for this purpose. Offer your rosaries for this aim. We are often enslaved to our chief passion because we are filled with pride. Let your prayer be humble and sincere. Choose a Psalm to say daily for this purpose: 3, 26, or 50, or one of the [Seven Penitential Psalms](#). Ask God for the grace to desire to suffer anything to overcome this.

Garrigou-Lagrange identifies **two other aspects to this effort. The first is examination of conscience:** “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” [6]. The examination must be tied with **frequent confession, which not only absolves past sin, but gives grace to avoid it in the future.**

The other method given is called a sanction:

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. [7]

Imagine paying a dollar every time you commit this sin. Or skipping your next meal, or all seasoning at the next meal. This habituates your faculties to hate committing this vice, and turns your inclination away from it.

Lastly, when the Easter season comes, be careful to moderate your feasting. While you relax all of your discipline in order to

properly celebrate paschaltide, keep watch over your predominant fault that you maintain the same rigor in virtue even if your exterior habits are reduced.

Lent is the “Christian’s war of defense” [8] wherein the pious soul zealously roots out this predominant vice in order to grow in charity. Do not waste your time or lose focus on this chief enemy that you may truly advance spiritually, and use the external practices for the necessary internal renovation.

Grant, O Lord, that Thy faithful people may, with true piety, undertake the time-honored custom of fasting and may carry it out with unwavering devotion. [9]

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[1] Garrigou-Lagrangé, Three Ages of the Spiritual Life (Herder: 1947), Vol. 1, 149, 150

[2] Ibid., 314-316