THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Pursuing True Happiness

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Question Everyone Asks

Every person who has ever lived has been chasing the same thing.

Aristotle saw this twenty-three hundred years ago. Whatever else people are doing in their hour-to-hour lives, they are reaching for something they think will make them happy. The man chasing money thinks money will do it. The man chasing fame thinks fame will. The man chasing sex thinks sex will, and the man chasing comfort thinks comfort will. They are all wrong in different ways, but they share the same engine. Happiness is the goal under every goal.

Aristotle called it the chief good of human life. He said all our other ambitions are aimed at it, whether we know that or not.

If you press an honest modern adult on what he is actually working toward, after the layers of professional language come off, he will usually admit something close to the same answer. "I just want to be happy." "I want my kids to be happy." "I want a life that feels worth living." Happiness, in some form, is the engine of nearly everything we do.

The strange thing is how badly most of us do at it.

The current generation in the developed world has the highest material standard of living in human history. The most freedom. The most options. The most entertainment. The most information. And rates of anxiety, depression, addiction, loneliness, and suicide that no previous generation has matched. By every conventional measure, we have won. And we are miserable.

The Catholic tradition has an explanation. It is not the explanation our culture is going to volunteer. Most modern advice on happiness reduces to one of three things: more pleasure, more achievement, or more authenticity. The tradition would say all three are wrong, or rather, not wrong but radically incomplete. We are aiming at the right target with maps that do not actually lead there.

This book is about a better map.

It draws primarily on Saint Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Dominican friar who, building on Aristotle and the whole Christian tradition before him, gave us the most complete account of human happiness ever written. His framework has been articulated in a particularly clear form in our own time by the Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer, who calls it the four levels of happiness. We will use his name for it.

The four levels are a diagnostic and a ladder. Most of us are stuck somewhere on the first or second level, exhausted from pursuing things that cannot finally satisfy us. The map shows where the longing actually points. It does not promise the climb is easy. It promises the climb is real, and that there is something at the top.

Pull up a chair. Let me show you the map.

CHAPTER ONE

What You're Actually Looking For

Before we get to the four levels, we have to be clear about what we are looking for.

Most modern talk about happiness is muddled because the English word lumps together several different things. We say "happy" and we mean any of these: pleasure, excitement, contentment, satisfaction, peace, fulfillment, joy. We use the same word for a child eating ice cream and a martyr facing the lions and a grandmother holding her first grandchild. Something is wrong with the word.

The classical tradition was more careful.

Two Better Words

In Greek, the word Aristotle used was *eudaimonia*, which is not really translatable into English. It is sometimes rendered "happiness," but it is closer to "flourishing" or "the life that goes well." Eudaimonia is not a feeling. It is the condition of a human being who is functioning the way human beings are designed to function, fully and over time.

In Latin, the Christian tradition gave us *beatitudo*, which we translate as "blessedness" or "beatitude." Beatitudo is not a passing emotion. It is the state of a soul that has reached, or is reaching, what it was made for.

When the tradition asks what makes a person happy, it is not asking what makes him feel good in a given moment. It is asking what kind of life actually fulfills the design of a human being. Those are different questions. The first one has answers like ice cream and warm baths. The second has the answer Aquinas spent his life pointing toward.

The Test of a Real Answer

Aquinas thought a real account of happiness had to pass a hard test. Whatever happiness is, it has to be:

- **Complete.** Lacking nothing essential.
- **Lasting.** Not subject to being lost or taken away.
- **Sufficient.** Not requiring constant supplementation by other goods.

- **Truly fulfilling.** Actually satisfying the deepest hunger of the person.

Apply this test to the usual modern answers and they all fail.

Money is not complete (you can always have more). It is not lasting (markets crash). It is not sufficient (the lonely rich man is a familiar figure). It is not fulfilling (the dying billionaire wishes for more time, not more money).

Fame fails the same tests. So does power. So does sexual conquest. So does professional accomplishment. So does any pleasure of the body. So does any human relationship, even the best ones, because every human relationship ends in death or distance or change.

This is not a counsel of pessimism. It is the necessary first step. If you have been measuring your life against the wrong criteria, you will never feel you have arrived. The first move is to clarify what you are actually trying to find.

> *Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in Thee.*
>
> *St. Augustine, Confessions*

Augustine wrote that sentence in the fourth century after spending much of his young life chasing pleasure, status, and intellectual satisfaction. He knew exactly what was wrong with the standard answers because he had tried them. The restlessness he names is the universal human condition. The question is what we do with it.

CHAPTER TWO

Aquinas's Map

Here is the framework in one paragraph, so you can hold the whole thing in your mind before we dig in.

> *There are four levels of happiness available to a human being. The lowest is the happiness of pleasure and immediate gratification. Above it sits the happiness of personal achievement and ego. Above that, the happiness of doing good for others, of love and contribution. And at the top, the happiness of seeing God face to face, which is what every other level has been reaching for without knowing it.*

The Latin Names

Each level has a name from the Latin tradition. Fr. Spitzer popularized them in modern Catholic teaching. You don't need to memorize them, but knowing them gives you a shared vocabulary with two thousand years of Christian thinkers.

- **Level One: Laetus.** From the Latin word for happy or glad. The happiness of immediate sensory pleasure, comfort, and gratification. The level of the body.
- **Level Two: Felix.** From the Latin word for fortunate or successful. The happiness of personal achievement, comparison, status, and ego. The level of the self.
- **Level Three: Beatitudo.** From the Latin word for blessedness. The happiness of love, service, and contribution. The level of the soul turned outward toward others.
- **Level Four: Sublime Beatitudo.** The Latin term for ultimate or perfect blessedness. The happiness of union with God, glimpsed now in prayer and the sacraments and fulfilled in heaven. The level the soul was made for.

How the Levels Relate

The first thing to understand is that the lower levels are not bad. Each is a real good in its place. The pleasure of a good meal is a genuine gift. The satisfaction of a job done well is a genuine reward. The Catholic tradition has never been against any of these. The error is not

in enjoying them. The error is in trying to make them carry weight they were never built to carry.

Each level has a ceiling. The lower the level, the lower the ceiling. Stay too long at one level, especially the lower two, and you will discover the ceiling by hitting your head on it for years before you understand what is happening. You will wonder why you keep climbing the ladder of success and feeling no better than when you started. You will wonder why each new pleasure produces less satisfaction than the one before. You will wonder why, sitting on top of everything you spent twenty years wanting, you still feel a vague hunger you cannot name.

The hunger is the design feature, not the bug. It is the soul telling you the level you are on is not the one you were made for.

The Climb

The four levels are not stages you finish and leave behind. A man at Level Three still eats lunch (Level One) and still cares about his work (Level Two). The point is which level is on top. The point is which one is organizing the others.

A man whose deepest organizing principle is pleasure will subordinate everything else to pleasure. A man organized by ego will subordinate everything to status. A man organized by love will use his pleasures and his achievements as instruments of love. A man organized by God will use everything as a path to Him.

The climb is the slow reordering of what sits on top.

CHAPTER THREE

Level One: The Pleasure Floor

Level One is where every human being starts. It is the happiness of the body. A child reaches for the toy, the sweet, the warm blanket. He pulls back from what hurts. He pursues what feels good. This is built into us at the deepest biological layer and it is, in its place, entirely good.

The Catholic tradition is emphatic on this. The body is not evil. Pleasure is not evil. Eating, drinking, sex within marriage, rest, sleep, exercise, music, warm fires on cold nights: these are all gifts of a generous Creator. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the man we are following through this book, was famously fond of a good meal and had reportedly to be reminded by his fellow friars to stop reaching across the table to take more of what he wanted. He liked his food. He was not embarrassed about it.

The problem is not pleasure. The problem is what happens when pleasure is asked to be the top of the ladder instead of the bottom.

What Pleasure Gives

Real things, all of them good in measure. Immediate satisfaction. Relief from discomfort. Rest. The bonding of shared meals. The renewal of sleep. The communion of marital intimacy. The simple gladness of a beautiful day. Without these, life would be a grinding affair. The body is designed to take pleasure in its proper goods, and a soul housed in such a body would be foolish to refuse them.

What Pleasure Cannot Give

Anything that lasts. Pleasure is, by its nature, momentary. The bite of food is delicious for the seconds you are tasting it. The drink is satisfying for as long as the warmth is in your throat. The orgasm is a flash. By the time you are reaching for the next bite or sip, the previous one is no longer giving you anything. Pleasure does not accumulate. It evaporates the moment after you have it.

This is the central fact about pleasure that the modern world has organized itself to deny. The whole machinery of advertising, entertainment, and consumer culture is built on the

lie that the next pleasure will be the one that finally fills you. It will not. There is no pleasure of the body that will. Not even the best one. Not even a thousand of them in a row.

> *Pleasure is honest about itself. It promises only the moment. The man who is unhappy with pleasure is the man who asked it to do something it never agreed to.*

The Trap

The trap of Level One is not pleasure itself. It is what happens when a man decides that pleasure is the answer to the question of happiness. Then everything else in his life gets reorganized to maximize it. Work becomes a means of generating money for pleasure. Relationships become means of accessing pleasure. Religion becomes a means of removing what limits pleasure. Eventually he is not so much enjoying his pleasures as serving them.

Three things happen to the man stuck on Level One.

Tolerance. The same pleasure that once produced an intense reward now produces less. He has to escalate. More food. More expensive drink. More extreme stimulation. The cycle is the same one a chemist would describe for an addict, because in a sense it is. The brain's reward system, asked to do more than it was designed to do, starts requiring larger and larger doses for the same effect.

Emptiness between pleasures. The hours when he is not actively pursuing the pleasure become unbearable. He cannot tolerate silence, boredom, stillness. He fills every gap with the device, the snack, the drink, the show, the next thing. The interior life withers because he cannot sit still long enough for it to grow.

A vague underlying sadness. After enough years on Level One, a quiet despair starts to seep up around the edges. It is not connected to anything specific. He has plenty. He should be happy. He is not. He does not know why. He does not know that the despair is the design feature firing properly, telling him he was made for more.

Most of the Modern World

It is worth saying plainly: most of contemporary Western culture is organized around Level One. The advertising you see, the entertainment you consume, the food industry, the porn

industry, the gambling industry, the influencer economy, the algorithm of your phone, the assumptions of your peers, all of it presses you toward the same message. The good life is the life of maximum pleasure. The happy man is the man who has the most of it.

If you have been living inside this air without examining it, you have absorbed the assumption. You believe it on a level deeper than your stated theology. The first work of climbing the ladder is noticing the air you have been breathing and beginning to breathe a different one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Level Two: The Ego Trap

Above pleasure sits a different kind of happiness, one that pleasure-driven cultures often mistake for the real thing. This is the happiness of the self: achievement, success, recognition, status, comparative position. The happiness of being good at something, of being known, of being above.

Level Two is the dominant level of the educated, ambitious, professional class. It is the level most of this book's readers are stuck on, often without realizing it. Where Level One captures the man with no plan, Level Two captures the man with a plan. The successful man. The accomplished man. The man who is winning.

What Achievement Gives

Real things, again. The satisfaction of growth and mastery. The dignity of work done well. The genuine joy of competence. The development of gifts. The respect of peers. The ability to provide for one's family. Status, in its proper place, is not evil. It is the appropriate recognition of contribution. A doctor who has saved lives, a builder who has built well, a writer who has written truly: these men receive honor, and the honor is just.

Achievement, in measure, builds character. The man who has tried hard things and succeeded at some of them has muscles of will and resilience that the man who has tried nothing does not. Level Two is, in its right place, a real upgrade from Level One. A society that values achievement will produce more good than a society that values only pleasure.

What Achievement Cannot Give

Stable happiness. Because achievement is always comparative. Always relative. Always provisional.

You can be the best salesman in your office. There are better salesmen in other offices. You can be the wealthiest man in your neighborhood. There are wealthier men in other neighborhoods. You can be the most accomplished man in your field. There is someone you never quite caught up to, and someone behind you catching up. The ladder of achievement

has no top, and the moment you reach what you thought was the top, you realize there is more above you that you cannot see from where you stand.

Worse, achievement is fragile. The promotion can be taken away. The market can collapse. The career can be ended by an illness or a scandal. The body that performed so well at thirty cannot perform the same at fifty. The recognition that fueled you in your forties is replaced by a younger man in his thirties. Everything you built can be taken from you, and the older you get, the more obvious this becomes.

> *The Felix man is always one promotion, one comparison, one accomplishment away from the happiness he is sure is just ahead. He never arrives. He cannot. The ladder he is on does not have the floor he is looking for.*

The Empty Summit

Pay attention to the public testimony of people who reached the top of their fields. The actors who said winning the Oscar felt like nothing. The athletes who said the Super Bowl ring did not change the void underneath. The CEOs who sold their companies for hundreds of millions and admitted, often years later, to a deep depression on the other side of the sale. Tom Brady, asked at the height of his career whether winning the Super Bowl was everything he had imagined, said it had to be more than this. He could not believe this was the thing he had been chasing his whole life.

This testimony is universal. It is so universal that you would expect everyone to have heard it and adjusted. We have not. We continue, generation after generation, to chase exactly the things our predecessors reached and found empty.

There is a name for what is happening. The ladder of Felix is endless because the self is the wrong object of pursuit. The self cannot give itself happiness. The well does not water itself. The mirror does not see its own face. A creature designed for relationship with others and with God cannot ultimately be filled by its own accomplishments, no matter how genuine those accomplishments are.

The Three Tells

If you want to know whether Level Two is the level organizing your life, look for these three signs.

Comparison fatigue. You measure yourself against other people constantly. You feel diminished by their successes. You feel inflated by their failures. The well-being you draw from a good day at work depends almost entirely on whether you stacked up well against someone else. Social media is the perfect environment for this disease, and most men under fifty are now badly infected.

The next-rung obsession. Whatever you have just achieved fades within weeks, and you are already focused on what is next. The promotion you spent three years chasing produces a few good days and then begins to feel like the new baseline you must defend. You cannot rest in any accomplishment because rest would feel like falling behind.

Identity crisis at loss. If you lost the job, the title, the income, the reputation, would you still know who you are? For the man stuck on Level Two, the honest answer is no. His sense of self is welded to his achievements. He has no identity outside them. The fear of loss is what keeps him running.

How Men Get Stuck Here

Often through real virtue. The man on Level Two is usually not lazy or hedonistic. He is responsible. He has put down childish things. He is providing for his family. He is doing what the culture told him good men do. He worked hard, played by the rules, climbed. The trouble is that the rules he is following lead to a destination he was never going to find satisfying.

The way out of Level Two is not to abandon achievement. It is to put achievement back in its proper place: as a means rather than an end. To use your competence, your status, your resources for something larger than yourself. To climb to the next level, which is where the real shift happens.

CHAPTER FIVE

Level Three: The Turn Outward

Something changes at Level Three, and the change is the most important shift a person can make in his life. The happiness here is no longer about you. It is about the good of others and the love of what is true, beautiful, and right.

The Latin name is beatitudo, blessedness. This is the level at which the soul turns outward. The man at Level Three is no longer organizing his life around his own pleasure or his own achievement. He is organizing it around love. Around mission. Around the good of his wife, his children, his community, his country, the truth he serves, the cause he gives himself to.

What the Turn Looks Like

The teacher who could have left for a better-paying job but stays because the kids in his classroom need him.

The father who realizes, somewhere in his thirties or forties, that his career was never the point. His career was the means by which he gave his children a stable home and a good education. The career mattered because the family did, not the other way around. He reorders accordingly.

The doctor who could have specialized in cosmetic procedures but instead works in a rural community where his skills are the only ones available for fifty miles.

The husband who has been so busy with his own concerns for years that he has stopped really seeing his wife, and one morning he sees her again, and the rest of his life rearranges around the love he had been taking for granted.

The man who finds, in middle age, a cause larger than his own success. A foundation he gives time to. A parish ministry he serves in. A justice he works for. A truth he speaks at cost to himself.

These are the marks of Level Three. The center of gravity has shifted from the self to something beyond the self. The questions change. Not "what do I want" but "what is needed." Not "what will make me happy" but "what is good and how can I serve it."

Why It Actually Makes You Happier

Here is the counterintuitive truth. The man who stops chasing his own happiness directly, and begins to give himself away to something larger, is the man who finds the thing the chasers never find.

This is not a cliché. It is a structural fact about the human soul. We are made for love. We are made for self-gift. The architecture of the human person is such that we become ourselves only by giving ourselves to others. Hoard yourself, and you shrink. Spend yourself, and you grow.

> *Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.*
>
> *Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes 24*

Read that sentence twice. It is one of the most important statements in modern Catholic teaching, and it carries the whole logic of Level Three. You become yourself by giving yourself. The man who tries to find himself by serving himself is reaching with the wrong end of the rope. The man who gives himself away is the one who, against the world's calculation, comes back to find a self worth having.

Where Most Saints Lived

If you read the lives of the saints, you find that most of them were not, in their earthly lives, mystics on mountaintops. They were people of Level Three. Mother Teresa of Calcutta picked up dying men from gutters. Saint Vincent de Paul served the poor of Paris for decades. Saint John Bosco built homes for street boys in Turin. Saint Damien of Molokai cared for lepers until he became one. Saint Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward to die in a starving father's place at Auschwitz.

These men and women were not perpetually in ecstasy. They were exhausted, often. They were ordinary in many ways. But the level on which they lived was the level of love, and from inside that level there flowed a happiness their pleasure-seeking and achievement-seeking contemporaries did not have.

If you doubt that Level Three is happier than Level Two, find a man who has genuinely made the turn outward and ask him. He will not tell you life got easier. He will tell you life finally got real.

Why It Still Is Not the Top

Level Three is high. It is far above where most of the world lives. The man who reaches it has done what most never do. He has, in the technical sense, become good.

And yet, even Level Three has a ceiling.

Love of others, however generous, is still finite. The people you love will die. The causes you serve will fail or change or no longer need you. The truth you speak will be ignored. The good you do will be undone by other people′s evil. If your happiness rests entirely on what you have given to finite people and finite causes, you have not yet rested on something that cannot be taken from you.

The saints who lived primarily at Level Three knew this. They served the poor with their hands and were lifted by something beyond the poor. They gave themselves to others and were given, by Someone else, the strength to keep giving. They were not running on their own love. They were running on a love that came from above and through them and out to the world.

That love has a source. The source is Level Four. Without it, even Level Three eventually exhausts itself.

CHAPTER SIX

Level Four: What the Heart Was Made For

This is the level the whole map has been building toward, and the hardest one to talk about, because it is the level we have not yet seen.

Level Four is union with God. The Latin term is sublime beatitudo, ultimate blessedness, or beatitudo perfecta, perfect happiness. The medieval theologians had another name for it. They called it the Beatific Vision, the direct, unmediated seeing of God face to face.

This is what the human soul was designed for. Every other level has been a partial answer to a question whose full answer is here.

The Argument from Restlessness

The clearest argument that Level Four is real is the one Augustine pointed at in the sentence already quoted. Our hearts are restless. Nothing finite satisfies them. The infinite longing is built into us.

Notice the structure of this argument. Hunger does not exist without food. Thirst does not exist without water. The mating drive does not exist without the possibility of union. The animal organism does not develop drives that point at nothing. Wherever there is a stable, universal, deep hunger in a species, there is something that hunger is designed to be satisfied by.

Human beings have a hunger no finite thing satisfies. Every level below Level Four has confirmed this. The pleasures fade. The achievements ring hollow. Even love of others does not quite fill the chamber. The hunger remains. By the logic of design, this hunger points at something.

The Christian tradition says: yes. It points at God. The infinite hunger is for the infinite Good. You were made to know and love and rest in God Himself, and until you do, you will continue to feel, even at your best moments, that something is missing.

> *You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.*
>
> *St. Augustine, Confessions*

Glimpses Now

Level Four is not only future. It begins now, in fragmentary ways, for those who pursue it.

The Mass is a doorway. The Eucharist places you, sacramentally, in contact with the very God you were made for. Adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament is the long, quiet practice of resting in His presence. Contemplative prayer, when grace gives it, is the experience of the soul being held by Someone larger than itself with no words required.

Most of these moments are brief and quiet. They are not the fireworks the spiritual marketplace promises. They are more like the way light comes through a window in winter: thin, real, warming. A moment of unusual peace at Communion. A line in a psalm that catches your breath. A walk after Mass when the world looks, for ten minutes, the way it actually is. These are the foretastes of the level you cannot yet inhabit fully.

The saints had more of these moments than the rest of us. Some of them had a great many, sustained over years. But all of them understood that even the most extraordinary spiritual experience in this life was a glimpse and not the fullness. The full Beatific Vision waits.

What Heaven Actually Is

It is not, in the Christian tradition, primarily a place where you reunite with loved ones, although you do. It is not primarily a place free of pain, although it is. It is not primarily a reward, although it is given as one. Heaven is, at its heart, the direct experience of God.

Aquinas wrote that the blessed in heaven see God as He is in Himself, and that this seeing produces a happiness so complete that no human language can capture it. Every faculty of the soul is filled to capacity. The mind knows what it was made to know. The will loves what it was made to love. The hunger that drove every other pursuit on every other level is finally satisfied. There is nothing left to seek because everything you were ever seeking, often without knowing it, is right there in front of you, freely given, eternally received.

This is the destination. This is what Level Four actually is. The other three levels are not bad. They are real goods. But they are previews. They are the trailers. The film is the seeing of God, and it is the only thing that lasts.

The Practical Difference

A man who has put Level Four at the top of his ladder, even just intellectually, lives differently from a man who has not.

He prays, because prayer is the practice of the level he is reaching for. He goes to Mass like it matters, because it does. He receives the sacraments because they are the means by which Level Four becomes available now. He cares for the poor and his family and his work, because love is the apprenticeship for the One who is Love. He fasts and gives alms and watches what he says, because the soul has to be trained to hold the kind of happiness Level Four contains.

And when the disappointments come, as they will, on Levels One, Two, and Three, he is not shattered. He knew those levels could not deliver what they seemed to promise. The losses hurt, but they do not unmake him. He has already placed his ultimate weight elsewhere. He is, in the strict sense, free from the world's hold on him, while still loving everything in it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Virtues That Get You There

Now the practical question. If the four levels are a ladder, what are the rungs? How does a person actually climb?

The Catholic tradition is unanimous. The climb is made through the virtues. The virtues are the engines of ascent. Without them, even the best intentions slide back down to the levels you came from.

There are seven of them in the tradition, in two groups.

The Cardinal Virtues

Four of them, called cardinal from the Latin cardo, meaning hinge. The rest of the moral life hinges on these. They are human virtues, developed by practice, available to anyone who chooses to cultivate them.

Prudence

Practical wisdom. The ability to see what is actually going on in a situation and choose what is genuinely good rather than what is merely attractive. Prudence is what tells you that a third drink will not actually make this evening better, that the easy lie will cost you more than the hard truth, that the promotion will not deliver what you are imagining. Prudence is the virtue that lets you see past Level One and Level Two to what is really at stake.

Justice

Giving each person what is owed to him. To God, worship. To parents, honor. To children, formation. To employees, fair wages. To enemies, charity. To everyone, the truth. Justice is the virtue that turns you outward. A just man cannot stay locked in Level Two because Level Two is fundamentally self-referential. To practice justice is already to begin the turn that Level Three completes.

Fortitude

Courage, especially the kind that sustains you over time rather than the kind that flashes once. Fortitude is what gets you through the years when the climb is hard and the rewards have not yet arrived. The man who is making the turn from Level Two to Level Three will

face years of being misunderstood, of doing what looks foolish to his old friends, of investing in things that pay no visible dividend. Fortitude is what holds him steady.

Temperance

The right ordering of appetites. Not the absence of desire, but desire put in its proper place. The temperate man enjoys food without being ruled by it. He enjoys his wife without lust pulling him elsewhere. He enjoys his work without idolizing it. He enjoys his rest without giving in to sloth. Temperance is what allows Level One to do what it is supposed to do, namely, give you legitimate pleasure in measure, without becoming the master of your life.

The Theological Virtues

Three more. These are not developed by practice alone. They are infused by grace, given in baptism and grown by the sacraments and prayer. They are the rungs of the ladder that reach into Level Four, which human effort alone cannot touch.

Faith

Trusting what God has revealed about Himself, the world, and you. Faith is the recognition that you cannot see the whole picture from where you stand, and the willingness to trust the One who can. Faith is not certainty, and it is not opposed to reason. It is the act of resting on the testimony of a trustworthy witness about realities your senses cannot reach. Without it, Level Four is invisible to you.

Hope

Confident expectation that what God has promised, He will deliver. Hope is what sustains the long climb when Level Four feels far away. It is the virtue that keeps the soul oriented upward through the dry seasons, the sufferings, the apparent silences. The man with hope is not naive about how hard the climb is. He simply refuses to abandon the destination because the path is difficult.

Charity

Love. Not romantic love. Not even friendship, though it includes it. The technical Christian term is the divine love itself, poured into the soul by the Holy Spirit, making you capable of loving God for His own sake and loving every neighbor as yourself. Charity is the queen of the virtues. It is the one without which all the others are hollow. Paul wrote that even if he

had faith to move mountains, without charity he was nothing. Charity is the very content of Level Four itself, beginning now.

How They Build

The cardinal virtues stabilize the lower levels. They keep pleasure in its place, keep achievement honest, keep the self in proper relation to others. They are necessary but not sufficient. A man can have great prudence and justice and fortitude and temperance and still not be a saint. He can be a noble pagan, an admirable atheist, a decent man whom everyone respects. He has done what human effort can do.

The theological virtues lift everything else into Level Four. They are the rungs that reach above what human nature alone can climb. They are pure gift, given at baptism, grown by the practice of the faith. They make the natural good supernaturally fruitful. They turn the noble pagan into the saint.

The climb requires both. Build the natural virtues by repeated practice. Receive the supernatural virtues by the sacraments and prayer. Day after day. Year after year. The soul, slowly, becomes the kind of soul that can inhabit each level higher than it could before.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Where Are You Stuck?

Now the diagnostic question. Where, honestly, is your center of gravity?

This is not a casual question and the honest answer is rarely flattering. Most of us live well below where we imagine ourselves to be living. The man who thinks of himself as a Level Three Catholic often, on close examination, has Level Two as the actual organizer of his decisions, with a Level Three veneer painted over the top. The painted version is what he shows his fellow parishioners. The actual version is what his calendar and his bank statement and his anxieties reveal.

The point of asking is not to shame yourself. It is to know where the work is.

Diagnostic Questions

Sit with these. Honest answers, not aspirational ones.

On Level One

- Is there a pleasure you genuinely cannot do without? Food, drink, sexual gratification, entertainment, comfort?
- Do you find it nearly impossible to sit in silence for ten minutes?
- Does the thought of fasting from anything you love produce real resistance?
- How much of your daily decision-making, examined honestly, is about avoiding discomfort and maximizing immediate enjoyment?

On Level Two

- How much of your sense of yourself depends on your job, your title, your income, your reputation?
- How often do you measure yourself against other people, openly or quietly?
- How would you describe yourself to a stranger if you could not mention your work or your accomplishments?
- If a major setback erased your career or your reputation tomorrow, who would you still be?

On Level Three

- Whom do you love sacrificially, in concrete ways that cost you?
- Is there anyone, outside your own family, whose well-being you actively serve?
- When you think about your wife and children, do you experience them primarily as gifts you serve or as supporters of your own pursuits?
- What truth, beauty, or justice do you give yourself to without expecting a return?

On Level Four

- How often do you pray, not as duty but as desire?
- When was the last time you spent twenty minutes simply being with God, not asking for anything?
- Does the prospect of eternity with God genuinely interest you, or is it an abstract belief you affirm without longing for it?
- Is your weekly Mass the most important hour of your week, in fact, not just in theory?

The Pattern That Emerges

Most readers, doing this honestly, will find a profile something like this. They have Level One pleasures that occasionally pull them lower than they want to go. They have Level Two as the actual organizer of their daily decisions, often without knowing it. They have flashes of Level Three when their family or their work demands it. They have the smallest taste of Level Four on a good Sunday morning, fading by Tuesday.

This is not a failure. This is, in fact, where most well-meaning Christian adults live. Diagnosing it is the beginning of moving.

How to Climb

Climbing is not a campaign. You do not announce next Monday that you are going to live at Level Four. The campaign approach is itself a Level Two move, treating sanctity as a project to achieve. The actual climb is quieter and longer.

- **Practice one virtue at a time.** Pick the cardinal virtue most missing from your life. Maybe temperance, if pleasure rules you. Maybe justice, if you have neglected someone's claim on you. Work on it for a season, six months, a year. Then pick another.

- **Receive the sacraments more often.** This is the supernatural fuel. Monthly confession at minimum. Daily Mass when possible. Adoration weekly. The theological virtues are grown by these means and only by these means.
- **Cut something from Level One that has been ruling you.** One thing, not everything. The phone after eight. The third drink. The food you cannot stop. Make the small fasting visible to yourself.
- **Add one act of self-giving each day.** Small. Specific. A genuine act of love that costs you something, however little. The phone call you have been avoiding. The compliment to the person you find hard. The fifteen minutes of fully attentive presence with your wife.
- **Reread this chapter every six months.** The climb is slow. You will not feel it most weeks. The yearly comparison is what shows you the movement.

CONCLUSION

The Long Climb

Here is what I want you to take from this book.

You are not crazy for being unhappy. Your unhappiness is, in fact, the most rational response possible to a life organized around things that cannot satisfy you. The vague discontent you carry through your weeks is not a flaw to be medicated. It is the design feature firing properly, telling you that your soul has been built for more than you have given it.

The Christian tradition does not promise you that the more is easy to reach. It promises that the more is real. It draws you a map. It tells you that other men have climbed before you and have made it, some of them whom you may meet someday in the only place where the climb ends. It gives you the tools. It puts the sacraments in your hands. It gives you Mary as a mother and the saints as companions and the Spirit as your guide.

The climb will not be linear. You will spend years on Level Two and slide back to Level One on bad weekends. You will catch glimpses of Level Three and lose them when you get tired. You will taste Level Four on a Sunday morning and forget the taste by Wednesday afternoon. None of this means you are failing. It means you are climbing, slowly, the way actual climbers climb a difficult mountain.

> *The man who never quite arrives at Level Four in this life, but who has spent his life reaching for it, will find at his death that the reaching was the arrival. The God he was climbing toward will meet him at the summit and explain what the climb was always for.*

That is what death is for the Christian. Not the end of the climb but the moment the cloud lifts and you finally see, all at once, the One you have been climbing toward for seventy years. The pleasures you enjoyed on Level One were rumors of Him. The achievements that pleased you on Level Two were echoes of His glory. The loves you gave yourself to on Level Three were small versions of the Love that made you. And when you see Him as He is, every prior level will be revealed as a preparation for the one you have finally reached.

Until then. Keep climbing. The slow steady climb is the saintly life. There is no other one available.

> *"Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."*
>
> *1 Cor 13:12*

✦ ✦ ✦