

## On Qualities of a Good Action with St. Bernard of Clairvaux – A Spiritual Exercise

“The left hand designates contemplation and the right activity. In this image, we usually hold the left hand hidden beneath clothing, whereas the right hand is exposed for activity.... The right glove is divided into five sections to accommodate the five This is because every good action must be upright, voluntary, pure, discerning and firm. That is to say that it must be upright in intention, voluntary so that it is not due to fear or some coercion, pure so that it is not rendered useless by any hint of vanity, discerning that so that it does not exceed due measure and firm so that it is persevering.” (Clairvaux, 2000)

### Qualities of a Good Action:

1. **Upright:** in intention
2. **Voluntary**
3. **Pure:** free from vanity
4. **Discerning:** within due measure
5. **Firm:** persevering

## What is an upright intention?

### Intention According to St. Thomas Aquinas

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, intention signifies a tendency towards something. Additionally, it is possible to intend multiple things simultaneously, as seen in the example of someone taking medicine with the dual intentions of recovering their health and alleviating symptoms. (Aquinas, 2024)

### Upright Intention

For an intention to be considered upright, it must align with the law of God and proper moral principles. Examples of upright intentions include:

- Honestly working to procure necessities
- Performing a work of mercy

In both cases, the intention is upright because it aligns with moral principles and the law of God.

## Voluntary

An act is not considered voluntary if it is performed without prior consideration. For example, dreams that occur while sleeping are not voluntary acts.

When others try to influence decisions they do not cease being voluntary.

- **Encouragement:** Others may encourage us by highlighting the positive outcomes of a good act, emphasizing the benefits we will gain.
- **Discouragement:** Conversely, others may discourage us by emphasizing the sufferings or losses we may endure if we choose a particular path, such as an easier way.

## On Qualities of a Good Action with St. Bernard of Clairvaux – A Spiritual Exercise

- **Violence:** someone either removing or injuring our ability to obtain our necessities or transgressing their own duties towards us.

### Purity of Intention

The purity of an act depends on the primary end or motivation behind it. People's actions are often driven by one of three main desires:

1. **To feel good:** seeking pleasure or comfort, or to avoid suffering.
2. **To look good:** seeking recognition or admiration from others.
3. **To be good:** wishing for the coming of God's kingdom and that we fulfill his will.

### The Danger of Deception

The devil can deceive us by tempting us to pursue good things for the wrong ends. For example:

- **Exercise:** Engaging in physical exercise can be a good act, but the motivation behind it determines its purity.
  - If the primary end is to build endurance to resist temptation, then the act is good.
  - However, if the primary motivation is vanity (to look good), then the act is tainted by impure intention.

## Discerning Due Measure

A recurring theme in spiritual masterpieces, particularly in the Institutes of John Cassian, is the difficulty of discernment. This challenge arises because:

- Each person's strength and abilities and circumstances vary.
- Which leads to spiritual practices and disciplines, schedules even things such as diet and sleeping cannot be universally adopted

To discern effectively, consider:

1. **Past actions and abilities:** Reflect on your experiences and capabilities
2. **Available resources:** Assess what you have at your disposal
3. **Peer examples:** Observe the strengths and successes of others, but avoid comparisons

Once you've made a vow or commitment, such as marriage vows, God will provide the necessary grace to fulfill them. This is similar to how we often ask people to perform tasks, but if they've been doing so for years without issue, there's no need for further discernment unless circumstances change significantly (e.g., illness).

### Key Point

- God gives us the grace to see our vows through, so we shouldn't use this as an excuse for excessive introspection about long-standing commitments.

## On Qualities of a Good Action with St. Bernard of Clairvaux – A Spiritual Exercise

- Instead, if we've been fulfilling our vows for years, we should focus on advancing and growing in our spiritual journey.

### Exceptions

- Significant changes in circumstances, such as illness. This is covered by our Rule

## Persevering

<sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we realize that suffering develops perseverance, <sup>4</sup>and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. <sup>5</sup>Such hope will not be doomed to disappointment,<sup>[a]</sup> because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. – Romans 5:3-5

The Rule uses the word perseverance three times in the Prologue, blessedness in this life and the next life only comes if one perseveres to the end and so it is with our good works.

We must make steadfast commitments to both immediate and final goals. To achieve this, one should:

1. **Set your mind on the ultimate goal:**” yearn for eternal life with all your soul”. (CPMO, 1990)
2. **Concentrate on the present task:** “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” *Matthew 6:34*
3. **Resist external and internal challenges:**
  - Exterior forces of evil
  - Interior passions (fears, doubts, desires, etc.)

A work is not good if it is not persevered in.

## Works Cited

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