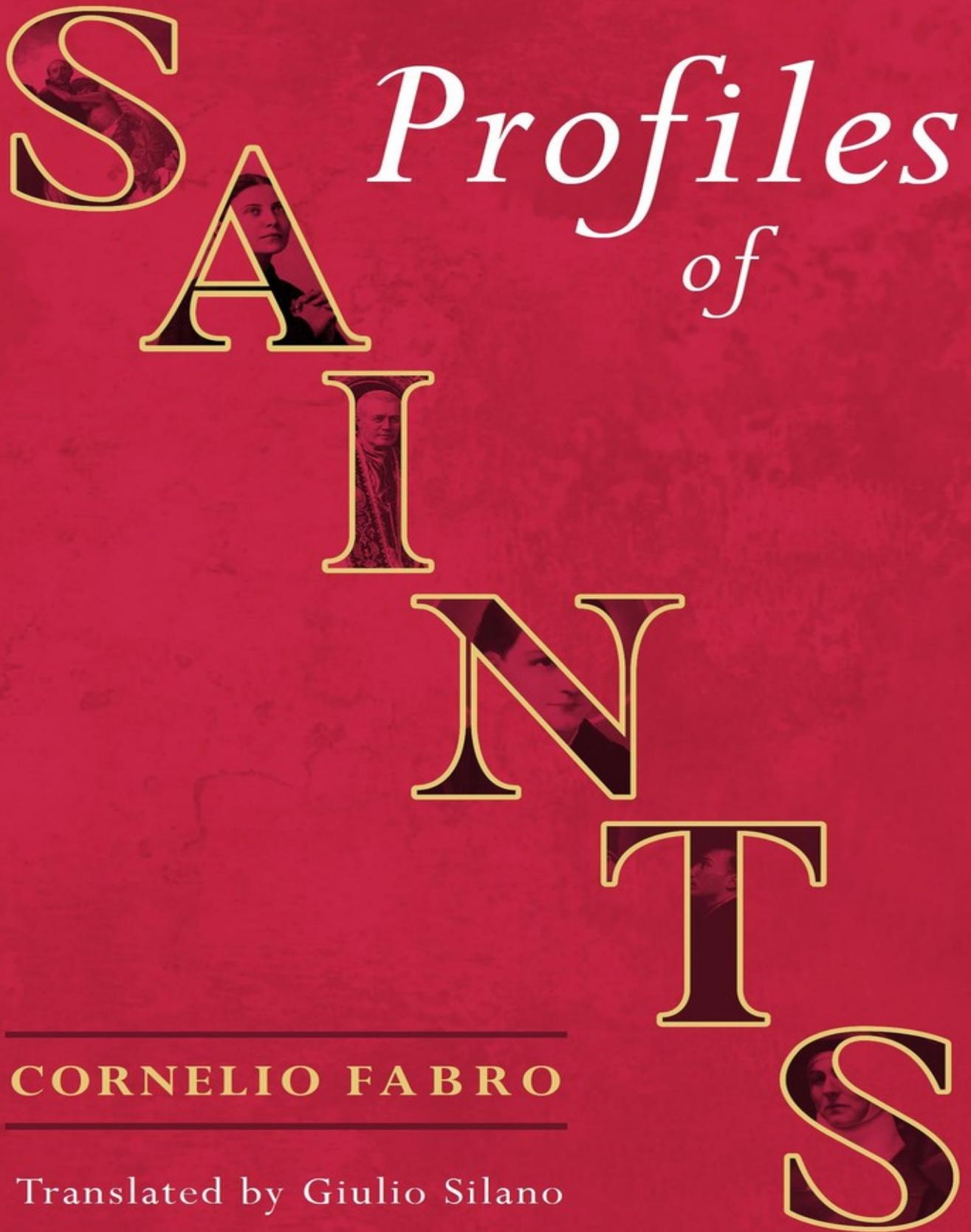


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CORNELIO FABRO

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Translated by Giulio Silano

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# St. Thomas Aquinas

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## OR ON ITALIAN GENTILITY

**W**illiam of Tocco, the official biographer for St. Thomas's cause for canonization, writes that Br. Thomas was tall in stature and wonderfully proportioned in his members; he had blond hair and his face was tanned by the sun. The subtle line of his lips betrayed both his goodness and his firmness; his eyes showed clarity and penetrating calmness. These reflecting and searching eyes are truly characteristic of the ancient representations of St. Thomas. Completely abstracted from the surrounding world, they seem to fix upon an aim distant yet present to the contemplating spirit, not as if lost in a dream, but as if being lifted up wholly in the ardor of a striking truth. Thomas is seized by a specific difficulty, pondering a specific mystery . . . and then, behold . . . the light of new knowledge flashes victorious in his spirit. Yet another moment and that silent mouth will open and convey to us the treasure uncovered, or else his slightly raised hand will write down his new intuition in the open tome before him.

The saint had a delicate, sensitive constitution, very receptive to joy and sorrow, and a rare experience of life. William of Tocco rightly observes that the portentousness of his memory, the beautiful leaps of his imagination, his gift for making intuitive connections, and the exuberant richness of his intimate life, which we admire especially in his liturgical poetry, were all due to this "most tender constitution." This spiritual refinement and sensibility put him in the company of such privileged souls as Francis of Assisi, Raphael, Mozart, and Goethe, along with the powerful spirits of Eckehart, Dante, Michelangelo, Beethoven (Stakemeier).

The refined makeup of his soul was accompanied by a virile courage that was free of sentimentality or personal vanity, and a coolly resolute power of decision, which manifested itself particularly in the face of danger. Such was the case when the ship taking him to Paris was

threatened by a furious storm with an imminent danger of complete shipwreck, in which he alone was able to retain a composure so calm as to inspire courage in the other people onboard until they were out of danger. Neither his mother's prayers, nor his sisters' tears, nor his brothers' brutality, nor even long months of captivity in his father's castle were able to shake the steely will with which he had freely chosen the ideal of his new Order. Yet, despite this firmness, Thomas never offended or harmed anyone either by word or in deed. It is true that, against his adversaries in Paris, in order to defend the truth, he knew how to express his thoughts with resoluteness, but his righteous indignation—both verbal and written—never exceeded its just measure. Because of nobility of spirit and awareness of an innate strength, rather than out of weakness, he showed himself meek and understanding toward the rejections and errors of his environment. Thomas possessed what Italians call “gentilezza” [gentility]: that refined and chivalrous manner, ever responsive to need and full of attentions, which issues from profound self-possession and trust in the good. In addition to this gentility, he possessed “dulcedo” [sweetness], radiant amiability and goodness, and the aristocratic delicacy of Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Philip Neri, and John Bosco. His contemporaries called him “the kindly and beloved master,” and even Eckehart speaks with emotion of the “dear St. Thomas.”

The famous theologian and man of science showed sincere respect for the little and the weak who are frequently so great and so strong in the eyes of God. He wrote that a little old woman full of faith understands much more concerning the divine things than a proud, learned man without faith who knows how to weave magisterial syllogisms on the First Principle of things (In *Symbolum Apostolorum expositio*, prologue).

\* \* \*

The spiritual development of St. Thomas does not display the same sudden leaps and gaps as that of a St. Augustine. From the very beginning, his happy constitution exhibited the mark of a psychological-physical unity. During his childhood, he grew like a strong, tender shoot in the garden of the Church without ever having to succumb to the terrible struggle between the senses and the spirit. The harmony that reigned within him could be troubled only with difficulty. Trustworthy witnesses,

such as Br. Reginald, his confessor, attest that he never felt or willingly allowed any temptations of the flesh. Being well regulated in all things, he knew how to arrange his day in a beautiful order: early in the morning, he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice; then he served the Mass of one of his brethren; finally, he mounted the pulpit to preach or took the professor's chair to teach his lesson. He showed no preference regarding different foods at table and immersed himself in his queries with such intensity that he never even noticed whether or not he had been served. During the hours set aside for recreation, he could be seen striding with resolute steps through the garden or the cloister, always in meditation, yet always ready to respond affably to the brothers who stopped to speak with him. His afternoons were spent either writing or dictating; and he abandoned himself to contemplation of divine things from after the evening meal until late into the night.

Where he was strict with himself, he was humane and reasonable with others. He allowed them the small and innocent joys of life, and taught expressly that humor and amusements have their place in helping us to bear our daily sufferings, which are far from few. In so doing, he succinctly unmasked the deep hypocrisy of a puritanical pharisaism.

\* \* \*

In full freedom, he chose for himself the flower of the most sublime donation to God in a life of virginity. The breath of his purity communicated itself more and more to his whole person, revealing the admirable impartiality and sureness of a man who has never experienced within himself the rupture caused by grave fault. His radiant purity was not, however, insensitivity; indeed, in the latter, he saw a distortion and defect of the soul that goes straight against the order of nature (ST II-II, q. 142, a. 1). The true foundation of a life of virginity is not the devaluation of the sensitive, a Neoplatonic reduction, or Stoic denial. He warned emphatically against a false rigorism that would consider normal conjugal life as something inferior and unsuitable. For him, as for the Apostle, a life of virginity is only for those who wish to serve God without obstacles and who wish to dedicate themselves to contemplation with a fuller and more pure freedom (ST II-II, q. 152, a. 1, ad 1).

It is in this total dedication to God that Thomas perceived his life's ideal and from it that his life drew its enchantment and its beauty. His was a spirit fixed unwaveringly on God. It is not without reason that painters of old have emphasized this trait of his personality. Theology was for him "sacred doctrine," holy and sanctifying, which lifts us above all natural perspectives and, with grace, is a participation in the intimate life of the Three Divine Persons. For this reason, St. Thomas adamantly insisted that chastity and interior purity of will are necessary for the knowledge of God. From impurity, he says, is born the blindness of a mind no longer open to the truth of divine things and then the paralysis of a soul unable to operate for its own salvation, foolishness, apathetic sloth, and hardness of heart (ST II-II, q. 56, a. 3).<sup>a</sup> With keen psychological observation, he shows that perfect dedication to the Divine Goodness gradually lessens the force of the lower inclinations, directing all the limited energies of our being toward the Supreme Good.

\* \* \*

Thus, for St. Thomas, sublime thoughts stand in a peace that is outside time, beyond all subjectivity and personal situations. It is truth in itself speaking here, the word of God in its inexhaustible fullness, and the theologian watches over it with respectful tranquility. Because St. Thomas's temperament was both that of mystic and researcher, his symbol is the radiant sun that, like a ruby, shines from his breast. The brightest clarity of thought and an impassioned mystical experience grew within him in a deep organic unity, joined together to form a single trait of his nature.

Although it is true that the first step toward God occurs through Faith, Faith can apprehend the divine only analogically, under the veil of human concepts. Love, on the other hand, transports us into God insofar as it unites us directly to him, attaining to him in a manner far more perfect than Faith. Love transforms us into new creatures, impressing upon the soul a growing likeness to the divine nature, and thus it communicates to us the foundations for a new and more profound understanding of the Divinity.

St. Thomas saw the effect of the gift of wisdom that the Holy Spirit infuses in us together with love in this experience of the divine. As love's most delicate flower, this wisdom grows and brings us to a sort of accord with and an affinity for the Deity, a "connaturality" with the Divinity. It renders us apt to live the sacred, to experience something of its mysteries beyond all our conceptions, to touch its inner reign, to taste its secret happiness.

God alone was ever the end of all of Thomas Aquinas's longing. Even as an adolescent in the monastery of Montecassino, he often asked his teachers, "Who is God?" All throughout his life, he did nothing more than to reflect upon that answer, and his yearning to attain the vision of God without veils became a burning flame by which, when not yet fifty, he was consumed.

<sup>a</sup> Rather, ST II-II, q. 15, a. 3.

## Conversations on St. John of God

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Just what resonance these *Gespräche um Johannes von Gott* by Ludwig Ruland will be able to have, I do not know. I sincerely hope that the approach taken by the author will meet with an understanding adequate to foster imitators who will have the same deep appreciation that he has of human things as well as his respect for things divine. Published in 1947, this little book is the labor of the Catholic publisher Ferdinand Schöningh of Würzburg, and is one of the first fraternal greetings to come to us from Germany in this post-war era. This greeting, which has as ambassador the saint of mercy, develops page by page, from beginning to end, the theme of using one's own immolation to relieve the suffering of others, to eradicate injustices, and to fertilize the little corner of goodness that every human heart retains of its divine origin. For each Christian, but especially for the saints, life has its starting point in the condemnation of this world. Even before Christianity, Socrates himself glimpsed this when he said to the judges that "it is better to suffer than to do injustice" (*Apol.* 32 bd).<sup>a</sup> The point of arrival, or better yet, the sphere of action of such a life is the infinite expanse of the works of mercy. The true point of arrival is the love that the saint bears for God, which is also the true starting point from the Christian perspective, rather than the merely human love of Socrates. In this sense, the works of mercy can be called an exteriorization of that interior love of the creature for its Creator, because the dialogue of the saints with creatures is no more than the echo of their dialogue with God, its fruit, and its testimony. The intimate relationship of the saint with God is tied to a secret. Since the way of sanctity is precisely the opposite of that of curiosity, this secret is hidden from every profane gaze. Each saint has possessed his secret, which has bound him to God in the abandonment of complete immolation. Since we, imprisoned as we are by our few half-baked ideas, are in the dark concerning that secret, whatever appears to us as incoherent or even

repulsive is in fact what links and explains these harmonies, which the Holy Spirit educes from our fragile human nature when the latter listens with docility to that same Spirit's ineffable invitations.

This little book is an attempt to fathom such a secret through a deepened knowledge of the fragility of the flesh. This is a bold undertaking, which though carried out in the feeble glow of an indirect light, attempts to respond to that question most compelling to our curiosity: Are the saints like or unlike us? Christian common sense answers that they were like us, but that they lived differently than us, that is, they possessed all our passions of body and soul, but they bore the first generously and struggled with the second without yielding. This little book takes a step forward in showing that some of the saints at least suffered bodily passions more painful and more deeply discordant than our own. Yet, they were able to "transfigure" them into the heavenly joyousness of the cardinal and theological virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit with a will that was indomitable and docile to divine grace.

The new method, presented in recent years and in different measures by other authors of hagiographical studies, attacks the facile hagiographical tradition, which portrays Christ's most faithful imitators as though they were exempt from our misery, perpetually surrounded by a halo of glory even during the course of their earthly lives. Positivism attempted to demonstrate that the halo in question was one of smoke, and sanctity and mysticism no more than abnormalities in the functioning of our vital activities, phenomena indicative of evasion, if not always of degeneration, as some researchers were willing to argue. The respectful recognition granted to Christian mysticism in Henri Bergson's last work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*,<sup>b</sup> has dealt justly with such profanations and made it possible for the Christian hagiographer to explore the life of the spirit according to his own proper criterion. Yet, the present little book admonishes that none of those things which can befall our poor human nature are, in themselves, opposed to grace, neither the illnesses and physical flaws, which like us, the saints may have had, nor even spiritual flaws themselves, excluding, of course, any attachment to evil. This method then is an arduous one which finds itself in its earliest applications and which ought to be followed with thoughtful attention. The study of man, the metaphysics of the spirit, so to speak, by merit of new

currents of thought, has entered into a phase, which reveals not a few points of contact with the most authentic Christian tradition. It pertains to “spiritual theology” to ensure that its method does not cross its boundaries or trespass onto forbidden ground.

Ludwig Ruland, having held the chairs of moral theology, pastoral theology, homiletics, and Christian sociology in the University of Würzburg from 1913 to 1938 (according to the information provided by a note appended to the volume), is a veteran of university teaching. He has ably entrusted the development of his analysis to that most cordial form of exploration of the truth, which is the dialogue. This form breaks away from all continuity of discourse that is external and systematic, in favor of an approach that is more interior, one that constitutes the interlocutors’ secret center of convergence. These interlocutors are the prior, the physician, and the professor. The first of these, the prior, basing himself on the first “Life” of St. John of God, written in 1580 by Francisco Castro, summarizes the biography of the saint in austere passages shorn of all rhetorical baggage. These passages are subsequently offered to the other two interlocutors, each of whom seeks to place those facts back within their real, original framework—according to the point of view of his own field of study—through the interrogation of medicine and history. In the course of this peaceful search for the subjective and objective conditions of the saint’s existence, of the “situation,” as they say today, distrust is cast upon the “Life” written in 1623 by Bishop Govea, which like that of Castro was also received by the Bollandists. Yet, aside from a congeries of visions, miracles, and supernatural manifestations, which lack any critical foundation and are due exclusively to the baroque imagination of its author, it adds nothing to the latter and principal source. It is to be lamented that later historians, unfortunately, have drawn more on Govea than on Castro.

Using Castro’s narrative, the two experts of the “Dialogue” seek to retrace the subjective and objective conditions mentioned earlier which Castro, bound as he was by the cultural perspective of his own time and lacking both a historical sense and psychological sensitivity, did not feel the need to examine. Thus the professor, with broad and effective expositions, introduces us to seventeenth-century Spanish life by describing the various social classes and clarifying the distances and

clashes between them. He also shows the enormous force that faith exercised both on the suffering and those rejected by fortune in bearing their unspeakable miseries, as well as its influence on those few favored ones who knew how to respond and frequently did so at the request of the saint, with a generosity equal to the faith that they professed. This explains the access that the saint had to the doors of the powerful, even of the king himself, and therefore the inexhaustibility of his means of assistance.

Much more arduous has been the task of the physician, which constitutes the truly original aspect of the volume. As is known, the biography of St. John of God portrays patterns and circumstances that are altogether unique. He ran away from home at the age of eight; among other things, this led even to the loss of his family name. It is for this reason that his new hosts called him John of God, according to the custom of the times. This suggests to the physician the hypothesis that John may have inherited a schizophrenic condition that disposed him to intermittent fits of “motor restlessness” and may have driven him to take up a new type of life abruptly. A vigorous youth, he attempted a career at arms, but suffered a grievous head wound in a fall from his horse, from which he was healed only after great sufferings. However, as the physician informs us, the healing from the physical trauma did not comport in itself a similar healing of the wounds that may have occurred in the deeper areas of the psyche, especially if we take into account a congenital schizophrenic condition. Then (and we note this as a simple hypothesis for consideration), in light of the most characteristic feature of the saint’s biography, namely, his admittance to the insane asylum at Granada, the physician asserts that this may well have been an episode of real insanity and not, as has been believed until now, of insanity simulated for ascetical reasons. To this type of disorder, the physician also attributes the urge for sudden changes in direction observable in the life of the saint, as well as the difficulty he experienced in recollecting himself in prayer. However, this perspective must not be misunderstood. It does not wish, in any way, to eliminate or to lessen the supernatural reality of this exceptional life in which the very gravity of the “disease” allows the untamed energy of John’s spirit and the work of divine grace to emerge more clearly. He directs the operation of a great hospital down to the least detail, supports several works of charity at the same time, being present everywhere with sound common sense regarding the realities of life. When the occasion

warrants, he makes use of the most sophisticated methods of human and Christian prudence for the good of those subject to him.

According to the physician, the case of St. John of God may not be the only instance in which an individual with an abnormal physico-psychic constitution reached sanctity. He cites the work of Fischer<sup>c</sup> on St. Camillus de Lellis,<sup>d</sup> who may have had a schizothymic condition. This might help to explain the conflict between St. Camillus and St. Philip Neri, his confessor, as well as the fits of temper into which, despite his best intentions, he fell with his associates. Amid the emotion and to the edification of those present, he would then shed tears of bitter repentance. God, it seems, wished to try these two saints of mercy, both of whom experienced the most repugnant sufferings of body and spirit, with similar afflictions in order that their detachment from self and their dedication to their brethren might know no bounds. Far from denying the supernatural, the physician actually intends to underline its efficacy and eminence. Moreover, he attributes to it the incident when the saint heroically rescued all the hospitalized patients from a fire without suffering any harm to himself—a miracle mentioned in both the Bull of canonization and in the prayer for his feast. Although his own interpretation leans toward the hypothesis of a “psychic trauma” caused by wounds to the meninges and cortex, he does not rule out Malvy’s explanation, which attributes the episode of insanity to the interior crisis or emotional “shock”<sup>e</sup> caused by the intensity of his repentance for his own sins. However, considering the complexity of hereditary and natural factors, which occur even in those consciences that pass for normal, perhaps the two explanations are not irreconcilable.

Yet in the life of man, even the gravest and most painful misfortunes serve the inscrutable designs of Providence, especially where there is docile submission to the motions of God. The physician is the one who points out that, for John, forced rest among the mentally ill, the barbarous treatment then used on those unfortunates notwithstanding, produced his return to a normal form of life. “With the passing of years, the interior impulse toward change and action can no longer be satisfied by the exterior necessities of the desired ideal. To rent or purchase houses to welcome the sick and the poor, and to seek alms ceaselessly for their support, corresponded to the deepest inclination of his nature. Under the

unceasing illumination and guidance of His grace, the soul that gives itself wholly to God then builds a sanctity of rare greatness upon the foundation of such a nature.”<sup>f</sup>

This sober declaration which can serve as a commentary to the “*Virtus in infirmitate perficitur*” [power is made perfect in weakness]<sup>g</sup> of St. Paul, sums up the new criterion followed by the author. At issue, then, is that “thorn” that God often fixes in the flesh of saints and of the greater spirits so that it may be for them both a continuous “reminder” of their natural misery and the bond by which He keeps them tied to Himself in ineffable love. Dr. Ruland does not say this, but it can be read between the lines.

To the modern scholars of the *gesta sanctorum* [deeds of the saints], which are so rich in both divine and human sense, we entrust the new method, so that they may recover the authentic face of our saints, steeped in suffering and transfigured by divine grace.

<sup>a</sup> Cf. Plato, *Apology* 32b—d.

<sup>b</sup> *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*.

<sup>c</sup> “Foscher” in *Profili di Santi*.

<sup>d</sup> Cf. Michael Fischer, *Der heilige Kamillus von Lellis* (Freiburg: Caritasverlag, 1940).

<sup>e</sup> Cf. Antoine Malvy, “Saint Jean de Dieu a-t-il simulé la folie?,” *Études* 191 (May 1927): 427–438.

<sup>f</sup> Ludwig Ruland, *Gespräche um Johannes von Gott* (Würzburg: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1947), 116–117.

<sup>g</sup> 2 Cor 12:9.

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