

Enough has been provided, hopefully, to convince the readership of the *Catholic Social Science Review* of the importance, relevance, and various contributions of Peter L. Berger. Hopefully, a Catholic-Bergerian exchange of views will continue into the indefinite future. One final and too obvious point: there is absolutely *nothing* “boring” about the man, his life, his writings, and the book under review!

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Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2010. 869 pages. \$20, paper.

I recently had the pleasure of reading two books that inspire human perfection. The first, *Washington: A Life* (2010), by Ron Chernow, is decidedly secular, but inspirational nonetheless. The other, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (1924), by Adolphe Tanqueray, S.S., D.D., is a treatise for those interested in advancing in the spiritual life.

The confluence of Washington’s biography and Tanqueray’s prescriptions for spiritual growth forced me to reflect anew on Jesus’ words, “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). This *Dominical* command is, in fact, the life project for every human being. In his classic work Tanqueray defines the three traditional stages of spiritual life—the *Purgative*, the *Illuminative*, and the *Unitive*—as steps toward perfection. But, like any worthwhile achievement, it takes effort, constant practice and supernatural grace.

Each person’s life is a mixture of the *human* and the *divine*. Even if, in our agnostic age, some doubt the supernatural aspect, it is through the interplay of nature and grace—our material attributes acted upon by the will of God—that we develop our character and strive for personal fulfillment. To grow in our humanity takes work. For one thing, we must come to grips with our motives, which are usually mixed. Often, for example, the quest for perfection gets all tangled up with desire for status or recognition, having others see us in a favorable light. And growing in character and spiritually requires us to take stock of ourselves—our virtues, our vices, and our ultimate goal—and then to make regular assessments of progress in achieving the hoped-for end (which, for believers is heaven) and it also requires, of course, prayer.

Ron Chernow's presentation of George Washington, a psychological and surprisingly spiritual portrait of this iconic figure, shows us a complex and, at times, conflicted person. "Never a perfect man," Chernow writes, "he always had a normal quota of human frailty, including a craving for money, status and fame." Nevertheless, America's first president is revealed as a man who continually strove to overcome his human weaknesses. Chernow provides examples that seem to indicate his reliance on God's grace for his success in doing so.

Tanqueray reminds us that, "Based on supernatural convictions the desire for perfection takes root and grows chiefly through meditation and prayer." And on that topic Chernow writes of Washington that each Sunday evening, "he read aloud sermons on passages from Scripture and continued to say grace at meals." He also relays that one observer remembered how Washington kneeling by the bed of Martha's daughter Patsy "solemnly recited the prayers for the dying."

Tanqueray tells us that the first step to perfection, the *Purgative*, is to have a "plan of life." We should consciously chart a course that will help us achieve what we desire. Self-reflection is key. A daily examination of conscience that dissects our activities and the interactions that occurred each day helps to identify failures as well as progress toward virtue. We should review the seven capital sins and try to uproot them from our lives. Determination to improve and to avoid relapses into vice should be our project for the morrow, especially cultivating the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

Washington realized the power of lust in spurring one to seek the joys of the flesh. This reflects Tanqueray's caution that, "The mortification of the senses demands that we speak no word nor lend a willing ear to utterances that hurt brotherly love, purity, humility and other Christian virtues, for, says St. Paul, 'Evil communications corrupt good manners.'" For example, according to Chernow, although Washington had an infatuation that dated from his youth with Sally Fairfax, the wife of a dear friend, he was careful never to cross the line in his affections or regard for her.

Tanqueray's second stage on the road to spiritual perfection, the *Illuminative*, is "thus named because the great aim of the soul is now the imitation, the following of Christ, by the positive exercise of Christian virtues." Chernow portrays Washington as exercising the virtue of charity, believing in "the need for good works as well as faith." George and Martha "never turned away beggars at the doorstep," he writes, and "tried to practice anonymous charity even when it would have been politically expedient to advertise it loudly." This is indicative of Washington's adherence to the Gospel according to Matthew "But when you give to the poor,

do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret” (Matthew 6:3–4). Washington also provides an illustration of humility when, according to Chernow, after John Adams and Thomas Jefferson took their oaths of office, the outgoing president “ended the inauguration ceremony with an exquisite gesture: he insisted that President Adams and Vice President Jefferson exit the chamber before him, a perfect symbol that the nation’s most powerful man had now reverted to the humble status of a private citizen.”

Such indications of Washington’s character clearly suggest efforts to model himself after Christ. As Tanquerey puts it, “Through meditation the person is attracted to our Lord’s virtues,” and in the second stage, “Fervent souls are more generous and humble.” This is because prayer is more affective (emotional) than discursive (logical). One meets Christ personally, and the encounter brings change. Washington’s fervor reveals itself the more in his concern for the spiritual well being of others, as he is said to have told his soldiers “every officer and man will endeavor to live and to act as becomes a Christian soldier defending the dearest rights and liberties of his country.”

Any determination as to whether Washington achieved Tanquerey’s final, *Unitive* stage is purely speculative. Nevertheless, there are a few indications that point to the possibility. Tanquerey describes this level as “To live altogether unto God, not on the level of mediocrity.” He says one of the characteristics is a “holy abandonment to God” when reasonings gradually disappear.

Someone who has achieved this level is not only virtuous, but infused with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As to the *infused* character of Washington’s contemplation, we can make no assertions. Washington gave some indication of sharing in the gift of fortitude, which Tanquerey describes as “imparting to the will an impulse and an energy which enable it to do things joyfully and fearlessly despite all obstacles.” He demonstrated something more than the cardinal virtue of courage at the Battle of Princeton where, Chernow writes, “he reined in his horse, faced the enemy directly, and simply froze. Yet again the intrepid Washington acted as if he were protected by an *invisible aura*.” And Chernow observes how Washington’s fortitude was reflected in his ability to keep the Continental Army intact by his “spiritual and managerial genius.”

Washington also exhibited signs of great piety, the gift that Tanquerey says, “makes us see in God not merely our Sovereign Master, but the best and most loving father.” Chernow reports that Washington “construed favorable events in the war as reflections of Providence, transforming him from an actor in a human drama into a tool of heavenly purpose. He be-

lieved that Providence (God) watched out for the United States of America and for him.” Washington’s proclamation of the first Thanksgiving declared that “Almighty God” should be thanked for the abundant blessings bestowed on the American people, illustrating how, as Tanquerey puts it, thoughts and actions can be transformed into “acts of religion.” It is also important to remember that Washington kissed the Bible after his first Inaugural Oath.

It also seems that he strove for “purity of heart,” which Tanquerey describes as “complete detachment” from those things that “can lead to sin and trouble the soul.” Washington tried to detach himself from material things. For example, he turned down any salary, both when serving as General of the Continental Army and after becoming President. He shunned honors and continually sacrificed himself for the good of the nation, despite his strong personal desire to retire to his beloved plantation, Mount Vernon. This detachment may also have been reflected in Washington’s death, which observers said demonstrated great equanimity, even though it was rather gruesome. In his final agony he is reported to have said, “I die hard, but I am not afraid to go.” Chernow writes, “Even in death Washington never lapsed into self-absorption and remained particularly attuned to other people’s moods.” For example, “he urged the young slave attending him to sit down.” Tanquerey would describe such apparent conformity with God’s will as “a transforming union which causes great serenity.”

Speculative as they may be, such signs suggest that George Washington was a deeply spiritual man who was successful because he intentionally nurtured his spiritual life. Reflecting on Washington’s story—in light of Tanquerey’s exposé—can provide motivation for all people to strive for excellence. It should remind us that human perfection is not reserved for those in monasteries or who have religious vocations. It is for everybody, even those who, like Washington, bear great public responsibilities. In fact, people involved in worldly affairs should pay special attention to their spiritual growth, so that they might achieve the greatness to which all human beings are called, help to create a better world, and in the end, enter into eternal life. After all, in the end, “only one thing is needful” (Luke 10:42).

Chernow includes an engraving, by David Erwin, circa 1800, titled *Apotheosis of Washington*, which portrays Washington achieving his eternal crown in heaven. While he will never be officially canonized by any Church, it is safe to say that America’s first president has achieved the status of a *secular saint*, someone to whom everyone can look as a role model.

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