

BOSSUET

ON GOVERNANCE

BISHOP JACQUES-BÉNIGNE BOSSUET TO KING LOUIS XIV

LETTER 2—1675 *What a king's devotion must be*

THE essential obligation that religion imposes on us is to love God with all our heart, as the source of all our good, and of all our being. We must not love anything which does not in some way pertain to Him, or lead us to Him. Such is the purpose of a Christian life, and until we have made this our purpose, until we desire that love shall reign in our hearts, we can have no sincere repentance and no true devotion. Our Lord has taught us in the holy gospel that we shall find our life in love alone.

Now love is nothing other than the firm, constant willingness and desire and purpose to please God, and to conform our own wishes entirely to what He commands, rooting out from our hearts all that might displease Him, even though it should cost us our lives. Love makes us as fond of our fellow men as we are of ourselves, and bids us consider every man's good, and help each one according to his state. A king, therefore, can practise the love of God in every minute of his days. Far from being distracted from his duties by the practice of devotion, it is love itself that will help him to undertake every portion of his work with firmness, gentleness, and such inward happiness and peace of soul that no earthly joy can ever be found equal to them.

For a king, it is nothing out of the ordinary to love God. It is simply to do all that his duty asks of him, but to do it for the love of God Who has put him on the throne. A king who loves God will wish to make God the true sovereign in his kingdom, for kings are only the vice-regents of God. A king, by inclining his will to God's will, thereby subjects the wills of all his people to God, in so far as theirs depend on his. He protects religion whenever necessary, and he realizes that when he protects the interests of religion, it is religion that is protecting him. There is no more powerful motive than religion for subjecting people to their princes. A good king loves his people with real affection, because God has confided them into his care. He looks after them with a father's heart, remembering that God is the Father of all men, and that he is himself God's viceroy over them. He can see that he is made king only in order to do good, in so far as he can, to all men, but particularly to his own subjects. This is the most admirable effect of his power over men.

When his actions are aimed at the good of the state, a king is practising the love of his fellow men in a supreme degree, because the good of the state comprises the good and the peace of an infinity of peoples. When he renders justice, or sees that it is meted out according to the laws of his land (and this is his principal office), he preserves the good of each of his subjects and gives something to men which is dearer to them than any other good, even their lives; I refer, of course, to their liberty and tranquillity, which it is the king's duty to keep from oppression and violence. Whatever he does, a ruler can always bear the good of his fellow men in mind, and seeking after their good, he fulfils the service which God has asked of him.

And so it is evident that a ruler, if he would become a saint, has to do no more than he normally does; but instead of doing it for a lower, and less agreeable, motive, he does it simply for the love of God. The public good is even included in a king's lawful pastimes and amusements, for these are often necessary to

recreate a mind which would otherwise be quite exhausted by many and varied duties.

What should a king do, then, when he gives himself to God? What should he need to change in his life? Nothing—only sin. And by doing all his actions for God, he will become a saint, without taking any unusual means for attaining sanctity. The love of God will teach him to do all things with necessary moderation, and to organize all his plans with the public good in view, to which are necessarily joined his own satisfaction and his own renown. His love of the common good will entail a careful examination of all particular cases, because the public good is made up precisely of these.

There is no need for long prayers, or for the extensive spiritual reading which those unaccustomed to it find so trying. Nothing of this sort is needed. Your need is simply to pray to God in all your comings and goings, whether you address Him personally by seeking Him with conscious prayer, or turn to Him silently in your soul. Take care to see that the prayers you say to God are well and properly said, and that will be enough. As regards your outward conduct, only sin is to be put away, for it disorganizes and dishonours your life, giving you anguish and punishment in this world and the next. How much happier we are when we have put such things out of our lives! Above all, seek to make the great change in your life *within* you. Let your prayer become more and more a simple habit of looking in God's direction. He will look after you and never cease to protect you with that care without which we could not live from one minute to the next.

—Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), Bishop of Meaux, in his *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, a selection translated from the French by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, and published by The Saint Austin Press, London, in 2001, pages 31–34. *Letters* first published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1958.

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