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THE SPIRITUAL CONFERENCES



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die 10 Augusti, 1906

# THE SPIRITUAL CONFERENCES

*Translated from the Annecy Text  
of 1895 under the supervision of*

ABBOT GASQUET

*and the late*

CANON MACKEY, O.S.B.

LONDON: BURNS & OATES, LIMITED

NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO: BENZIGER BROTHERS

1909



## DEDICATION

LIVE ✠ JESUS

*To our dear Sisters in Our Lord, our Sisters of the  
Visitation of Holy Mary*

DEAREST SISTERS,—

These are the Conferences which our Holy Founder gave to us at various times, and on different occasions. We listened to them most attentively, and wrote them down after he had finished delivering them; and as they were then fresh in our memory, and each of our sisters contributed a portion, we tried by collecting all these portions together, and arranging them as well as we could, to form a perfect whole. We confess, however (and this will easily be believed of a work which has passed through hands so unworthy as ours), that in spite of the care and diligence which we brought to the task, it has been impossible for us to be so exact as not to have allowed some valuable remarks to have escaped us; and even those which we have retained, lose much of the force and effect which they had when they came direct from such precious and venerable lips. At the same time, we may be permitted to say, with perfect truth, that a great part of the teachings which he left us are in this collection so

simply and faithfully reproduced, that whoever had the happiness of listening to them, or who is well versed in his books, will at once recognise in it his spirit, and will find no difficulty in placing these Conferences, if not in the rank of those works which issued straight from his hands, yet at least among those which have in some sense the honour of belonging to him. Indeed, if they are not so fully elaborated as the rest of his books, if the argument is not so close, if there is anything in them which strikes a reader as less worthy of his eminent doctrine and the high reputation which his other writings have won for him, it is not surprising, seeing that he never saw or read them. You know that children weaned too soon from their mother's breast are never so strong and healthy as those who are suckled for the proper time, and we always pity children born after their fathers' death.

Certainly the beloved Father of our souls never thought that his familiar Conferences would see any other light than that of our parlour, in which, with such incredible simplicity and familiarity, he answered our little questions; neither was it our intention to communicate them to the public, but only to preserve them in manuscript for the consolation of our Houses in particular, for the use of which they were destined. It happened, however (we cannot say how), that they were printed without our knowledge, with a great number of very serious mistakes, and under very poor conditions. His Lordship the Bishop of Geneva, the worthy brother and successor of our own beloved prelate, having seen this, obtained the licence for printing, and feel-

ing that the reputation of his holy brother was at stake, commanded us to promptly publish a true text, which should repair the harm done by this bad edition, and give correctly what had been taken down in this convent. Certainly, we are willing to believe about our neighbour that it was holy zeal rather than any other consideration which induced him to publish these instructions, but we must not push our indulgence too far. We cannot refrain from charitably complaining of him, not for having deprived us of what seemed to be ours (for we have nothing of our own, and spiritual goods are less so than any others, because they ought to be more freely communicated), but for having extracted these Conferences from us in such a way that, finding himself in difficulties, he was forced to break them up and to publish them piecemeal, as he had got hold of them. It must be noted particularly that these copies have been re-copied several times by young persons, who have added all sorts of little things picked up here and there—which had, indeed, been said to particular individuals, but which, for want of memory, had not been written down as our beloved Father had said them. Consequently, he who carried them off was obliged to fill up the blanks and correct the sense by much foreign matter. This so completely altered the work that it is scarcely recognisable, as may easily be seen by comparing the two editions. It has therefore been necessary, dearest sisters, to lay these Conferences, in the first place, before those on whom we depend and whose advice we are bound to take. They have carefully corrected the defects which they had

contracted under our hands, and have given them to the public in the form which was requisite for enabling them to justly bear the name of *the Conferences* of our blessed Father. Perhaps you may find in them some things so specially proper to our own Houses, that you will not consider it expedient to publish them so openly, the spirit of the world not being always disposed to receive works of piety with that simplicity and reverence which is their due. Nevertheless, as it was always one of the salutary counsels and desires of our blessed Father and Founder, declared to us in one of his Conferences, that the spirit of our Houses should be communicated to our neighbour, therefore, that we may not deprive our neighbour of the fruit of the holy instructions which we have received, obedience and charity require us to impart them to the public; obedience also adding that they should be particularly dedicated to us, as for those to whom they specially belong, our blessed Father having addressed them to us.

Let us, then, together enjoy these useful and delightful Conferences; let us, by frequently and attentively reading them, keep ourselves in the spirit of our Rule, and not only by reading them, but, still more, by faithfully practising the holy lessons with which they are filled; and while we are giving outward expression to them, let us imprint them deeply on our hearts, so that they may never be effaced, and that we may not have one day to give account of a precious talent wasted. We hope that our blessed Father who gave this talent to us from Our Lord will obtain for us, from



His divine Goodness, grace to employ it well, and to make use of it for His glory and the salvation of our souls. This is our constant desire for you and for ourselves, who are in Jesus Christ,

Dearest Sisters,

Your very humble and affectionate Sisters  
and Servants,

THE RELIGIOUS OF THE MONASTERY  
OF THE VISITATION OF HOLY  
MARY OF ANNECY.

BLESSED BE GOD.



## TO THE READER

A FEW words only seem called for to introduce the present volume. The edition of the *Spiritual Conferences* translated into English, which was published in 1862, has naturally long been out of print, and the translation itself, according to modern notions, although faithful enough to the French original, left much to be desired. It was therefore wisely determined by the Sisters of the Convent of the Visitation, at Harrow-on-the-Hill, to prepare an entirely new English version of the Conferences of St. Francis of Sales, in the belief that if they were made more readable, the practical and common-sense spiritual teaching of their great patron and founder, contained in them, might prove of some service to souls seeking for help in the interior life.

It was confidently hoped that this edition of the Conferences would have been edited by the late Dom Benedict Mackey, O.S.B. He indeed discussed the matter, and had undertaken it, with the design of giving in this English version a new preface founded upon that which he had contributed to the authentic version of the *Spiritual Conferences*.\* He

\* At Annecy, J. Niérat, 1895.

had actually begun the revision when death put an end to his work. What his loss has been to this undertaking only those who know what he has done in editing the works of St. Francis of Sales can appreciate. For more than twenty years he had been allowed by the Superiors of the English Benedictines to devote himself to this labour of love. The fourteen published volumes of the great Annecy Edition form his most fitting monument. He practically gave his life for his work, and to make the edition more complete he visited every library in Europe, and traced every scrap of a letter even into the hands of private individual collectors. It has lately been said of him that "there can be no doubt that by his death we have lost the man who knew more about St. Francis of Sales than any one else, living or dead."

Upon Dom Mackey's death it became necessary to consider what was the best course to pursue in regard to this present volume. As I had long urged the Religious of the Visitation to undertake the work, I felt bound to help them in the difficulty in which they were placed by this untimely death. One point had to be determined at the very beginning: Dom Mackey had not written his contemplated preface, and a translation of his introduction to the French Edition as a whole seemed uncalled for. He had left certain notes as to his intentions, and in a conversation with me he had said that if Cardinal Wiseman's preface to

the edition of 1862 was reprinted, it would be better not to publish the translation of the second part of his French preface, which dealt with the teaching of the Conferences in a spiritual point of view. This plan has been adopted. The first part of Dom Mackey's preface, translated from the French, with some few omissions, here precedes the interesting preface which Cardinal Wiseman contributed to the print of 1862.

F. AIDAN GASQUET,

*Abb. President O.S.B.*



# PREFACE TO THE FRENCH EDITION \*

## ORIGIN AND PUBLICATION OF THE CONFERENCES

*The True Spiritual Conferences* are a collection of instructions addressed in that form by St. Francis de Sales to the Nuns of the Visitation. This simple and familiar method of instruction is to be found in use both in the infancy of the Church and also in the beginning of all the Religious Orders. If we open the book of the Holy Gospels, indeed, we there find the Saviour of the world conversing familiarly with the crowds who flocked to Him in the first opening of His Ministry. Later on, when the hatred of the Pharisees constrained Him to be circumspect and guarded and to make use of allegorical language, we still find Him explaining in private to His Disciples *the mysteries of the Kingdom of God*.† It is with an ever-increasing intimacy that, in these wondrous and divine conversations, He treats them not as *servants* but as *friends*, until at length, in the discourse which followed the Last Supper, He suffers the outpouring of His infinite love to burst all bounds, and com-

\* [tr. See p. xii.]

† Mark iv. 11, 34.

municates to them *all that He has learnt from His Father*. Imitating their Divine Master, the Apostles often made use of this mode of instruction, as St. Luke testifies in the Acts.\*

Perhaps St. Francis de Sales was inspired by this remembrance when he delivered his spiritual conferences. He delighted also in recalling to his memory the thought of the Fathers of the Desert, whose example he quotes, and on whose words he comments; he represents them as also delivering conferences; for, he says, "that has been done from all time" (p. 141). Those of Cassian (1) were very well known to him, and so also was the Life of St. Anthony, in which St. Athanasius devotes whole chapters to the relation of those conferences which that far-famed recluse held with his disciples (2). But of all the Patriarchs of the desert, no one is so often quoted as St. Pachomius, one of those who held spiritual conferences in the highest honour. His historian relates that every night after Office, he gathered together his Brethren "according to custom, to hear the word of God." His discourses were regarded as a sort of sacramental, so much so,

(1) The *Conferences and Institutions* of this celebrated monk were held in such repute, that St. Benedict commanded them, as well as the Lives of the Fathers of the Desert, to be read every evening in the monasteries of his Order.

(2) They often began with these words: "Although the Holy Scriptures contain everything, it is a very good thing to edify one another by mutual discourses." After these exhortations, says St. Athanasius, all his hearers were thrilled with a happy fervour, in some a longing after virtue was kindled, the tottering faith of others was strengthened; vain fears and dangerous prejudices were banished from the heart and mind of all. (Vita S. Ant. §§ 16, 44.)

\* Cap. xi., xx. 19-36.



indeed, that the auditors, after having listened to them with devotion, believed themselves to be secure of the remission of their sins (3). We will not stop to enumerate a multitude of other recluses who were made celebrated by their spiritual conferences. Let it suffice to mention in conclusion the names of St. Dorotheus, St. John Climachus, and above all that of St. Bernard.

We see, then, that our holy Doctor followed examples of the highest authority, when he taught his daughters of the Visitation by familiar conferences. More insinuating and more persuasive than oratorical discourse or written addresses, these instructions permitted him to penetrate the souls of his listeners and infuse into them those principles of perfection with which he himself was inspired, or, rather, to animate them with the thoughts and feelings of Jesus Christ. To reproduce under different aspects, and in infinitely varied degrees, the interior and exterior life of that Model of all the elect, is the aim which all the Founders of Religious Orders proposed to themselves, and to which St. Francis de Sales in particular aspired.

For more than two years (June 1610 to October 1612) the scene of his conferences was at Annecy in the Gallery House (4), and the orchards which surrounded it; the audience, a little group of devout souls; three at the beginning, eight at the end of the first year, ten at the end of the second. These

(3) *Vitæ Patrum*, lib. I. ; *Vita S. Pachomii*, cc. xxx. xlvi.

(4) The humble dwelling in which the Visitation had birth owed its name to a covered gallery, which, being thrown out above the public road, formed a communication between the house and an orchard opposite to it.

souls, to whom the divine call had come with an irresistible power in the midst—for the most part—of the most brilliant worldly surroundings, had now no other ambition than to hide themselves in the deepest obscurity, in poverty, silence, and self-immolation, to make themselves forgotten on earth, so that they might hold the more undisturbed intercourse with Heaven. Providence had given them, in the person of St. Francis de Sales, a master capable of developing such high aspirations. They all venerated him as an angel of God, and had no less confidence in his devotion than faith in his wisdom. All were humble enough to demand from their teacher the imparting of the most elementary knowledge concerning the spiritual life, and enlightened enough to receive with delight and full appreciation the most sublime instructions. On his part, our Saint appeared in the midst of them, less like a legislator imposing laws, than like a father teaching his little ones to walk. There was, therefore, on both sides a close intimacy; a childlike freedom which yet lacked nothing in respect and reverence, a fatherly tenderness which yet was never wanting in firmness. The holy Founder, we may venture to say, literally fulfilled the functions of Master of the Novices. No incident occurred in the newly formed Community of which he was not instantly informed; no doubt arose of which he was not at once asked the solution. His inexhaustible charity encouraged this incessant reference to him; he found in it no burden, but rather a refreshment in the midst of his other labours.

“Our holy Founder,” writes St. Jane-Frances de

Chantal in a Memoir relating to the origin of the Order (5), "often visited us, heard our confessions every fortnight, and held with us short spiritual conferences, to teach us true perfection; bidding each of us practise some one particular virtue according to her special requirement, and by this means our first year passed away, having advanced us greatly in holy perfection." Mother Marie-Adrienne Fichet, the seventh Superior of the Visitation, declares the same in her *History of the Gallery*. After having described the extreme poverty of the first Mothers of the Order, and the privations which naturally resulted from this poverty, she adds: "What consoled them was the frequency of our holy Founder's conferences. Even in bad weather, when rain and snow were falling, he did not give up visiting them two or three times a week, or oftener" (6).

(5) The Book of Vows of the 1st Convent at Annecy.

(6) Father Alexandre Fichet, S.J., the brother of Mother Marie-Adrienne, describing the origin of the Visitation, speaks thus of the formation of the first Nuns: "The holy Founder in private conferences gave them lessons on every particular of the Religious life: 1. On all the Offices, sermons, and functions of the Order, on the position of Superior, superintendent, inferior, and equal; in which each individual should have no aim but God Himself, His service, and the interests of Religion, with an absolute forgetfulness of herself, and a perpetual mortification of her self-love . . . 2. On the qualities of Novices and Nuns, which are a forgetfulness, nay more, a holy and abiding horror of the world and of the flesh-pots of Egypt, and a devout love of Jesus and of their vocation to His divine service, an ardent and consuming desire to do the will of God, to advance His glory, and to save their own souls, a passionate delight in observing all the duties of Religion and the minutest details of the Rules. . . ." (*Part II. chap. ii. des Saintes Reliques de l'Erothée, en la sainte vie de la Mère Françoise de Fremiot, Baronne de Chantal.* A Lyon, chez Vincent de Cœursillys, M.DC.LXII.)

In these intimate conferences, and as circumstances gave occasion, a great many of those practices which were afterwards incorporated in the Constitutions of the Visitation were established. The Saint availed himself of all passing occurrences as material for the instruction of his daughters, and for their training in the virtues of the Cloister. It was on account of a slight disagreement which arose between Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre and Mother Péronne-Marie de Châtel, that the custom of asking pardon of one another on their knees after any dispute was established among the sisters. An act of mortification practised by Mother de Châtel was the occasion of the rule being made of keeping the eyes cast down during meals. Then, too, it was in these familiar exhortations that the Nuns learned what marks of deference they should show to one another, and in what manner they should effect that change of cells and of objects of piety which takes place every year.

During the fine weather these conferences were generally held in the open air. We may judge so from the following account borrowed from Mother Fichet: "On the Feast of St. Laurence in the year 1612," she says, "our blessed Father came to visit our Venerable Foundress, accompanied as usual by M. Michel Favre, his almoner, without whom, indeed, he never came. All the sisters went down to the fountain orchard. A seat was brought for him and placed under the vine arbour; the sisters grouped themselves on the ground round about him." The Saint, yielding to their entreaties, spoke to them of moderation, then of kindness, one of his

favourite virtues. He had already given his daughters many beautiful instructions, which were afterwards published, when "he was interrupted by thunder and rain, which obliged him to go up into a gallery, to which the sisters followed him, and the conference was continued with even deeper interest than before."

At other times, the little Community assembled in the apartment of the holy Foundress. "Our blessed Father," says Mother Fichet again, "held many conferences there, and as at that time he was writing his *Treatise on the Love of God*, our first Mothers used to ask him at each visit what he had written since the last; he repeated to them the substance of the chapters, and afterwards gave them some beautiful instructions. . . . It was in this room that he bade us farewell before going to preach at Chambery, and spoke to us of promptitude in obedience, and of the respect due to Superiors."

The favoured audience knew how to appreciate the spiritual banquet served to them, and following the Evangelical Counsels, wished to gather up *the fragments so that nothing might be lost*; but the holy Bishop opposed this at first, saying that "all was to be found in his *Treatise on the Love of God*." It was, then, the teaching contained in this masterpiece of all our Saint's writings, as he himself mentions in the preface of that work, which served as the theme of most of the numerous conferences of those early years.

Nevertheless, his prohibition was not adhered to so strictly as to prevent his instructions from being

partly written down. Mother Fichet, the faithful historian of those happy times, had this most welcome task assigned to her. It is thanks to her that some of the conferences which took place in the Gallery have been preserved to us. That *On the Obligation of the Constitutions* appears to be the first, not only in order of publication, but also in priority of date; it must have been delivered in the summer of 1611, soon after the Profession of the first Mothers. The Saint, who in his conferences, generally speaking, formed no kind of plan beforehand, and replied to the questions proposed to him on the inspiration of the moment, in this particular instance considered the subject so important that he wrote notes—the only notes preserved of all the many subjects treated in the Conferences (7).

When the Community, having grown in number, was obliged to quit the little dwelling in the faubourg for more spacious quarters in the town, the conferences were continued first in the temporary building and afterwards in the Convent parlour, with as much delightful simplicity as under the shelter of the Gallery. Mother Fichet at this time met with a fellow-worker who very soon surpassed her in excellence of memory and exactness of repetition; this was Mother Claude-Agnès Joly de la Roche. “Our

(7) These notes must have been somewhat numerous, for the page given in fac-simile at the beginning of the French edition is numbered 3. It is written at the back of a letter dated July 28, 1611, which permits us to fix approximately the time at which the first part of this conference was delivered. It contains, under one and the same title, two distinct conferences. According to Mother Fichet, the second part would be delivered on August 10, 1612.

Institute," wrote St. Jane-Frances de Chantal later on, "owes her an eternal gratitude for having so carefully collected the conferences of our venerable Father, and a great number of his sermons, God having endowed her with so happy a memory that she repeated word for word what our good Prelate had preached, several days after she had heard it." And the public are indebted to her diligence for this work, from which all spiritual persons draw, as from a living stream, draughts of the purest devotion (8). To the first division of her collection belong the *Conferences On Confidence, On Self-Renouncement, and On Religious Modesty*.

Whether present or absent, the Holy Foundress never ceased to urge our blessed Prelate to preach the Gospel to her daughters. Thus, from Lyons, whither the Saint had gone to establish the second House of the Order, she sent this message to Mother Jeanne-Charlotte de Bréchar, who was in charge of the House at Annecy: "When he (the Bishop) comes to see you and has a little leisure, I beg you to persuade him to speak to all the Community in common, if that is agreeable to him, so that we may gather up some crumbs from the abundance of your consolations" (9). St. Francis was no doubt alluding to this message when, in March 1615, he wrote to his faithful fellow-labourer, on the subject of the Community at

(8) *The Lives of four of the first Mothers of the Order of the Visitation of Blessed Mary*, by the Reverend Mother Françoise Madeleine de Changy at Annecy—by Jacques Clerc, M.DC.LIX. Reprinted at Paris, Poussielgue, 1892.

(9) *Works of St. Jane-Frances de Chantal* (Paris, Plon Plon, 1877), Vol. iv., Letter xx.

Annecy: "I am well satisfied with all this dear family, with whom I shall converse in common one day in next week, as I hear from Sister Jeanne-Charlotte that my Mother (St. Chantal) commands me to do so." Then, remembering how overburdened the holy Bishop was, and how she herself had implored him to reserve all his leisure for the composition of *The Treatise on the Love of God*, the holy Foundress alters her mind, and on the 28th of April writes thus to Mother de Bréhard: "Do not urge my dearest and best Father any further to give the conferences, since he is already so overwhelmed with work, and it is so important that his book should be finished" (10). And a little later on, after having entered into some details with regard to building matters, she adds: "But as for these small affairs, there is no need to trouble the beloved Bishop to come; on the contrary, we must do so as little as possible, and leave him as much time as we can for his book" (11). The end of this year, 1615, and part of the following year were not, therefore, times of spiritual abundance for the little Community; for the completion of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, and prolonged absences, did not permit the holy Bishop to occupy himself much with his daughters.

In a remarkable letter, dated August 1, 1617 St. Jane-Frances de Chantal wrote thus of him "This holy soul goes on increasing more and more in sanctity, and advancing nearer and nearer towards that eternity for which he longs so ardently; neither will he pause until he is numbered among

(10) Letter xxvi.

(11) Letter xxx.



those great Fathers and Prelates of the Church. . . . For the last year we have seldom had the consolation of seeing him " (12). This consolation, however, appears to have become more frequent during the ensuing months. The collections of the conferences are continued, and copies of them are made, to be forwarded to the new Convents. Copies are sent to Moulins, to Lyons, and to Grenoble. "We send you all the conferences given to us by our Bishop since our return from Lyons," writes St. Jane-Frances de Chantal to Mother de Brécharde; "that on the Rule is admirable" (13). And to Mother de Châtel: "You shall have all the conferences that the Bishop has given us and will give us; for, my dearest daughter, as far as is possible, I wish to persuade him to employ all the time he spends with us before our departure in this manner, and I desire that all our Houses should share in this treasure" (14). The desires of the Saint were fulfilled, for, according to the most probable conjectures, this year 1618 was one in which the collection of conferences was added to most abundantly. The Conferences *On Cordiality*, *On the Virtue of Obedience*, *On the Spirit of the Rules*, and *On the Will of God* were given at this period.

From Bourges, from Paris, whither she had gone to found Convents, St. Jane-Frances circulated the precious manuscripts throughout the Houses of the rising Institute. More than this, she was unceasing in her entreaties to the holy Founder

(12) Letter cx.

(13) She is referring to Conference xiii.

(14) Letter clviii.

to bestow his instructions on the Community at Annecy, entreaties to which he most readily acceded. "Our sisters here are doing very well," he wrote, December 13, 1619, "and there is nothing to complain of, unless it is that they are wanting to do too much, so that when our Mother returns she may find everything in the very best state possible; this desire makes them somewhat over-zealous. Yesterday, we held a conference in which I tried to put them a little more at their ease." This conference must have been followed by several others; for on February 12, 1620, the Saint (St. Jane-Frances) writes (15): "The Bishop . . . gives a great many exhortations to our sisters; it is for the advantage of all our Houses, and I entreated him most earnestly to do it."

While the holy Foundress urges her beloved Father to be lavish in breaking and distributing the bread of the divine word, she also impresses on her various Communities the duty of nourishing their souls with the crumbs which are transmitted to them. "Take care that the conference on the Rules and all that you have of the Bishop's teaching is frequently read," she writes to Mother de Châtel (16). "I know of nothing better calculated to feed the spiritual life of the House." To Mother de Mouthoux (17): "Keep invariably close to the Rule, and to the advice given in the Conferences; read them often, and have them read to the sisters. Every month, I have one or two of them read at table." To Mother Favre (18): "We are so full of

(15) Letter ccxxix.

(17) Letter cccxxxv

(16) Letter cclxii.

(18) Letter cccxxxvii.

the Bishop's instructions, that scarcely anything can occur for which we do not find what we need in the Conferences. . . . Let us feed on this bread; it is the best for us." And again: "In the Bishop's conferences there is all that can be desired for perfection; their teaching is admirable."

The intelligent and industrious reporter of the conferences was obliged to leave Annecy, July 6, 1620. Providence had, however, provided a successor. Another Nun, with as faithful a memory, was ready to replace her; this was Mother Marie-Marguerite Michel, who had made her vows the very day before the departure of the Foundresses of the Orleans convent. "She took the greatest care," we are told in her *Life* (19), "to collect all the counsels and the recommendations of certain practices given to her by the man of God, and in order that every word uttered by him for the daughters of Holy Mary might be gathered up like manna, most precious and fitted for the nourishment of the soul, she listened with the deepest attention to the exhortations which at that time the Bishop delivered not unfrequently, and on leaving his presence she hastened to commit all this spiritual wealth to writing; her memory, or rather the Holy Ghost, Whose aid in this matter she specially invoked, furnishing her with materials exactly in the same order as that which the holy Prelate had observed in his discourse. This was afterwards read aloud to the Community, that each sister might notice what had been forgotten; but

(19) *The Lives of various Superiors of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.* At Annecy, Humbert Fontaine, M.DC.XCIII.

it scarcely ever happened that anything could be added to what she had written." It is to Mother Marie-Marguerite Michel, then, that we are indebted for the Conferences *On Generosity, On Votes, and On the Virtues of St. Joseph.*

It was not only at Annecy, however, that the words of the Founder were gathered up and treasured with faithful affection. At Paris, where he sojourned in 1619, at Lyons, where he closed his holy life in 1622, his teaching was received with reverence, and written down with jealous care. Thence we get the Conferences *Why we should become Religious* and *On Asking for Nothing.*

The death of the Servant of God bestowed a sort of new consecration on all his works, and the esteem in which his conferences were already held increased more and more. St. Jane-Frances de Chantal, who has always so strongly recommended the reading of them, becomes still more urgent in the matter. Such is the influence which she attributes to these manuscripts, that even in 1624, at the time of the first edition of the Book of Customs, she adds these words to what she declares to be the faithful expression of her beloved Father's intentions: "I say nothing on the subject of prayer, because the *Introduction to the Devout Life* is sufficient for the training of souls as yet unpractised in it; and the *Treatise on the Love of God*, . . . with the *Conferences*, furnish all that is needed for the more advanced." And in Article xxix. of the Book of Customs it is said: "The Conferences shall be read once a year . . . in the Refectory during meals, or at least one or two every month." These two

sentences were inserted with some modifications in the first edition of the Book of Customs, printed in 1628, and in the final edition of 1637.

At the death of its Founder, the Visitation numbered thirteen Convents; during the seven years which followed, the number had risen to thirty-five. All these Communities possessed manuscript copies of the Conferences, and read them assiduously; but these had been written and rewritten so many times, that numerous mistakes had crept into the transcriptions. We infer this from several of the letters of St. Jane-Frances de Chantal; in one, among others, dated March 31, 1623 (20), she says to Mother de Blonay: "You can send the Conference to our Houses after you have corrected it." To Mother de la Roche she writes (21): "Examine the Conferences; for if there should be any so badly reported that you cannot really correct them, wait for those from Nussy." It was prudent to be reserved in communicating the manuscripts to others, therefore the Saint adds: "The Sermons may be shown, but not the Conferences, except to well-known and trustworthy persons" (22). Many letters must have been exchanged between St. Jane-Frances de Chantal and Mother de la Roche on this same subject. Unfortunately the portions of this correspondence

(20) Letter cdxxxiii.

(21) Letter dxiii.

(22) Among these "well-known persons" must be numbered the first biographers of St. Francis de Sales: Longue-terre, P. de la Rivière, Dom Jean de St. François, who all mention or quote the MSS., and even P. Dagonel, S.J., who gives fragments of them in his book entitled *Christian Advice, important and common to all* (Paris: pub. Sebastien Cramoisy, M.DC.XXIX.).

which would have furnished us with so much useful information have not come down to us.

In September 1624, for the first time, the idea of having these collected manuscripts printed finds its way into one of the Saint's letters. The following year she submits them to the consideration of a Jesuit Father, and writes to Mother de Blonay (23): "The Father who has seen the Conferences, is of opinion that they will form a most useful book, worthy of the author;" and later on (24): "My humble respects to the Reverend Father Provincial. . . . If you receive the Conferences, take care that he sees them and tells you what he thinks of them." Two years pass away, without any further steps being taken in the prosecution of this design. St. Jane-Frances is absorbed in many weighty matters—long journeys, the foundation of many new Houses, and, above all, in her anxious endeavours to procure the Beatification of her holy Director. Meanwhile she learnt that some unknown person had abstracted the manuscripts, so carefully preserved in the secrecy of the Cloister as a family treasure, and that it was intended to publish them. At first this was believed to be a false alarm, but very soon it became evident that these fears were only too well founded, and that the Conferences were already in the press. . . .\*

At first sight, it might seem that this work, very far from forming a treatise on the duties of the Religious life, was nothing but a collection of ascetic instructions, without sequence or unity. It is,

(23) Letter dxxxii.

(24) Letter deccxxiii.

\* [tr. See "Dedication," p. vi.]

however, nothing of the kind, for the questions which St. Jane-Frances de Chantal and her daughters put to their beloved Father were so numerous that, in dealing with them, he was led to explain to his questioners the Religious life under all its various aspects, and to treat of the principal obligations which it imposes. . . .

However clear and precise the doctrine put forth in the Conferences may be, there have been people who have considered that certain points of this doctrine might need explanation. Take, in the first place, that maxim so dear to the holy Bishop: "Ask for nothing, refuse nothing, and desire nothing." But what need could there be of outside explanation, when he himself defines the sense which he attaches to it? "When I say that we must ask for nothing and desire nothing, I mean as regards temporal things; for with regard to virtues, we may ask for them, and in asking for the love of God we comprise all, for it contains them all" (p. 400). This same thought is explained in almost identical terms in Conference VII. "Among our desires," he says, "there is one which is pre-eminent. . . . This desire is the one which we brought with us on entering Religion, the desire to embrace all the Religious virtues; it is one of the branches of the love of God, and one of the topmost of that divine tree" (p. 109). What could be more categorical on this point? And yet our Saint does not stop short there. He permits his daughters not only to desire but even to ask for certain aids which will be useful in the work of their sanctification. For instance, when an inward longing urges them

to receive Communion on days when it is not prescribed for the Community, they are authorised by him to receive it; or, again, permission is granted to use the discipline when it happens to be necessary. More than this, the Nuns of the Visitation are ordered to ask confidently for such bodily alleviations as "they think they need." . . .

It was from the Works of St. Francis de Sales, and especially from his Conferences, that the Visitation, when it emerged from the Revolution, drew once again that life-giving power which, like new sap, enabled it to flourish in the midst of ruins, and to spread forth its beneficent branches throughout both the Old and the New World. And in our own times, the reputation for sanctity which surrounds the memory of the Venerable Mother Marie de Sales Chappuis, is a fresh proof of the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the doctrine contained in *The True Spiritual Conferences*. . . . While, however, we express our appreciation of the style of the book, we cannot say that it is free altogether from imperfections; for we must distinguish in that style what belongs to the holy Bishop, and what is to be ascribed to the sisters who took down and collected his words. To the sisters must be attributed exclusively certain inaccuracies, some obscurity of detail, the intricacy and length of certain sentences, overloaded with incident, which interfere with the fluency, and still more with the lucidity, of the discourse. It is true that these defects are largely compensated by the fidelity with which, generally speaking, not only the thought but even the actual expressions of our Saint are reproduced; and even at times the graceful



turn of his phrases, and the delicate shades of his simple but vivid similes. The strength of this style is displayed in the *Controversies*; its brilliancy and loftiness in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and still more in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Certain comparisons of which he makes use in these latter works reappear in the Conferences; such as the play of colours on the dove's plumage in the sunlight (25).

The Conferences seem, indeed, to be nothing but a sort of commentary on the words of the great Apostle to the Philippians: *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*. The Visitation Order enjoyed the great happiness of being imbued with this teaching; thus the Son of God could look upon it with satisfaction, and finding in it some likeness to Himself, some reproduction of His interior life, poor and common in the sight of men, but rich and fruitful in the sight of God, He rewarded this lowly Order by giving to it His Sacred Heart.

May the number of souls increase who shall deserve a share of that priceless inheritance by studying and practising the teaching of the Spiritual Conferences!

DOM B. MACKEY, O.S.B.

(25) *The Catholic Controversy*, Translator's Preface, p. xxii., note, and Part II. Chap. i. Article iii., p. 153; *Treatise on the Love of God*, Preface, pp. 3, 4.



## INTRODUCTION

WRITTEN BY CARDINAL WISEMAN FOR  
AN EDITION OF THE "CONFERENCES"  
PUBLISHED IN 1862

THE usual object of a preface is to claim the reader's interest for a work, or his indulgence for its defects, or his better understanding of it, through explanations of its plan and objects. But a preface to a book by St. Francis de Sales must appear superfluous to every Catholic reader, on any of these grounds. The author's name, a name so revered, so beloved by every devout soul, at once excites interest, excludes all apologies, and dispenses with explanations. Having been requested by the pious community of his daughters in England to prefix to the new translation of his "Conferences" a few preliminary pages, we find it no easy task to comply with their flattering request. Only the hope of bringing these excellent discourses to the knowledge of more lovers of true devotion, than their modest title would guide to their perusal, can form an excuse to ourselves or to our readers.

At first sight it, may appear unreasonable to say that conferences, or spiritual lectures, delivered within the walls of a single convent, having its own special character, not written by their author, but

from memory by his devout hearers, can promise much usefulness beyond the order to which that house belonged, or at most, beyond the sphere of religious life. Now, so far from this being, in our judgment, the case, we consider them practically calculated to do much good beyond the cloister and the chapter-house of monastery or convent. They will be read, we trust with pleasure, and we are sure with profit, by devout persons living in the world, by clergy and laity; the former of whom will find in them invaluable principles and advice for the guidance of consciences, while the latter cannot fail to derive from their study, consolation, encouragement, and direction.

And how is this? Because, while undoubtedly the applications and illustrations of St. Francis, in this work, are mainly referred to, and drawn from, the duties and virtues of the conventual life, the whole book is pervaded by the *spirit* of the Saint, a spirit which ever bears with it these qualities, or results. The human heart, and the Christian's way to heaven, in whatever condition of life, are essentially the same: the one made by the One Divine Hand; the other pointed out by the Heavenly Finger of Him Who alone is "the way, the truth, and the life." With both St. Francis deals in his Conferences, and with both no one was ever more familiar than he. He cannot speak of the heart, its emotions, its passions, its direction, to a Religious, but he must needs touch secret springs that fly open, and discover hidden treasures, or lurking miseries, in each of our hearts. For its powers unemployed, or misapplied, will be fully revealed to us.

And so the path of life eternal, as shown particularly to the Sisters of the Visitation, is not the painful and thorny one of penance and austerity, but that of charity, humility, sweetness, union of the affections with God, devotion, kindness to every one, respectfulness, considerateness, and obedience, all bound up in strict order and observance of rule. And by what other way than this does any one entertain any rational expectation of reaching heaven?

But perhaps we are prematurely entering into details. Let us rather, as our design is, endeavour to seize, and describe, what we have called the *spirit* of St. Francis, so admirably exhibited to us in this little volume.

What does this expression mean? No one has given us a better explanation of it than the Saint himself in his thirteenth conference, "on the *spirit* of the Rules." He there shows us how all religious orders have one general and common spirit, "that of aspiring to the perfection of charity"; but each has its individual spirit, in the means by which its rules direct the attainment of that end (p. 236).

And so it is with spiritual writers. They all propose to themselves one aim—that of guiding souls, through the practice of virtue, to eternal salvation. This many of them do excellently, and it would be difficult to give a decided preference among many. Some may write better than others; illustrate their subjects more agreeably; throw into their manner more cheerfulness or more gravity; lay more stress on particular works or virtues; inculcate

more some favourite devotion. But all treat of sin and repentance, the sacraments and grace, the manner of overcoming vices and subduing the passions, and the gradual acquisition of virtue and perfection.

But we shall hardly find one of whom we can say that he possesses a *spirit* of his own: one who distinguishes himself from others, not by a higher degree, but by a distinct order, of excellence; one who has transfused his own individual soul into what he has written; who we feel, as we read him, has long practised everything that he enjoins and advises; and who consequently lives in every line of his pages, breathes, throbs, pants in every word, as if it were laid on his own bosom, over his own heart while we peruse it. We shall meet with few who, from their own meditations and transports of devotion, have added to the treasures of piety stored up in the Church before them, and transmitted a fresh supply, accepted by her, and laid up by her own hands, in her treasury, like relics and sacred jewels, precious to herself and her children.

Of these few St. Francis is one. We might read excellent volumes by holy writers, and form no distinct idea from them of individual character. Holy, wise, and learned we should know and see them to have been; but we should feel little intimacy with them. St. Francis so lives in every page that he has written, that we see his own peculiar disposition stamped on it. No one else could have written it. And why? Because what we have called his *spirit* pervades all that it dictates, and that spirit is life and breath, and

soul, and personality. For, as St. Paul asks, "what man knoweth the things of a man, except the spirit of (that) man, which is in him?" (1 Cor. ii. 11). The individuality of each man, and his consciousness of self, which distinguishes him from every other, has its seat in his *spirit*. And one who can in his actions or words thoroughly manifest that spirit, can resemble none else, and can be resembled by none else.

Now, to illustrate what we wish to say of St. Francis, as thus unfolding his spirit through and in his writings, let us go into a higher order of holiness, and see this idea practically exhibited.

The most perfect class of saints in the Church is undoubtedly that of the Apostles, not only from its privileges, but also from its virtues. They rise above all others by the sublimity of their Apostolic *spirit*. This, which we all can easily perceive, distinguishes them from every other band in the army of Saints. And we understand it as the general characteristic of that "glorious choir." The same unselfish life of labour, in obedience to their divine call and commission, the same readiness to suffer and die for its accomplishment, the same zeal and laboriousness, and the same spotless life and superhuman virtue, compose that character, which is simply called their *spirit*. We know but little of the lives and acts of many: but we never doubt that Bartholomew, and Thaddeus, and Thomas, and Philip possessed it, and displayed it, in their dark and thankless missions, equally with their more celebrated brethren.

Yet even among these there were inequalities,

though not differences. In St. Peter eminently stand forth the characteristics of his prerogatives—authority, ardour, sagacity and power to lead, with a strong repentant love of his crucified Lord. In St. Paul we see all that was required by his grand apostleship of the nations, untiring activity, burning zeal, and wonderful tact, eloquence, and defiance of opposition and persecution. Still, no one ever speaks of the *spirit* of St. Peter, or the *spirit* of St. Paul, otherwise than as the apostolic *spirit* common to both, and to their fellow apostles, only more wonderfully developed, and pre-eminent in their order.

But we may speak, and do, of the *spirit* of St. John, as distinct from the common gifts of the apostleship, as having impregnated the universal Church for ever, with a distinct wisdom or grace, the absence of which would have been a loss, and the existence of which we feel that God communicated through him alone. John breathed upon the infant Church a breath which at once pervaded her, which did not indeed communicate to her what was instinctive and congenital to her, love of her Creator and her Spouse, but which gave it life, activity, system, and perfect form. The whole theory and practice was at once communicated to her of the “triple cord” of love, of the love of God for man, of the love of man for God, and of the love of each man for all the rest of men. We all know whence he drew this breath, or rather where it was quickened and purified. As in the living circulation, the air which we inhale flows through its own channels, while the sluggish



blood presses through its own veins; and, though both are kept separate, yet by the contact between their respective conduits, through a subtle process of infiltration, they act on one another; and the blood runs brightened and freshened by momentary approximation, rather than access, to the renovating æther: so John, though he but laid his head on the outward covering of the adorable Heart of Jesus, received at every throb a mysterious communication with the life that beat there, a participation of the love, marvellous and divine, which abode in it, which transformed his entire being into a union of life and love with those of Christ, not granted to any other apostle.

Hence he could speak nothing else but love. If he writes a Gospel, love diffuses a golden glow over it, totally different from any other's—it is the Gospel of love. If he writes a long epistle to the universal Church, or a short letter to a lady and her children, it must be on love; and we know that he spoke ever on this one topic, till the thoughts and words of his long life gradually distilled and condensed, at last, in the feebleness of his frame and organs, concentrated themselves into the one sentence, which, Sunday after Sunday, formed his only sermon; till, by its monotony, it wearied his hearers, but cannot weary the Church of ages; "My little children, love one another."

Such is the *spirit* of St. John; and it is not too much to say that in the modern Church, a spirit not dissimilar has been given singularly to St. Francis de Sales. And from our illustration, drawn so high, we may more easily understand

what constitutes this divine gift of a particular spirit. Oh that we had space to open all our mind on this subject, in connection with, and to the honour of, either Saint. It is full of beautiful suggestions, and branches out into sweet and enchanting bypaths. But we are only engaged in the humble work of a preface, and not composing a treatise. Let us, then, confine ourselves to St. Francis.

The spirit of a Saint is like a delicate and exquisite perfume, that can scarcely be defined, though enjoyed by all. It is a cordial that refreshes, an elixir that quickens, different from all others, though one cannot always say how. Each of these is, or may be, compounded of many ingredients, yet so blended in a secret laboratory where "the apothecary shall make sweet confections, and make up ointments of health" (Ecclus. xxxviii. 7), that the most sensitive organ cannot discover what they are; for they give one single and inimitable result. And so the peculiar spirit of a holy man has a common base of virtue with every other perfect servant of God's. He will be humble, patient, devout, mortified, pure, watchful, a man of prayer and meditation, and, above all, on fire with divine charity. But blended with all these virtues, there will be an ætherial savour, that seems to exhale from them, and distinguishes them, a sweet aroma unattainable by any other.

And it will be that multitudes who cannot describe it, may nevertheless be conscious of it. The entire Church will recognise the gift: every one of her children feel it. It is like the Magdalen's spikenard: "the house was filled with its odour"

(John xii. 3), and many enjoyed it who saw not whence it came.

The Church has indeed openly recognised in St. Francis the existence of such a peculiar spiritual gift, a spirit of his own. In his Collect, she praises God for having "made him all to all, for the salvation of souls," and prays that by following "the direction of his precepts or advice," and "steeped in the sweetness of charity, we may attain eternal life." And again in her legend of him, after our Saint has been praised for all the virtues that made him one, he receives that special eulogium which belongs singularly to himself, that "his works, filled with heavenly doctrine, shine brightly through the Church; for that in them he has pointed out a way, sure and easy, to Christian perfection." Thus does the Church recognise a peculiar commission given by divine goodness to St. Francis, of making felt "the sweetness of charity," and leading men to salvation by this path, rather than by that of austerity and penance.

It may be said that he took the first step on that glorious and royal highway, on which his friend St. Vincent of Paul advanced so boldly; that Francis taught the beautiful theory which Vincent crowned by practice. And who amongst us, on reflecting, does not find, or rather feel, that he has been solidly benefited by this teaching? You, virtuous and holy souls, and we, poor repentant sinners, you who bound forward on your path with heads erect rejoicing, or we who creep forward sorrowful and dejected; do we not all feel that St. Francis, by his sweet spirit, pervading the Church,

has made our way brighter and lighter? He could not make the narrow road a wide one—God forbid! But how many unnecessary briars has he not plucked out of it, how many a heavy stone has he not rolled aside from before our feet, how many a yawning chasm has he not bridged over for our secure passage, how many a dark nook and gloomy turn has he not lighted up by his cheerful torch! Has he not made meditation more easy, prayer more confident, confession less painful, communion more refreshing, scruples less annoying, temptations less formidable, the world less dangerous; the love of God more practicable, and virtue more amiable? And this not only to those who have read, and who love his works, but to all Catholics, through the spirit of gentle direction, and tender considerateness which has tempered and seasoned the direction of souls since his time, in spite of the insidious rigours of the Jansenistic period.

And now coming to the precious little volume before us, we could desire no better proof of the accuracy with which the orally delivered lectures contained in it have been recorded than this: that every page breathes the spirit of St. Francis as fully as that Philothea of which an English Protestant monarch expressed his judgment, by peevishly wondering why none of *his* bishops could write anything like that. As St. John's spirit imparts its sweet flavour to his shortest writing, so does that of St. Francis betray itself in his most familiar compositions.

Let us try to analyse the almost impalpable materials which compose this delicious essence.

The spirit of St. Francis is a spirit of sweetness. This is the most recognisable, the most obvious of its qualities. It associates itself in our minds with his name. One drop of bitterness or of acidity in a whole volume would be sufficient to make us reject it as none of his. It is not the universal blandness assumed by the courtier, a smile for all, which may cover resentment or contempt, or is only a mask for selfishness and self-complacency. It is not the softness of a weak and yielding mind, that has no strength of principle or of feeling, and shows no strong emotions, because it has no distinct perceptions. There never was any one with greater clearness of judgment as to good and evil, or a more firm determination of what *is* good and lovable, what *is* evil and odious. And yet when expressing himself on these, harshness or unkindness cannot mount to his pen or his tongue.

In fact, it is the sweetness not of manner, or of phrase, or of look that forms this quality, but the sweetness of mind, of heart, of soul distilled through every sense and every pore: for in one word it is the suavity of charity. With what a sweetly loving eye he looks forth on nature, and culls from it his imagery. If we glance not over his pages to learn our natural history, we cannot but smile delightedly at the beautiful simplicity with which he contemplates nature, as the mirror of the spiritual world. His bees are not those of Huber, or of our gardens; they are intelligent and moral little beings; and the Saint's heart loves them, because they, like it, are ever full of honey, or busy making it, redolent always of it, and over-

flowing with it. How loving is the following passage: "But as soon as our souls have chosen Our Lord for their sole and sovereign King, all our powers get quiet, like chaste and mystic bees, cluster around Him, and never leave their hive, except for those exercises of fraternal charity which this sacred King commands them to practise. As soon as these are accomplished, they return to recollection and holy desirable quiet, in order to distil and store up the honey of the sweet and holy thoughts and affections which they draw from His sacred presence" (p. 145).

And as he loves the honey-bee, from a natural sympathy between its, and his, unceasing occupations, so does he dearly love the dove, because of their mutual resemblances in disposition. But this is no more the dove of our cotes than the other is the bee of our hives. It is an ideal bird, that thinks, and reflects, and reasons, and is guided by the sweetest laws of disinterested love. Nay, the heart of St. Francis can understand its language, though so monotonous; to him its unwearied and unceasing cooing speaks distinct and tender sentences, worthy to be rules for a religious soul. Hence he makes this mystical tongue the subject of an entire conference (VII.). "The laws of doves," he tells his spiritual daughters, "are all extremely delightful, and form a most pleasing subject for meditation" (p. 106). Yes, truly sweet, when a Saint's sweetness makes it for us. No one but St. Francis could do it. For when he is describing the dove, he is really describing, though unconsciously, himself. "Consider too," he

says, "how pleasing is the law of their simplicity since Our Lord Himself praises it. . . . And, in the third place, how delightful is the law of their gentleness, for they are without gall or bitterness" (p. 107). Blessed Saint, who couldst say this of any creature, without self-reproach, without an idea that some one reading these lines might say, "He has given us here his own character, in that of the dove."

But rising above irrational illustrations, how great a favourite with him is St. Joseph, on account of his gentleness and unrepining simplicity, manifested most tenderly in his sweetness towards our B. Lady, under circumstances so painful to his love (p. 49). And then, how necessarily Our Lord becomes the type of perfection in this his favourite quality, so that he closes his beautiful remarks on Christ's sweetness by this conclusion: "But he who shall *prevent* his neighbour with *the blessings of sweetness* will be the most perfect imitator of Our Lord" (p. 66).

What does St. Francis unintentionally pronounce himself to be by these words? His great namesake of Assisium was pronounced to have come closer to our Redeemer than any one else in abnegation and renunciation of self: has any one come nearer than the second Francis, in the giving up of self to his neighbour? Each is a beautiful form of divine love.

Want of space prevents us from instancing our Saint's frequent illustrations drawn from children, whose little ways he had evidently learnt, through that attentiveness of affectionate observation, so

often despised by lofty souls. The reader of these Conferences will find them in many places. (As pp. 66, 85, 226.) For indeed we must close this first portion of our attempt to analyse the spirit of St. Francis: and will do so with one remark. This minute attention to the very smallest fondnesses of children, belongs to a mother's heart: and he never speaks of a father's tenderness for them. *His* child always runs to the mother, never to the sterner parent. How did he note and learn this sweetest of relations between human beings? how does he apply them so accurately and minutely to the spiritual life? Through his own gentle, delicate heart. His intellect was most masculine, his bearing most manly. When a student, he could wield his sword as bravely as, when a bishop, his pen: attacked in person, he could defend himself as courageously as, when assailed in principles, he could vindicate them fearlessly. No, there was nothing effeminate or weak in his constitution. His heart even was not feminine; it was not a woman's, but a mother's. Not a heart that shrank before the contemplation of sores or misery, or turned away from danger or conflict. The mother's does not, when her own child is their object. Its very tenderness of affection will make its possessor stand by, inwardly agonised, but outwardly calm, while it soothes its darling child writhing in pain, or wins it to take from her hand the bitter potion. Such is the maternal affectionateness of Francis's heart, exuberant with compassion, meekness, considerateness, gentleness, suavity, one of the few hearts which after, or since, the Apostle's could



become all to all—the child's with the child, the sufferer's with the sufferer, the rejoicer's with the rejoicer, and if not the sinner's, the penitent's, with the sinner. And so far from despising or undervaluing this delicacy of spiritual organisation as even an approach to weakness, we should look at it with reverence and almost awe, as approaching the divine; when we remember how He Who in the very context calls Himself "the Lord of hosts" (Isa. xlvi. 1) and "the mighty One of Jacob" (xlix. 26), yet claims as His own characteristic the mother's heart. "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if *she* should forget, yet will I not forget thee" (v. 15). Nor can it seem to us derogatory to a Saint's dignity to seek his images of this sweetest of loves among irrational creatures, or to have them applied to his character, when his and our Master has used them to describe His own tenderness. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often would I have gathered thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings" (Matt. xxiii. 37). Is there any appeal more softly touching in the whole New Testament than this?

The spirit of sweetness must needs be a spirit of consolation and of encouragement: of consolation to the afflicted, the tired, the depressed, the down-hearted; of encouragement to the strong, the robust, the determined and resolute.

And such is eminently the spirit of St. Francis. Nor could it be otherwise. For, as we have seen, his sweetness is that of charity. And charity is the Holy Spirit, whose name is the Paraclete, or

the Comforter ; whom the Church salutes lovingly by these titles :—

*“ Consolator optime  
Dulcis hospes animae  
Dulce refrigerium.”*

You see how sweetness and consolation are combined in the Spirit of God ; and how can they be disjoined in the spirit of one of His Saints ? If, therefore, Our Lord pours into one of these an extraordinary portion of spiritual sweetness, He thereby infuses into him a more than ordinary grace of consoling influence—he thereby becomes himself a comforter.

And is not our St. Francis one of these ? Most truly he is ; as much as if, in the upper chamber of Jerusalem, he had sat beneath the waving of that divine Dove’s golden pinions, as He shook from them, at every stroke, tongues of fire, soft, lambent, healing tongues ; which, applied to the sore or wounded heart, draw thence, as the flame is supposed to do for the body, the inflammation of burning passion, and soothes, then warms with healthy temperature.

We should have to quote from every conference, and almost from every page, in this little volume, did we intend, or presume, fully to illustrate this ingredient of St. Francis’ spirit. We may begin, however, by saying that his master-rule of consolation is to teach the soul how to do without it. He gently and sweetly allays the thirst for this water, with which God softly sprinkles His young plants, till their roots have struck deep

into the earth; like the olive, which sucks its fatness and its perennial sap from the very driest rock, from the arid cinders of the volcanic bed. "Oleum de saxo durissimo" (Deut. xxxii. 13). He weans the delicate and sensitive soul from that infant's milk to the solid food of the adult, the meat of the strong.

We have described the spirit of a Saint as a compound too fine and ætherial to bear exact separation into parts: the ingredients are too thoroughly blended by nice affinities to be separated. And so here the spirit of consolation mingles itself most homogeneously with the spirit of generosity, of which we shall have later to say a few words. By infusing this noble sentiment into the soul, it becomes invigorated, and so heedless of consolation. It is raised to loving God from purer, and serving Him for higher, motives. And thus the office of consolation becomes that of encouragement; the hand that led at the beginning of the race is wanted now to applaud its quicker progress towards the goal.

But at the beginning there are shackles on the limbs and weights on the frame, which must be shaken off or removed before we can run freely. And here, indeed, our Saint comes wonderfully to our assistance. There are many anxieties and scruples which beset every one in his spiritual life, especially in youth, perplexing the conscience and disturbing it with apprehensions of sin. There is a bird so timid that the shadow of a cloud passing overhead drives it, to seek shelter, into any hole in the earth; so there the fowler has set his device

for its destruction, and the foolish little thing runs into a real danger to escape from an imaginary one. And so it may befall weak and pusillanimous souls.

For such, St. Francis, in these Conferences, is admirable. And as they are to be found not only in the Visitation, not only in religion, not only in colleges and schools, but in the family, in the world, we say unhesitatingly that this little work is a present that must be acceptable to Catholic readers of every class. Let us illustrate this assertion by examples.

And first let us remark how the Saint repeatedly explains the important distinction between the superior and inferior region of the soul. The one is the throne of reason, the dwelling of the will, the seat of our nobler affections. It is the firmament raised above the sphere of mists and clouds, whirlwinds and tempests—that is, of our lower appetites, meaner desires, evil or imperfect affections. The upper sky is kept secure and pure by our love of God, habitual direction of all our wishes and thoughts to Him, persevering and unretracted union of ourselves and of our operations, interior and exterior, with Him, by singleness of intention. Now all the tumult and irregularity that is beneath may sweep across the face of what is above it, may blot it, obscure it, disfigure it to the eye, but it does not reach it, it does not disturb it. It keeps all below; it is outward to it, as the object which seems inside the lens or pupil of the eye. Thousands of such, and even foul ones, may pass in succession before that delicate mirror, and it is not thereby

defiled, or robbed of its delicate sensibility. This distinction so pervades the entire book that it is unnecessary to quote specific passages. (See p. 84.)

What is more annoying and discouraging than the difficulty of keeping the mind undistracted, recollected, united with God? Yet how does St. Francis treat this sense of imperfection? Among many other consoling ways, as follows: "That is not, however, what you ask, I see very well, but rather what you must do, in order so to fix your mind steadfastly in God, that nothing can weaken its hold or withdraw it from Him. For this two things are necessary: to die and to be saved" (p. 155).

And soon after he goes on to say: "Pardon me, my daughter; the smallest distraction does not withdraw your soul from God, as you say, for nothing withdraws us from God but sin; and our resolution made each morning to keep our soul united to God, and attentive to His presence, keeps us always there, even when we are sleeping, since we sleep in the name of God, and according to His most holy will."

And so of repeated infidelities in our desire to persevere, and in our religious practices. "I do not call it a failure in perseverance when we occasionally allow little interruptions in our obedience, provided that we do not abandon it altogether" (p. 169).

Again, how painful to a willing heart to find a repugnance to the performance of a duty. It almost drives to despair. It makes us feel as if it were better not to do it—it seems so worthless; nay, so hypocritical even. Hear how light St. Francis makes of it. "I wish you, however, to observe that

when I say we must do this I am always referring to the superior part of our soul, for as regards all the feelings of repugnance in the inferior part, we must pay no more heed to them than passers-by do to dogs which they hear barking in the distance" (p. 160).

Similar to repugnances are aversions. These affect persons, as those do duties. We may easily find directors who would not absolve us if we confessed an aversion for one who had done nothing to deserve it, or even for one who had. St. Francis gives us an entire Conference (XVI.) on this subject, and it is most lenient and consoling. "What remedy," he asks, "is there for these antipathies, since no one, however perfect he may be, can be exempt from them?" (p. 300). And he replies: "The only remedy for this evil, as indeed for all other kinds of temptation, is simply to turn away from it, and think no more about it." Then after some very simple explanations of wilful indulgence and simple feeling of aversion, he thus wisely concludes: "Now, when as regards our antipathies we do nothing worse than speak a little less pleasantly to a person than we should do to any one for whom we felt a strong affection, it is no great matter; indeed, it is scarcely in our power to do otherwise when under the influence of this emotion; and it would be wrong to require it of us" (p. 301).

Somewhat similar to this trial is the repugnance we have to be reprov'd, or set right, especially by those whose duty it is not to correct us. On this subject St. Francis remarks: "Taking everything into account, there is nobody who is not averse to

correction." And he instances St. Pachomius and St. Francis. How true is this experience of human nature, and how considerate his way of dealing with it! Listen to his kind and encouraging words. How lightly he taxes poor humanity in them! "In the second place, you want to know how we should receive correction without letting remain in us any sensitiveness or bitterness of heart. To prevent the feeling of anger from stirring within us, and to keep the blood from showing itself in our face, cannot be. Happy indeed shall we be if we attain to this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die!" (p. 150).

Let us remember that a Saint writes this who had completely mastered all passion and subdued self; and that, in instructing religious who aspired to perfection. There are few who may not derive comfort from this gentle guidance.

And here we will remark, as it will be impossible for us to detach and describe separately, many of the impalpable elements which compose the delicate flavour of our Saint's precious spirit, that, at first sight, this sweetness and its accompanying consolations might be supposed to be combined with some degree of weakness and indecision. Yet this is not so, but quite the contrary. St. Francis is always master of the principles on which he decides, and acts upon them definitely.

For example, in doubts and hesitations about partial consent to long temptations, a weak mind, directing or directed, has recourse to the comfort of general accusations, and dubious self-reproaches, as a remedy. St. Francis proscribes this com-

promise, and does not hesitate to forbid the practice. The entire passages should be read, as they afford most useful instruction, as well as solid comfort. We will only give a few detached sentences. "To say that we accuse ourselves of having felt some stirrings of anger, sadness, and so on, is not to the purpose. Anger and sadness being passions, their stirrings within us are not sins, seeing that it is not in our power to prevent them. Anger must be unbridled, or it must lead to unbridled actions to be a sin" (p. 293). Again:—

"Do not make any useless accusation in confession. You have had imperfect thoughts about your neighbour, thoughts of vanity, or even worse; you have had distractions in your prayers; well, if you have deliberately dwelt upon them, say so in good faith, and do not content yourself with saying that you have not been careful enough in keeping yourself recollected during the time of prayer. If you have been negligent in rejecting a distraction, say so, for these general accusations are of no use in confession" (p. 295). Finally, "You tell me now that when you have experienced some great emotion of anger, or any other temptation has assailed you, you always feel scruples if you do not confess it. I reply that you should mention it in your review of conscience, but not in the way of confession" (p. 86).

We have already intimated that generosity enters largely into the composition of our Saint's spirit. But generosity, in his language, is very different from what it sounds in the mouth of others; and on this account we must be allowed to say a few words



upon it. Generally speaking, we associate generosity with a certain greatness, or rather grandeur, of soul. It becomes almost akin to pride, in our mental associations. We think this vice to be the danger, the temptation, of the generous mind.

But in our dear Saint's scheme of virtues it is exactly the contrary. It sounds almost a paradox when we find him declaring such a danger to be impossible. Generosity and pride are incompatible; they cannot co-exist, according to him. And why? "You see then," he observes, "that these two virtues of humility and generosity are so closely joined and united to one another, that they never are and never can be separated" (p. 76). Now, the reasoning by which he reaches this conclusion is of almost mathematical accuracy, and the encouraging deductions which he draws from it are a series of beautiful maxims for the spiritual life.

While St. Francis teaches us to despise all goods apparent in ourselves as from ourselves, such as are perishable, transitory, and dependent on others, or otherwise fortuitous, and in this places humility, he instructs us highly to value the direct gifts of God, such as faith, hope, and charity, "good gifts which are in us but not of us," as also vocation, and "a certain capacity which God has given us of being united to Him by grace." And in our consciousness of the possession of these gifts, and our determination to devote ourselves, through them, entirely to God, he places generosity. "Humility believes it can do nothing, . . . while, on the contrary, generosity makes us say with St. Paul, 'I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me.'

Humility makes us mistrust ourselves; generosity makes us trust in God" (p. 75).

We need hardly say how variously this beautiful view goes far beyond its immediate application here. It reconciles with humility the consciousness of intellectual and other mental qualities, when they are recognised as simple gifts of God, and dedicated and devoted generously to Him. Indeed, the more they are cultivated in this spirit—their objects infinitely varying—the more do deficiencies and imperfections become sensitively felt, and the more is humility forced upon the soul; as the brighter we make a fire, kindled at the mouth of a deep pit or cavern, the deeper and intenser we cause its darkness to appear. Many, we well know, are perplexed and troubled by the difficulty of uniting these two conflicting feelings, that they are nothing, and that yet they are really a great deal. On the contrary, there is much more to fear from that humility which pretends to exclude knowledge of what is plain to others, and so cannot be concealed from inward conviction. "The humility," says our Saint, "which does not produce generosity, is undoubtedly false" (p. 76).

The generous willingness to undertake duties and occupations beyond our strength is supported with comforting consistency by St. Francis, who never shrinks from the legitimate consequences of his principles. He thus applies them, when treating of hope, to a particular case: "Even if you have no virtues or perceive none in yourselves, do not be distressed on that account, for if you undertake the guidance of souls or any other work, what-

ever it may be, for the glory of God and to satisfy obedience, He will take care of you, and has pledged Himself to provide all that will be necessary for you as well as for those whom He has committed to your charge.

It is true that what you are undertaking is a matter of great consequence and of immense importance, but still you would be very wrong not to hope for good success in it, seeing that you do not undertake it by your own choice but by obedience" (p. 93).

How truly consoling and encouraging to the bishop, to the priest, to the monk, and often to the layman, as well as to the nun, must this doctrine, of generous abandonment of our wills to God, often prove.

We must unite together two other, similar but distinct, ingredients of the sweet spirit of St. Francis; observing that we are obliged to omit even mention of many, which the devout reader will easily discover.

These two qualities are considerateness and discernment. The first of them leavens the whole work, and all the Saint's direction. The frailties, the weaknesses, the peculiarities of temper, disposition, and even physical nature of different persons to whom his instruction has to be applicable, never for a moment escape him. With his prudence and tact, which practical experience in this sublime art of spiritual direction can alone fully make us appreciate, there is no danger of error or oversight. His counsels are so well balanced, that we cannot recollect an instance of an advice by which any one

could be possibly led into trouble. For example, never could one say in reading these Conferences, "This will not apply to me, who am weak, or timid, or not accomplished, or poor in spiritual or mental gifts;" nor, on the other hand, "This is meant for persons of not so cultivated a mind, or such long experience especially in office, as it has pleased Almighty God to bestow on me." No; everything in these charming Conferences is so well adjusted and averaged, that they will be read with equal pleasure and profit by the most illiterate lay sister or *tourière* who can barely spell them out, and by the most highly educated choir nun; by the youthful novice, and by the venerable jubilarian. There is not a line that will encourage the ardent and aspiring to overstep the prescriptions of rule, by voluntary austerities or extraneous devotions, or that will depress the feebler or faint-hearted to droop below the level-line of full and generous observance. To check and to cheer, firmly to curb and gently to spur, to keep all together as one body, which may move and apply its different limbs variously for the performance of individual functions, but has no power of advance or retreat—of locomotion, piecemeal, but must move on together as a unity and a whole—such is the tendency of the entire treatise.

Any community formed and trained upon its principles, must advance by a uniform and combined movement towards aggregate, which is far more valuable than individual, perfection—without perceptible prominences or depressions, that is, without any member to be pointed out as rising signally

above others in religious holiness, or as lagging behind in the performance of duty. How much better is a religious house of which it is said, "That is a holy Community," than one of which it is whispered, "In that Convent there are some nuns who are quite saints." This is St. Francis' great aim, to train not one or two holy women up to great perfection, but an aggregate of such handmaids of God, and spouses of the Lamb, so prepared as that from their number the Almighty may at any time choose such as He sees fit to walk more close to Him, and to be singled out for that sublimer perfection which one scarcely may dare to covet.

Hence, as we have intimated, he resolutely sets himself against any extraordinary, however secret, performances, especially in all that belongs to penance and mortification. His admirable Conference (XIII.) "on the spirit of the Rule" is most decisive on this subject. He thus defines "the particular spirit of the Visitation." "I have always considered that it is a spirit of profound humility towards God, and of great gentleness with our neighbour; the more so because, treating the body with less severity, it must all the more foster kindness of heart" (p. 240). This principle is admirably illustrated, in a way which brings out the considerateness of St. Francis for those whose infirmities will not allow them to enter other orders. But we must not deny ourselves the satisfaction of quoting a few lines further on. Thus does the holy bishop speak: "If, however, there should be a sister so generous and courageous as

to wish to arrive at perfection in a quarter of an hour, by doing more than the rest of the community, I would advise her to humble herself and submit to a restraint upon her zeal, so far as to extend the space of time to three days, taking the same course as her sisters, and if there should be sisters who have strong and healthy constitutions, well and good; but still they must not want to go faster than the weak" (p. 242).

It required no small resolution and determinateness of principle to speak thus. The founder and head of an institute like this naturally desires and rejoices to see his spiritual daughters springing forward, bounding like the roe on the way of perfection, and some foremost in the race, leaders, examples, forerunners of the rest, like John running before, and quicker than Peter, to find his Lord. But St. Francis, all to all, to the weak as to the strong, had no partialities in his spirit, no preferences: he admired, no doubt, that part of John's modest conduct when he checked his youthful speed and paused till Peter overtook him, that so they might enter in together where Jesus had reposed. And so "the strong and healthy" must not put the weak to shame by "going faster." The entire body must move together, and reach heaven hand in hand.

Hence he considers nothing too minute or too common to be beneath his notice or instruction. For example, he descends to prescribing rules for recreation and conversation, and they are simple and practical; thus, "I reply: as in all other actions, although in this particular one there should be a holy freedom and frankness in conversing

upon such subjects as serve to foster a spirit of joy and recreation" (p. 220).

How sensible is his injunction to avoid "the vice of stupidity," and not learning what is necessary (p. 144).

He does not command the rejection of natural affections and social courtesies, but only their being always kept under proper rule and command. What considerateness there is in the following words: "Then, again, the natural love of relationship, good manners, courtesy, affinity, sympathy, and kindness will be purified and reduced to the perfect obedience of the all-pure love of the divine good pleasure" (p. 230).

Every page could furnish examples of this spirit of considerateness, and at the same time of discernment, which applies it. For this quality consists in a singular perspicacity and minuteness of observation, such as we have remarked St. Francis displays of the little ways of children. Far more is this exhibited by him when he treats of, and with, his spiritual family. He seems to have overheard every possible dialogue between a superior and any one of her subjects, whether scrupulous, or, to use a homely word, fidgety, or ardent, or desponding, or clever, or dull, or deluded. In every mood he knows what the one must have said, and what the other ought to have answered. He has somehow listened invisible to the sisters talking together, in recreation, in their offices, in the infirmary; and he repeats with graphic simplicity their conversation, with occasionally its unconscious arts, springing from yet unconquered

natural propensities, little remnants of self—self-esteem, self-respect, or perhaps self-love, in its more innocent forms. But still more, he has stolen into their hearts by a secret and tender sympathy, instinctive to him. He has read their thoughts, with a loving eye, their aspirations, their hesitations, their anxieties, their secret trials. He has looked under those delicate folds which shelter failings or defects, imperceptible to their owners, and with a gentle and skilful hand has drawn them out. We feel confident that not a single silent excuse, or unspoken suggestion of imperfect virtue, has escaped his notice.

Hence he is always ready to make allowances, to frame excuses, to plead for human weaknesses, which one with less discernment would never have known, and one with less sweetness and compassion would not so amiably have spared. One of the qualities of his spirit thus always returns to unite with the others in harmonious combination; were any one absent, we should not have the spirit of St. Francis.

Let us now lightly touch upon the last characteristic of this admirable spirit, which we can afford room for. The spirit of St. Francis de Sales is eminently a spirit of wisdom. For certainly all that we have written will have been written in vain if our readers have not recognised in it a super-human prudence. And what is this but wisdom? Moderation, avoidance of extremes, adaptation to all circumstances, selection of means to answer all characters and positions—these constitute a wisdom difficult and uncommon.



But we now use the word wisdom in a higher sense. When principles and maxims are found sufficiently wide and deep to reach every class, and penetrate to whatever sphere of men and of things, for the benefit of the one and the improvement of the other, they form, in the best sense, a code of wisdom. Universality of application of what is good, universality in time, universality in place, stamp on it the seal of wisdom. Astronomy, physiology, medicine have changed again and again—they constitute science, not wisdom. But the sentences written by Hebrew sages, their proverbs and their aphorisms, we call "Books of wisdom." For they are as true and as applicable in the Europe of to-day as they were in the Asia of three thousand years ago.

And such is the wisdom of St. Francis. Nothing would be easier than to reduce it to the form of spiritual axioms, universally applicable to the end of time. Indeed, so true is this, that he himself has to a certain extent done it for us. Certainly, without intending to be sententious, than which nothing can be more removed from his thought and style, he has often thrown his counsels and observations into a condensed form, like a drop from an alembic, which contains the distilled virtue of many flowers. They are what, in oriental phrase, would be called his pearls. A very few examples must suffice to explain our meaning.

"I ever say that the throne of God's mercy is our misery, therefore the greater our misery the greater should be our confidence" (p. 19). Many beautiful thoughts will spring up from this illustra-

tion. For the greatness of the throne will be proportioned to the greatness of what it has to bear. The larger the throne of our humility, built by ourselves, the greater the majesty of Divine Mercy that will occupy it; and so the more abundant our motives of confidence in it.

“Desire nothing, refuse nothing” (p. 406).  
 “Ask for nothing, and refuse nothing” (p. 94).  
 A condensation of his doctrine of humility and generosity.

“Charity is an ascending humility, and humility is a descending charity” (p. 136). This sentence contains wisdom enough for a treatise on the alliance between these two greatest of virtues.

“There is a great difference between getting rid of a vice, and acquiring its contrary virtue” (p. 304). “Virtue is something positive, not a mere absence of its contrary” (p. 166). Maxims worthy of a great and profitable development, and affording matter for much practical reflection.

“There are some laws which are justly unjust” (p. 255). The Saint himself admirably comments on this wise apophthegm.

And now our labour of love is closed. We might perhaps have spared our readers so long a perusal, by referring them to the supreme judgment of the Church, who tells us that St. Francis gave to the Visitation “constitutions wonderful for their wisdom, discretion, and sweetness.” And do not these words describe the ingredients into which we have tried to resolve the spirit of his conferences? It will be obvious, and indeed it has been already remarked, that we have not treated of the virtues, but only of

the spirit, of St. Francis. No doubt his spirit could not have existed without the virtues which made him a Saint. His humility, his meekness, his piety, his charity were heroic; the qualities of his peculiar spirit were peculiar gifts superadded to these, or sweet emanations from them, peculiarly his own.

This little book, therefore, has our hearty blessing; we dare not add, our approbation. It is from our glorious Fellow-bishop and Patron Saint that *we* must humbly entreat approbation of what we have presumed to write concerning him and his work. If it shall prove of benefit to others, religious or secular, we shall feel that he has deigned to look down upon our humble labour, undertaken for love of him, after God, Whose glory, with him, we devoutly seek to promote, and has blessed it. May his spirit with his mantle descend upon us, his sweetness particularly and his humility—a double spirit, to none more necessary in the Church than to bishops, to none more wanting among bishops than to us.

To all Religious we recommend this work most lovingly; to those whom we are allowed to address as our spiritual daughters, with paternal, to others with a most kindly, affection. From all we earnestly solicit fervent prayers for our many wants, and for the necessities of our Flock, and for the alleviation of the tribulations that afflict the Universal Church and its venerable Head.

N. CARD. WISEMAN.

## NOTICE FROM THE FRENCH EDITION

*“The present edition is taken from the text of 1629. The authenticity of the additions is certified by St. Jane-Frances de Chantal. The variants met with at the bottom of the pages are taken, some from original manuscripts; others from a collection called Colloquies.”*

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# CONFERENCES OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

## CONFERENCE I

### OBLIGATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONS

*Herein is set forth the obligation of the Constitutions of the Visitation of Holy Mary and the qualities of the devotion which the nuns of that Order ought to possess.*

THESE Constitutions are not of themselves binding under pain of any sin, mortal or venial. They are only given for the direction and guidance of the members of the Congregation. Still, if any one were to violate them wilfully and purposely, either out of contempt for them, or so as to cause scandal to the sisters or to outsiders, that person would undoubtedly commit a grave offence; for no one can be held guiltless who disparages and dishonours the things of God, contradicts her profession, brings disorder into the Congregation, and squanders those fruits of good example which she ought to produce for the profit of her neighbour. Indeed, such wilful contempt is in the end certain to draw down some heavy chastisement from Heaven. It

especially deprives the soul of the gifts and graces of the Holy Ghost, which are generally taken away from those who abandon their good designs and quit the path in which God has placed them. Now a contempt of the Constitutions, as of all good works, is recognised by the following considerations.

Those who out of contempt violate or leave undone some command, not only wilfully but of set purpose, undoubtedly fall into this fault. If, however, they violate it from inadvertence, forgetfulness, or a sudden movement of some passion, it is a different thing; for contempt implies a deliberate will, and a will distinctly determined to do what it does. Hence it follows, that those who violate or disobey a command out of contempt, not only disobey but intend to disobey; not only commit an act of disobedience but commit it with the intention of being disobedient. You are forbidden to eat between meals: a sister eats plums, apricots, or other fruits; she breaks the Rule and commits a disobedience. Now if she eats from a desire to gratify her appetite, then she disobeys not from disobedience but from gluttony; but if she eat because she has no respect for the Rule, and does not wish to pay any attention to it or to submit to it, in which case she disobeys through contempt and pure disobedience.

It follows again, that those who disobey through some sudden inclination or movement of passion would much prefer to satisfy their inclination without disobedience. While, for example, they take pleasure in eating, they are sorry to disobey in so doing; but those who disobey through mere dis-

obedience and contempt are not at all troubled in disobeying, on the contrary, they take pleasure in doing so. Hence, in the one case, disobedience follows or accompanies the act, but in the other, disobedience precedes the act, and is its cause and motive, although the act itself is one of gluttony. For they who eat contrary to the command, either after the command or at the time that it is being given, commit a disobedience, although, if in so eating they could avoid it, they would wish not to commit it (like those who, in drinking too much, do not wish to be intoxicated, and yet in drinking do become so). But those who eat from contempt of the Rule, or from downright disobedience, actually will the disobedience, so that they would not commit the act, or even desire to commit it, if they were not incited to do so by their will to disobey. Some then disobey, desiring a thing to which disobedience is attached, and others disobey, desiring the same thing just because disobedience is attached to it. Some find that there is disobedience in the thing which they desire, and wish that it was not there; others seek for it, and only desire the thing because it is forbidden. One person says: I disobey because I wish to eat this apricot, which I cannot eat without disobedience; another says: I eat it because I wish to disobey, and I shall do so by eating it. Disobedience or contempt is a consequence of the one act, but is the motive of the other. Now, this formal contempt of good and holy things is never free from at least venial sin, even in matters which are only of counsel: for although we may, without offending, refrain from following the

counsels in some holy things, and prefer others, yet we cannot, without offending, abandon them from low esteem or contempt of them. We are not bound to follow all that is good, but we are bound to honour and esteem it; consequently, we are still more bound not to despise and undervalue it. It follows, moreover, that those who violate the Rule and Constitutions out of contempt, either consider them to be of no value or utility, which is great presumption and arrogance; or else, admitting them to be useful and yet not submitting to them, they contradict themselves, to the great detriment of their neighbour, to whom they give scandal and bad example; they fail in their engagement and promises to the Society, and bring disorder into a Religious house, all which things are great faults.

I will now give you some tests by which you may discern when a person violates the Rules or obedience out of contempt:—

1. When, on being corrected, she turns the reproof into ridicule, and shows no sign of repentance.
2. When she persists in her fault without evincing the smallest desire or will to amend.
3. When she contends that the Rule or command is unreasonable.
4. When she tries to induce others to commit the same fault, persuading them that they need not be afraid, that it is a mere nothing, that there is no danger at all in the matter.

These signs, however, are not so certain that they may not sometimes be produced by other causes than contempt. It may happen that a person shows disrespect for his reprovee on ac-

count of the light esteem in which he holds him; he persists in his fault from weakness of character, becomes pertinacious through annoyance and temper, and may entice others to commit the same fault for the sake of having companions and to excuse his own wrong-doing. Still, it is easy to judge from circumstances whether all this is done out of contempt; for that is ordinarily followed by impudence and bold assertion of independence, and the lips are sure, at last, to speak the language of the heart, and to declare, as David has it: Who is lord over us?

And here I must add a word about a temptation which may arise on this point: namely, that a person sometimes does not consider himself disobedient or lax if he only despises one or two Rules, of little importance in his opinion, provided that he observes all the others. But, alas! what self-deception! for what one esteems very little, another may esteem highly, and *vice versâ*; so that in a society, one individual may despise one Rule, a second may think nothing of another, a third of another; and thus all will be thrown into disorder. For when the human spirit suffers itself to be guided only by its own inclinations and antipathies, what can follow but perpetual inconstancy and all kinds of faults? Yesterday when I was in a joyous mood, silence was irksome to me, and I was tempted to think it made me lose my time; to-day when I feel melancholy, I am tempted to think recreation and conversation still more vain; yesterday, when I was full of consolation, singing was delightful to me; to-day when I am dry it will displease me; and so in other instances.

In short, they who wish to live happily, and in a perfect manner, must accustom themselves to live according to reason, rule, and obedience, not according to their own inclinations or aversions. They must esteem, honour, and cherish all the Rules, at least in their higher will. If they despise one to-day, to-morrow they will despise another, and the day after yet another, and when once the bond of duty is broken, all that was bound together by it is little by little scattered abroad and lost.

God forbid that any daughter of the Visitation should ever wander so far away from the path of the love of God, that she should lose herself in this contempt of the Rules through disobedience, hardness of heart, and obstinacy; for what greater misery or evil could befall her? especially as there are so few Rules of a special character and peculiar to the Congregation. For the greater part and practically all of these Rules are either so universal that they would have had to observe them in their homes, if they wished to live with any honour, reputation, and in the fear of God; or they are such as manifestly concern the well-being of a Religious house, or of its officials in particular.

If at times there should arise any disgust or aversion for the Constitutions and Regulations of the Congregation, the sisters must behave exactly as they would with regard to other temptations, correcting the aversion they feel by reason and by good and firm resolutions formed in the higher region of the soul. They must wait until God sends them consolation in their path, and shows them (as to Jacob when he was weary and worn out on his

journey \*) that the Rules and method of life which they have embraced are the true ladder by which they should, like Angels, ascend to God by charity and descend into themselves by humility.

But should they, not from any aversion but from infirmity, happen to violate the Rule, then they will instantly humble themselves before Our Lord, asking His pardon, renewing their resolution to observe this particular Rule, and taking especial care not to fall into discouragement and disquiet of mind; on the contrary, they will, with fresh confidence in God, have recourse to His divine love.

As regards violations of the Rule which do not proceed from either mere disobedience or contempt, if they are caused by carelessness, infirmity, temptation, or negligence, we may and should confess them as venial sins, or things in which there may be venial sins; for although there may be no sort of sin as regards the obligation of the Rule, there may be some on account of negligence, carelessness, precipitation, or similar faults. This is because it seldom happens that, seeing some good work which is calculated to make us better, and being actually invited and called to perform it, we wilfully omit it without offence. Such omission only proceeds from negligence, ill-regulated affection, or want of fervour, and if we are to give account of idle words,† how much more of having rendered vain and fruitless the invitation to the practice of the Rule!

I have said that we seldom avoid offending God

\* Gen. xxviii. 11, 12.

† Matt. xii. 36.

when we wilfully omit the doing of some good work calculated for our improvement. I say wilfully, because it may happen that we omit it, not voluntarily, but through forgetfulness or inadvertence or surprise. In that case there is no sin at all, great or little, unless indeed it were a matter of such great importance that we were bound to be on our guard, so as not to fall into such a state of forgetfulness, inadvertence, or being surprised. For example, if a sister breaks silence because she is not attentive to the fact of its being silence time, and so does not remember the Rule because she is thinking of other things; or if she is surprised by some sudden desire to speak, and before she has time to think of repressing it has said something, she certainly has not sinned; for the observance of silence is not of such great importance that we must keep so close an attention as to be unable to forget it. On the contrary, it being a very good thing to occupy ourselves during silence time with holy and pious thoughts, if attention to them should make us forget the silence, this forgetfulness, proceeding from so good a cause, cannot be bad, nor consequently the breaking of silence which arises therefrom.

If, however, a sister were to forget to attend to a sick person, who for want of such attendance would be in danger, and if the attendance had been so enjoined on the sister that complete reliance was placed on her for the performance of the duty, it would be no good excuse to say: "Oh, I never thought about it, it did not occur to my memory." No indeed, for it was a matter of such great impor-



tance that she was bound to attend to it without fail, and her want of attention cannot be excusable, considering the gravity of the matter.

We must believe that in proportion to the growth of divine love in the souls of the daughters of the Congregation, will be their increase in exact and careful observance of their Constitutions, although these are not of themselves binding under pain of mortal or venial sin. If they were binding under pain of death, how strictly would they not be observed? Now, *love is strong as death*,\* therefore the attractions of love are strong as the threat of death to make us fulfil a resolution. Jealousy, or zeal, says the sacred Canticle,† is *hard* and lasting as *hell*; therefore, souls full of zeal will do as much in virtue of it as they would do for the fear of hell, and more. Hence the daughters of the Congregation, carried onward by the sweet impetuosity of love, with God's help observe their Rules as exactly as if they were bound to do so under pain of eternal damnation.

In a word, they will perpetually bear in mind what Solomon says in the Proverbs,‡ *He that keepeth the commandment keepeth his own soul: but he that neglecteth his own way shall die*: now your way is the condition of life in which God has placed you. I say nothing here of your obligation to keep your vows, for it is quite evident that any one who absolutely transgresses the Rule in the essential vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, commits mortal sin, as also by breaking enclosure.

Let the sisters make special profession of nourish-

\* Cant. ult. 6.

† Ibid.

‡ Cap. xix. 16.

ing in their hearts a devotion interior, strong and generous.

I say interior, because their will should be in conformity with their outward actions, whether great or small; nothing must be done by routine, but by choice and application of the will. And if sometimes from force of habit the external action precedes the inward affection, at least let the affection follow instantly. If, before my body bows to my Superior, I have not made an act of inward reverence by humbly willing to submit to him, at least let me take care that this willing reverence accompany or follow quickly the outward gesture. The daughters of the Visitation have very few Rules regarding the exterior, few austerities, few ceremonies, few offices; let them willingly and lovingly accommodate their hearts to the practice of these few, letting their exterior acts spring from the interior and these outward acts nourish the interior by the exterior; for so does fire produce ashes and ashes preserve the fire.

This devotion must also be strong:—

1. In bearing temptations, which never fail those who desire in earnest to serve God.

2. In bearing with the variety of dispositions which are to be met with in the Congregation, this being as severe a trial for weak minds as can be found.

3. In bearing each one of you with her imperfections, so as not to be disturbed at seeing herself subject to them.

4. In fighting against our imperfections. For as we need a very strong humility not to lose courage,

but rather to increase our confidence in God in the midst of our weaknesses, so do we also need a courage strong enough to undertake the correction and perfect amendment of them.

5. In despising the opinion and judgment of the world, which never fails to run counter to all pious institutions, especially in their beginnings.

6. In keeping ourselves independent of all private affections, friendships, or inclinations, so as not to live according to them, but rather according to the light of true piety.

7. In keeping ourselves independent of the sweetness and consolations which may come to us from God or from creatures, so as never to allow ourselves to be attached to them.

8. In waging a continual war against our evil inclinations, humours, habits, and propensities.

Finally, this devotion must be generous, so as not to be dismayed by difficulties. On the contrary, difficulties should increase our courage; for, as says St. Bernard, he whose courage does not grow in the midst of troubles and contradictions is not very valiant. It must be generous in aiming at the very highest point of perfection, notwithstanding all present imperfections and infirmities, relying with a perfect confidence on the divine mercy, after the example of her who said to her Beloved: \* *Draw me, we will run after Thee in the odour of Thine ointments*; words which seem to mean: "Of myself I am unable to move, but if Thou dost draw me, I shall run." The divine Lover of our souls sometimes leaves us, as it were, stuck fast in our miseries,

\* Cant. i. 3.

so that we may know that our deliverance comes from Him, and so that when it comes we may value it highly as the precious gift of His goodness. Hence, as generous devotion never ceases to cry out to God: *Draw me*, so also it never ceases to aspire, to hope, and to resolve courageously to run, saying: *We will run after Thee*. And we must never be disquieted if we do not at once run after our Saviour, provided that we always say: *Draw me*, and have the courage to add: *We will run*. For although we may not be running, it is enough that with God's help *we will run*. This Congregation, not differently from other Religious Orders, is not an assemblage of perfect persons, but of such as aim at perfection; not of persons who are running, but of such as intend to run, and who, with that intent, learn first to walk slowly, then to quicken their steps, then to half run, and at last to run.

This generous devotion despises nothing, and enables us without trouble or anxiety to see others walking, running, or flying, according to the diversity of inspirations and variety of the measure of divine grace which each one receives. The great apostle St. Paul addresses this lesson to the Romans<sup>\*</sup>: *One believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs: let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and he that eateth not, let him not judge him that eateth. Let every man abound in his own sense: he that eateth eateth to the Lord, and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and both the one and the other give thanks to God.*

\* Cap. xiv. 2, 3, 5, 6.

The Rules (1) do not command many fasts, but nevertheless some individuals may for their special needs obtain permission to practise extra ones; let not those who fast despise those who eat, nor those who eat despise those who fast. And the same in all other things which are neither commanded nor forbidden, let each one *abound in her own sense*: that is, let each enjoy and use her liberty, without judging or interfering with the others who do not do as she does, or trying to persuade them that her ways are the best; since it may even be that one eats with as much renunciation of her own will as another fasts, and that one does not tell her faults, from as strong a renunciation as that with which another tells them.

Generous devotion does not wish to have companions in all that it does, but only in its aim, which is the glory of God and the advancement of our neighbour in divine love; and provided it sees its neighbour so advancing, it cares little what road is taken to reach the goal. As long as he who fasts, fasts for God, and he who fasts not, also fasts not for God, it is as well satisfied with the one as with the other. It has no wish to drag others in its train, but simply, humbly, and calmly pursues its own road. Even if it happen that a person eats, not for God, but from her own inclination; or that she avoid the discipline, not for God, but from natural aversion, still those who go the contrary way must not in any way judge her, but must, without

(1) It is not commanded to take the discipline, yet it may be advantageous to some to do so, whereas others are not at all attracted to it.

passing censure, pursue their way gently and sweetly, without despising or judging the weak hardly, remembering that if on these occasions some perhaps yield too easily to their inclinations and antipathies, others on other occasions do the same. Let those, however, who have such inclinations and antipathies, beware of saying a word or giving a sign which would show annoyance at the superiority of the others, for this would be a great impertinence; rather, considering their own weakness, they ought to look upon those who do better than themselves with a holy, sweet, and cordial reverence; for thus they may draw as much profit from their own weakness by means of the humility which will proceed from it, as others will draw from their exercises. For if this point is well understood and observed it will preserve a marvellous tranquillity and sweetness in the Congregation. Let Martha be active, but let her not disturb Magdalen; let Magdalen be contemplative, but let her not despise Martha, for Our Lord will take the part of her who is censured.

Nevertheless, if some sisters have an aversion from things which are pious, good, and approved, or have inclinations for things which are less pious, they will, if they follow my advice, use violence and, as far as possible, go against their aversions and inclinations, so as to render themselves truly mistresses of themselves, and serve God by an excellent mortification. Thus they will do violence to their repugnance, contradict their contradictions, turn away from their inclinations, shun their aversions, and everywhere and in all things establish the supremacy of reason, especially when they have

leisure to form their resolution. And, in conclusion, they will try to keep their heart supple and accommodating, submissive and ready to yield in all lawful matters, and to show in all their undertakings obedience and charity, like the dove which receives all the colours given to her by the sun. Happy are pliable hearts, for they will never break !

The daughters of the Visitation will always speak very humbly of their little Congregation, and, as regards honour and esteem, will prefer all others to it ; but, as regards love, they will prefer it to all others, freely testifying, when opportunity occurs, how happily they live in this vocation. Thus wives ought to prefer their husbands to all others, not in honour but in affection ; thus each one prefers his native country to every other in love, but not in esteem, and every mariner holds the vessel in which he sails dearer than all others, although these may be richer and better equipped. Let us frankly own that other Congregations are better, richer, and more excellent, but not more lovable or more desirable for us, since Our Lord has willed that it should be our country and our bark, and that our hearts should be wedded to this Order ; in accordance with the saying of one who, when asked which was the sweetest resting-place and the best nourishment for a child, replied : “ the breast and the milk of its mother ; ” for though there may be a fairer breast and better milk to be found, yet for it there can be none more suitable nor more dear.

## CONFERENCE II

### ON CONFIDENCE

*In which it is inquired whether one may go to God with confidence, even with the feeling of our misery, and how this may be; also of perfect self-abandonment.*

You ask me, my dearest daughters, if a soul sensible of her own misery, can go with great confidence to God. I reply, that not only can the soul which knows her misery have great confidence in God, but that, unless she has such knowledge, she cannot have true confidence in Him; for it is this true knowledge and confession of our misery which brings us to God. Thus all the great saints, Job, David, and the rest, began every prayer with the confession of their own misery and unworthiness, so that it is a very good thing to acknowledge ourselves to be poor, vile, abject, and unworthy to appear in the presence of God. That saying, so celebrated among the ancients, *Know thyself*, even though it may be understood as applying to the knowledge of the greatness and excellence of the soul, so that it may not be debased or profaned by things unworthy of its nobility, may also be taken as referring to the knowledge of our unworthiness, imperfection, and misery. Now the



greater our knowledge of our own misery, the more profound will be our confidence in the goodness and mercy of God; for between mercy and misery there is so close a connection that the one cannot be exercised without the other. If God had not created man He would still indeed have been perfect in goodness, but He would not have been actually merciful, since mercy can only be exercised towards the miserable.

You see, then, that the more miserable we know ourselves to be, the more occasion we have to confide in God, since we have nothing in ourselves in which we can trust. The mistrust of ourselves proceeds from the knowledge of our imperfections. It is a very good thing to mistrust ourselves, but at the same time how will it avail us, unless we cast our whole confidence upon God, and wait for His mercy? It is right that our daily faults and infidelities should cause us some confusion when we would appear before Our Lord; and we read of great souls, like St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa, who, when they had been betrayed into some fault, were overwhelmed with confusion. Again, it is reasonable that, having offended God, we should be kept in the background a little by humility and a feeling of confusion, for if we have offended a friend only we are ashamed to approach him. But it is quite certain that we must not remain at a distance, for the virtues of humility, abjection, and confusion are intermediate virtues by which the soul must ascend to union with her God.

It would be no great matter to accept our nothingness and strip ourselves of self (which is done by

acts of confusion) if the result of this were not the total surrender of ourselves to God, as St. Paul teaches us when he says: *Strip yourselves of the old man, and put on the new:*\* for we must not remain unclothed, but clothe ourselves with God. This little withdrawal is only that we may press on the better towards God by an act of love and confidence. We must never suffer our confusion to be attended with sadness and disquietude; that kind of confusion proceeds from self-love, because we are troubled at not being perfect, not so much for the love of God, as for love of ourselves.

And even if you do not feel such confidence, you must still not fail to make acts of it, saying to our Lord: "Although, dear Lord, I have no feeling of confidence in Thee, I know all the same that Thou art my God, that I am wholly Thine, and that I have no hope but in Thy goodness; therefore I abandon myself, with all that I have and am, into Thy hands." It is always in our power to make these acts; though there may be difficulty, there is never impossibility. It is on these occasions and amid these difficulties that we ought to show fidelity to Our Lord; for though we may make these acts without fervour and without satisfaction to ourselves, we must not distress ourselves about that; Our Lord loves them better thus. And do not say that you repeat them indeed but only with your lips; for if the heart did not will it, the lips would not utter a word. Having done this, be at peace, and without dwelling at all upon your trouble, speak to Our Lord of other things.

\* Col. iii. 9, 10.

The conclusion of this first point, then, is that it is very good for us to be covered with confusion when we know and feel our misery and imperfection; but that we must not stop there. Neither must the consciousness of these miseries discourage us, but rather make us raise our hearts to God by a holy confidence, the foundation of which ought to be in Him and not in ourselves. And this inasmuch as we change and He never changes, but is equally good and merciful when we are weak and imperfect as when we are strong and perfect. I ever say that the throne of God's mercy is (1) our misery, therefore the greater our misery, the greater should be our confidence (2).

Let us now pass on to the other question, which is as to self-abandonment, and what ought to be the exercises of the self-abandoned soul. You must know that to practise self-abandonment and to forsake ourselves, is nothing else but to yield up and get rid of our own will that we may give it to God. For, as I have already said, it would be of no benefit at all to renounce and forsake ourselves, if it were not done in order to unite ourselves perfectly to the divine Goodness. It is then with that aim only that we must make this act of renunciation, which would otherwise be useless, and would resemble those of the ancient philosophers, who made admirable renunciation of all things and themselves also, under the vain pretence of devoting themselves to philosophy. Take as an example of

(1) *That the*—way to find God is the consideration of. (*Variant.*)

(2) *Confidence*—for confidence is the life of the soul: take away its confidence you put it to death. (*Var.*)

this, Epictetus, a very famous philosopher, who, being born a slave, was, on account of his great wisdom, offered his freedom, but who, by the most extreme act of renunciation which can be, refused to accept his liberty. So he went on voluntarily living in a state of slavery, and in such extreme poverty, that after his death nothing was found in his possession but a lamp, which was sold at a very high price because it had belonged to so great a man. But, as for us, we only desire to abandon ourselves in order that we may leave ourselves at the mercy of the will of God. There are many people who say to Our Lord: "I give myself wholly to Thee without any reserve;" but there are very few who actually practise this self-abandonment, which is nothing else but the acceptance with perfect indifference of all the events which may befall us, just as they arrive by the order of God's providence: affliction equally with consolation, sickness as health, poverty as riches, contempt as honour, shame as glory. I refer, of course, to the action of our higher nature, for there is no sort of doubt but that our lower nature and our natural inclinations will tend rather towards honour than contempt, towards wealth than poverty; although we cannot be ignorant that contempt, abjection, and poverty are more pleasing to God, than honour and the abundance of riches. Now, in order to practise this self-abandonment, we must obey the known will of God, and also that of His good pleasure; the one by resignation, the other by indifference. The known will of God comprehends His Commandments, His counsels, His inspirations, our Rules,

and the orders of our Superiors. His will of good pleasure concerns events which we cannot foresee. For instance, I do not know if I shall die to-morrow; I come to see that it is the good pleasure of God, and therefore I abandon myself to His good pleasure, and die willingly. In the same way I do not know whether in the coming year all the fruits of the earth will be destroyed by storms and unfavourable weather; if it should be so, or if a pestilence should break out, or whatever may happen, it is quite evident that it is the good pleasure of God, and therefore I conform to it. It may happen that you have no consolation in your exercises: now it is certain that this is the good pleasure of God, therefore you must remain calm and indifferent between desolation and consolation; the same as to all things which may occur to you, as to the clothes which are given to you, as to the food which is offered to you (3). ✕

I must, moreover, observe that there are matters in which the known will of God must be united to the will of His good pleasure. For instance, I fall sick of a malignant fever; in this

(3) *And consolation.*—A habit is given to you which you do not like so well as the one you are accustomed to wear; the habit-keeper did it with simplicity. It is certainly the good pleasure of God that you should wear this habit, and you must take it with indifference. It is the same with some food in the refectory which is not to your taste; it is doubtless the good pleasure of God that you should eat it, and you must do so with indifference, I mean, as regards the will. So also with caresses and proofs of friendship. If a person does not show signs of affection to you, be sure that this is the good pleasure of God, and that the person is occupied with something better. Why, then, take the trouble to make much of you? If, however, the caress is given, then you must believe that this too is the good pleasure of God, and thank Him for this little consolation.

(Var.)

event I see that it is God's good pleasure that I should be quite indifferent as to whether I am ill or well; but the known will of God is that I, not being under obedience, should call in a doctor, and apply all the remedies possible (I do not say the most choice, but the common and ordinary ones) and that Religious, who are under a Superior, should accept in simplicity and submission the remedies and treatment offered to them; for God has signified this to us by giving virtue to remedies, Holy Scripture in various places teaches us to do so, and the Church commands it.

Having done this, whether the malady conquers the remedies or the remedies get the better of the malady should be a matter of perfect indifference, so much so that, if sickness and health were put before us, and Our Lord were to say to us: "If thou choose health, I will not deprive thee of a single particle of My grace, if thou choose sickness, I shall not in any degree increase that grace, but in the choice of sickness there is a little more of My good pleasure"—the soul which has wholly forsaken herself and abandoned herself into the hands of Our Lord will undoubtedly choose sickness, solely because it is more pleasing to God. Even though this might mean a whole lifetime spent on her couch in constant suffering, she would not for any earthly consideration desire to be in any other condition than this. Thus the saints who are in heaven are so closely united to the will of God, that if there were even a little more of His good pleasure in hell than in paradise, they would quit paradise to go there. † This state of self-

abandonment comprehends also perfect submission to the good pleasure of God in all temptations, dryness, dulness, aversions, and repugnances which come upon us in the spiritual life, for we see in all these things the good pleasure of God, when they do not happen through our own fault and there is no sin in them.

In truth self-renunciation is the virtue of virtues: it is the cream of charity, the odour of humility, the merit, I consider, of patience, and the fruit of perseverance. Great is this virtue, and alone worthy of being practised by the best beloved children of God. *Father*, says our dear Saviour on the cross,\* *into Thy hands I commend My spirit*. As if He said: "It is true that *all is consummated* and that I have finished all *that Thou gavest Me to do*; but yet, if it is Thy will that I should still remain on this cross and suffer more, I am content to do so; *into Thy hands I commend My spirit*, Thou canst do with Me as it pleases Thee." We ought to do the same, my dearest daughters, on all occasions, whether we suffer or whether we enjoy some consolation, allowing ourselves thus to be guided by the divine will at its good pleasure, without ever permitting ourselves to be led by our own will. Our Lord loves with a most tender love those who are so happy as to abandon themselves wholly to His fatherly care, letting themselves be governed by His divine Providence, without any idle speculations as to whether the workings of this Providence will be useful to them to their profit, or painful to their loss, and this because they are well assured that

\* Luke xxiii. 4, 6.

nothing can be sent, nothing permitted by this paternal and most loving Heart, which will not be a source of good and profit to them. All that is required is that they should place all their confidence in Him, and say from their heart: "*Into Thy blessed hands I commend my spirit, my soul, my body and all that I have, to do with them as it shall please Thee.*" Never are we reduced to such an extremity, that we cannot pour forth before the divine Majesty, the perfume of a holy submission to His most holy will, and of a continual promise never wilfully to offend Him. Sometimes Our Lord wills that the souls chosen for the service of His divine Majesty should content themselves with a firm and unchanging resolution to persevere in following Him amid the disgusts, dryness, repugnances, and asperities of the spiritual life, without consolation, delight, sweetness, or relish, and indeed believing themselves unworthy of such. They thus follow their divine Saviour in the higher region of their soul, with no other support than that of His divine will, by whose good pleasure it is thus. And this is the path in which I desire that we should walk, my dear daughters.

You ask me next with what a Religious entirely given up into the hands of God should occupy her mind. She has nothing to do but to remain close to Our Lord, without troubling herself about anything, either as regards her body or her soul; for since she has committed herself to the Providence of God, why need she think about what will become of her? Our Lord, to whom she has absolutely surrendered herself, will think of everything for



her. I do not, however, mean to say that we must not think about the things to which we are bound by our respective duties; for it would not be right that a Superior, under pretence of having given himself up wholly to God and throwing all his care on Him, should neglect to read and learn the instructions which are needful for the due exercise of his office.

It is quite true that it needs a very great confidence thus to abandon ourselves without any reserve to divine Providence; but then, when we abandon everything, Our Lord takes care of everything and orders everything. On the other hand, if we reserve to ourselves anything, instead of confiding it to Him, He leaves it to us, saying as it were: "You think yourselves wise enough to manage this matter without Me; well, I will leave you to act, you will see how you will succeed." Those who are dedicated to God in Religion ought to abandon all without any reserve. St. Magdalen, who had given herself up wholly to the will of Our Lord, remained *at His feet* and *listened while He spoke*.<sup>\*</sup> When He ceased to speak, she also ceased to listen, but still she never stirred from the place she had taken near Him. So is it with the soul which has surrendered itself; it has nothing else to do but to rest in the arms of Our Lord like a child on his mother's breast. When she puts him down to walk, he walks until she takes him up again, and when she wishes to carry him, he allows her to do so. He neither knows nor thinks where he is going, but allows himself to be carried or led

\* Luke x. 31.

wherever his mother pleases. So this soul lets itself be carried when it lovingly accepts God's good pleasure in all things that happen, and walks when it carefully effects all that the known will of God demands.

You ask me now, if it is possible that our will should be so absolutely dead in Our Lord, that we no longer know what we wish or what we do not wish. I reply at once that, however much we may have renounced ourselves, we always so far retain our liberty and free will, that some desires or volitions stir within us. These, however, are not absolute volitions, or complete desires, for as soon as a soul which has abandoned itself to the good pleasure of God perceives within itself any volition, it immediately puts it to death, to make the will of God live in its stead.

You also wish to know if a soul, still very imperfect, can with profit to itself remain in prayer before God, with that simple attention to His divine presence of which I spoke. I tell you that if God places you there, you can certainly remain there, for it happens not unfrequently that Our Lord gives this repose and tranquillity to souls which are not thoroughly purged. While, however, they still need purgation, they should, outside the time of prayer, occupy themselves with the reflections and considerations necessary for their amendment. Indeed, even if God should keep them always in deep recollection, they still retain sufficient liberty to discourse with the understanding on many indifferent subjects; why, then, should they not be able to ponder and form the resolutions needed for their

amendment and the practice of virtues? There are very perfect persons to whom Our Lord never gives this sweetness and repose, who do all in the higher region (4) of their soul, and who by the sheer force of the higher reason, make their own will die and God's will live in them. And this death is *the death of the cross*,\* which is much more excellent and generous than that other, which for the following reason should rather be called a slumber than a death; namely, because a soul which has embarked in the vessel of God's Providence, lets itself be carried gently along, like a person who though asleep in a boat upon a quiet sea, is all the time making progress. This manner of death, so gentle and so sweet, is given as by a free gift, the other by merit.

You wish further to know what foundation our confidence ought to have. It must be grounded on the infinite goodness of God and on the merits of the Death and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, with this condition on our part, that we should preserve and recognise in ourselves an entire and firm resolution to belong wholly to God, and to abandon ourselves in all things and without any reserve to His Providence. I wish you, however, to observe that I do not say that we must feel this resolution to belong wholly to God, but only that we must have it and recognise it in ourselves; because we must not concern ourselves with what we feel or do not feel, since the greater part

(4) *The higher region of*—the reason; and this is called dying in the love of our crucified Saviour, and this death. (*Var.*)

\* Phil. ii. 8.

of our feelings and satisfactions are only the movements of self-love. Neither must it be supposed that, in all this practice of self-renunciation and indifference, we shall never have desires contrary to the will of God, or that nature will never shrink with repugnance from the dispositions of His good pleasure. This would be an error. These virtues reside in the higher region of our soul: the lower, generally speaking, has nothing to do with them. We must remain at peace, and paying no attention whatever to what that lower nature desires, we must embrace the divine will and unite ourselves to it whatever this may entail. There are very few persons who reach this height of perfect self-renunciation; nevertheless, we must all aim at it, each according to his little measure.

## CONFERENCE III

### ON CONSTANCY

*On the Flight of Our Lord into Egypt. And which treats of the constancy which we ought to maintain amid the accidents of this world (1).*

WE are keeping the Octave of the Feast of the Holy Innocents, on which day holy Church makes us read the Gospel \* which describes how *the Angel of the Lord* told the glorious St. Joseph *in a dream*, that is to say when sleeping, that he must take the Child and the Mother and flee into Egypt, since Herod, jealous of his royalty, and fearing that He would take it away, was seeking Our Lord to put Him to death. Full of wrath because the three Kings had not returned to him in Jerusalem, he had commanded that all the little children under two years of age should be put to death, believing that Our Lord was among them, and hoping by that means to ensure the possession of his kingdom. This gospel is full of beautiful thoughts; I will content myself with a few, which will furnish us

(1) *Sermon for the Octave of Holy Innocents.*

\* Matt. ii. 13, 18.

with material for a conference as interesting as it will be profitable (2).

I will begin with the first consideration made by the great St. John Chrysostom, which is on the inconstancy, variety, and instability of the accidents of this mortal life. Oh! how useful is this consideration! and the absence of this consideration it is which leads us to discouragement and inconsistency, to disquiet and changeableness, to inconstancy and instability in our resolutions. We would desire not to meet with any difficulties, any contradiction, any trouble in our path; we would always have consolations without dryness or distaste, advantages without any drawback, health without sickness, repose without labour, peace without any trouble. Ah! who does not see our folly! for we desire what cannot be. Unmixed good or unmixed

(2) I doubt not that you have discovered many of these thoughts in the meditation which you made on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, but so great is their number that I believe you may have overlooked some which would be of profit to you. At the same time I do not mean to try and hunt out those which you may have passed over, nor to enlarge upon those which you did discover, but simply to tell you what God has suggested to my mind. For as in a picture in which a grown man, or it may be a giant, is represented as fighting, or performing some other action, it is much easier to remark the traits of the painting, than in one which represents some small figure, or several small figures (for more time is needed to observe the little details of the latter picture, than the larger lines of the former), so in those great Mysteries in which figure Our Lord, Our Lady, St. Joseph, the Shepherds and the Three Kings, it seems easy at once to discover the signification, but it is not so easy to do it in this little picture, which like a little anthill represents so great a number of little children assembled together. However long a time, then, we devote to considering what this Mystery represents, and however often we contemplate it, we shall always find that there is something fresh for us to discover. (*Var.*)

evil is only to be found in paradise or in hell. In paradise, happiness, repose, and consolation exist in all their perfection, with no admixture of evil, trouble, or affliction; while in hell, on the contrary, are found utter evil, despair, trouble, and disquietude, without any admixture of good, of hope, tranquillity, or peace. But in this perishable life, good is never to be found without evil following in its train; there is no wealth without anxiety, no repose without labour, no consolation without affliction, no health without sickness. In short, good and evil are, in all things here below, mingled and commingled; this life presents a continued variety of diverse accidents. Thus God has willed that the seasons should be diversified, and that summer should be followed by autumn, winter by spring, to teach us that in this world *nothing is lasting*,\* and that temporal things are perpetually mutable, inconstant, and subject to change. Our want of recognition of this truth is, as I have said, what makes us unstable and changeable in our humours, inasmuch as we do not make use of the reason which God has given us, which reason renders us unchanging, firm, and steadfast, and hence like unto God.

When God said: *Let us make man to our likeness*,† He thereby bestowed on him reason and the use thereof, in order to be able to discuss and consider good and evil, to discern the one from the other, and to know which things should be chosen and which rejected. It is reason which makes us superior to all the animals, and masters over them.

\* Eccles. ii. 11.

† Gen. i. 26.

When God had created our first parents, He gave them an absolute dominion *over the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the earth,\** and consequently He gave them the knowledge of each species, and the means of dominating them, and rendering themselves their lord and master. God has not only bestowed this favour upon man, that he should be lord over the animals by means of this gift of reason, by which He has made him like to Himself, but He has also given him full power over all sorts of accidents and events. It is said that the wise man, that is, the man who is guided by reason, will render himself absolute master of the stars. What does this mean but that by the use of reason he will remain firm and constant amid all the various events and accidents of this mortal life. Let the weather be fine or let it rain, let the air be calm or let the wind blow, the wise man pays no attention to it, knowing well that nothing in this life is lasting, and that this is not a place of rest. In affliction he does not despond but waits for consolation; in sickness he does not torment himself but waits for health, or if he sees that his hurt is such that death must follow, he thanks God, hoping for the repose of that life immortal, to which this life is but a prelude. If poverty overtakes him he does not distress himself, for he knows very well that riches do not exist in this life without poverty; if he is despised he knows well that honour here below has no permanence, but is generally followed by dishonour or contempt. In short, in all kinds of events, in prosperity or adver-

\* Gen. v. 28, 30.



sity, he remains firm, steadfast, and constant in his resolution to aspire and to strain after the enjoyment of eternal blessings.

But we must not only consider this variety, changeableness, and instability in the transitory and material things of this mortal life; we must also consider them in their relation to the events of our spiritual life, in which firmness and constancy are as much more necessary as the spiritual life is raised above the mortal and bodily life. It is a very great error to be unwilling to suffer or to feel variations and changes in our humours, not governing ourselves by reason and refusing to allow ourselves to be governed by it. It is often said: "Look at this child, he is very young, but still he has already the use of reason;" conversely, there are many who have the use of reason and yet, like children, do not guide themselves by the dictates of reason. God has given reason to man to guide him, but yet there are very few who allow it to rule in them; on the contrary, they let themselves be governed by their passions, which ought to be subject and obedient to reason, according to the order which God requires of us.

To make myself understood I will speak more familiarly. Most people in the world allow themselves to be governed by their passions and not by reason; therefore they are, generally speaking, inconsistent, variable, and changeable in their humours. If they have a fancy to go to bed early or very late, they do just whichever they please; if they want to get up early to go to the country, they do so; if they prefer to sleep, they do that. If they

want to dine or sup early or very late, they arrange so: and not only are they inconsistent and changeable in these matters, but they are the same in their intercourse with others. They wish people to accommodate themselves to their humours and will not accommodate themselves to those of others. They allow themselves to be carried away by their inclinations and private affections and passions, without being on that account considered faulty by the world; and provided that they do not interfere much with their neighbours' tastes and ways, they are not looked upon as unreasonable or capricious. And why? simply because this is an ordinary defect among people of the world. But in Religion we cannot, of course, allow ourselves to be carried away by our passions. As regards external things there are the Rules to keep us regular in our prayer, our eating, our sleeping, and the same with other exercises, which are always at the same hour, when obedience or the bell summons us; and then our mutual intercourse is always the same, for we cannot separate ourselves from one another.

In what, then, can we display caprice and fickleness? It is in the changes of our tempers, wills, and desires. At present I am joyous, because all things are succeeding as I wished; very soon I shall be sad, because a little unexpected contradiction will have arisen. But did you not know that this is not the place where pleasure pure and unalloyed is to be found, and that this life is full of such troubles? To-day, because you have consolations in your prayer, you feel encouraged and thoroughly resolved to serve God; but to-morrow, when dryness

comes upon you, you will have no heart for the service of God: "Alas!" you say, "I am so languid and dejected!" But come now, tell me: if you governed yourself by reason, would you not see that if it was good to serve God yesterday, it is still very good to serve Him to-day, and will equally be very good to do so to-morrow? He is always the same God, as worthy to be loved in dryness as in consolation. To-day we desire one thing and to-morrow another; what I see done by so-and-so at this moment pleases me, but presently it will displease me so greatly that I might even conceive an aversion for that person. Just now I love some one very much, and take great delight in his conversation; to-morrow, I shall scarcely be able to endure him. And why? is he not as worthy of being loved to-day as he was yesterday? If we attended to the dictates of reason, we should see that this person ought to be loved because he is a creature who bears the image of the divine Majesty; and thus we should take as much pleasure in his conversation now as we did formerly.

But all this proceeds simply from the fact that we allow ourselves to be guided by our inclinations, our passions, or our affections, thus perverting the order placed in us by God, that all should be subject to reason. For if reason does not dominate all our powers, our faculties, our passions, inclinations, affections, and indeed all that makes up our being, what will be the result, if not a continual state of vicissitude, inconstancy, variety, changeableness, and inconsistency which will make us sometimes fervent and full of courage, but as often slothful,

careless and idle; at one moment joyous, at the next melancholy? We shall be calm for an hour, and then uneasy for two days: in short, our life will pass away in idleness and waste of time.

By this first remark, then, we are urged and invited to consider the inconstancy and uncertainty of success both in temporal and spiritual things, in order that in the event of sudden occurrences, which from being quite new and unforeseen might give a shock to our minds, we may not lose courage, nor suffer ourselves to be carried away by unevenness of temper amid the unevennesses of life; but that, submitting to the guidance of the reason which God has implanted in us, and to His Providence, we may remain firm, constant, and unchangeable in our resolution to serve God with constancy, bravely, boldly, fervently, without any interruption whatever.

If I were speaking to people who did not understand me, I should try to inculcate upon them, as well as ever I could, what I have just been saying; but you know very well that I have always tried to bring before you this most holy evenness of mind, as being the special and most necessary virtue of Religion. All the ancient fathers of Religious Orders have done their utmost to make this evenness and steadfastness of mind and temper reign in their monasteries. For this end they established Statutes, Constitutions, and Rules, in order that the Religious might make use of them as a bridge, by which to pass from the constant uniformity of the exercises marked out in them and which they have embraced, to this most lovable and desirable evenness of spirit, amid all the changes and contra-

rieties which are to be met with on the path of our mortal as well as of our spiritual life.

The great St. Chrysostom says: O man, you who are so much disquieted because all things do not succeed according to your wishes, are you not ashamed to see that what you want was not to be found in the family of Our Lord? Consider, I pray you, the vicissitudes and changes, and alternations of joy and sorrow, which are to be met with there. Our Lady received the tidings that she should conceive of the Holy Ghost a Son, Who should be Our Lord and Saviour. What joy, what jubilation for her in that sacred hour of the Incarnation of the Eternal Word! Shortly afterwards St. Joseph, seeing that she was with child and knowing that it was not by him, Alas! into what affliction, into what distress was he not plunged! And Our Lady, what an extremity of grief and pain did she not feel in her soul, seeing her dear husband on the point of quitting her, her modesty not permitting her to reveal to St. Joseph the honour and the grace with which God had favoured her! Then a little later, this storm having passed over, because the angel had discovered to St. Joseph the secret of this mystery, what consolation did they not receive!

When Our Lady brought forth her Son, the Angels announced His birth, the Shepherds and the Magi came to adore Him. I leave you to imagine what rejoicing and consolation of spirit was theirs, amid all this! But wait, for that is not all. A little later, *the Angel of the Lord* said to St. Joseph *in a dream: Take the Child and His Mother and flee into Egypt*, because Herod wishes to put the Child to

death.\* Oh, how great a subject of grief must not this have been to Our Lady and St. Joseph! How exactly the Angel treats St. Joseph as a true Religious! *Take the Child, he says, and His Mother, and flee into Egypt, and be there until I tell thee.* What is all this? Might not St. Joseph have said: "You tell me to go; will it not be time enough to go to-morrow morning? Whither would you have me go by night? My preparations are not made; how would you have me carry the Child? Will my arms be strong enough to carry Him all through so long a journey? Or perhaps you mean the Mother to carry Him in her turn? Alas! do you not see that she is but a young girl, weak and tender? I have neither horse nor money for this journey. And do you not know that the Egyptians are enemies to the Israelites? Who will receive us?" Had we been in St. Joseph's place, should we not have urged a thousand such pleas to excuse ourselves from obeying the command? Whereas he without a word set out directly on his journey, and did all that the Angel had told him to do.

There are many useful remarks to be made on this command. In the first place, we are taught that, as regards matters of obedience, there must be no putting off, no delay. It is the act of the slothful to delay, as St. Augustine said of himself: † By-and-by, "yet a little," and then I will be converted. The Holy Ghost will have no putting off, but desires great promptitude in obeying His inspirations; our slothfulness, which makes us say: "I will begin presently," is our destruction. Why not

\* Matt. ii. 13.

† Confess., bk. viii. c. v.

now, at this very moment, when he is inspiring and urging us? Because we are so tender over ourselves that we are afraid of all that seems likely to interfere with our repose, which is really nothing but our slothfulness and indolence. We do not wish to be roused by any external objects which would draw us out of ourselves, and we imitate the sluggard, who, when his friends tried to induce him to come out of his house, thus complained: "How can I? *There is a lion in the way, and bears are round about, who will certainly devour me.*"\*

Oh, how much are we to blame in suffering God to press and knock again and again at the door of our hearts, before we will open to Him and permit Him to enter in and dwell there! Alas! it is much to be feared that we shall excite His anger and constrain Him to abandon us.

Further, we must consider the great peace and serenity of mind of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, shown in their constancy amid all the unexpected events which, as we have said, befell them. Now consider whether we are justified in being surprised and troubled when we meet with similar accidents in the house of God, which is holy Religion, seeing that they occurred even in the family of Our Lord, in which abode constancy and steadfastness itself in the person of Our Lord. We must repeat over and over again to ourselves, so as the better to impress the truth upon our minds, that no inequality of events must ever carry away our hearts and minds into inequalities of temper; for unevenness of temper proceeds from no other source than our

\* Prov. xxii. 13; xxvi. 13.

passions, inclinations, or unmortified affections. These must have no power with us whenever they incite us to do, to omit, or to desire anything however small, which is contrary to what the dictates of reason urge us to do or leave undone in order to please God.

I pass on to my second consideration on those words spoken by *the Angel of the Lord* to St. Joseph: *Take the Child*, and what follows. I dwell on this expression: *the Angel of the Lord*, and I ask you to observe how highly we ought to esteem the care, the succour, the assistance and the direction of those with whom God encompasses us in order to help us to walk surely in the path of perfection. You must notice, in the first place, that when we say *the Angel of the Lord*, it must not be understood in the same sense as when we say our Angel, in speaking of ourselves, for that means our Angel Guardian, appointed by God to take care of us. Our Lord, who is the King and Conductor of the very Angels themselves, has no need, that is, never in His mortal life had need of an Angel Guardian. When, therefore, we say *the Angel of the Lord*, we mean the Angel appointed to the care of the household and family of Our Lord, and more especially devoted to His service and to that of the Blessed Virgin.

To explain this in a familiar manner: during the last few days, offices and aids have been changed. Now what is the meaning of these aids being given to you? Why are they so given? St. Gregory\* says that in this miserable world, if we wish to keep

\* S. Greg. Thaum., Paraphr. in Eccles. iv. 10-12.



firm and steadfast in the work we have undertaken of saving or perfecting ourselves, we should behave like people who walk on ice. For these, says he, take each other by the hand or under the arms, so that, if one of them slips, the other may hold him up, and that other, when he in his turn is on the point of falling, may be held up by his friend. We in this life are walking as it were on the ice, exposed at each moment to the danger of meeting with occasions of slipping and of falling, now into vexation, now into murmurings, anon into a certain perversity, which makes us dissatisfied with everything that our neighbour does. Then follows disgust for our vocation; melancholy suggesting to us that we shall never do any good in it, and so on through all those accidents which are to be met with in our little spiritual world. For man is an epitome of the world, or rather, he is a little world in himself, in which all that is to be found in the great world of the universe is found. The passions represent the brute beasts and unreasoning creatures. The senses, inclinations, affections, powers, faculties of our soul, all have their special significance. I will not, however, dwell upon this, as I wish to continue my previous discourse.

The aids, then, who are given to us, are intended to help us to keep steadily on our way, to prevent our falling, or, if we fall, to aid us in getting up again. Oh! with what openness, cordiality, sincerity, simplicity, and faithful confidence ought we not to hold intercourse with these aids, who are given to us by God to help us in our spiritual progress. Certainly we should act with them as

with regard to our good Angels. We ought to look upon them in the same way, since our good Angels are called our Angel Guardians because they are commissioned to help us by their inspirations, to defend us in perils, to reprove us when we err, to stimulate us in the pursuit of virtue; they are charged to carry our prayers before the throne of the majesty, goodness, and mercy of Our Lord, and to bring back to us the answers to our petitions. The graces, too, which God bestows upon us, He gives through the intervention or intercession of our good Angels. Now our aids are our visible good angels, just as our holy Angel Guardians are our invisible ones. Our aids do visibly what our good Angels do inwardly; for they warn us of our faults; they encourage us when we are weak and languid; they stimulate us in our endeavours to attain perfection; they prevent us from falling by their good counsels, and they help us to rise up again, when we have fallen over some precipice of imperfection or fault. If we are overwhelmed with weariness and disgust they help us to bear our trouble patiently, and they pray God to give us strength so to bear it as not to be *overcome by temptation*.\* See, then, how much we ought to value their assistance and their tender care for us.

We will now consider why it was that Our Lord, Who is the Eternal Wisdom, did not take care of His family, I mean, did not inform St. Joseph or His sweetest Mother of all that was going to happen to them. Could He not have whispered to His foster-father St. Joseph: "Let us go down into Egypt, to

\* Matt. vi. 13.

stay there for such a time" ? since it is quite certain that He had the use of reason from the moment of His conception in the womb of the Blessed Virgin ; but He would not work this miracle of speaking before the time had come. Could He not have breathed His inspiration in the heart of His most holy Mother, or of His beloved reputed Father, St. Joseph, her spouse ? Why, then, did He not do this instead of leaving the charge to the Angel, who was greatly inferior to Our Lady ? There is a mystery in it all. Our Lord would not in any way interfere with the office of St. Gabriel, who, having been commissioned by the Eternal Father to announce the mystery of the Incarnation to the glorious Virgin, was henceforth in a manner the steward of the household and family of Our Lord, to watch over them in all that might befall them of good or ill, and especially to prevent anything from happening which might shorten the mortal life of our little new-born Child ; and for this reason he warned St. Joseph to carry Him quickly away into Egypt, to escape the tyranny of Herod, who intended to destroy Him. Our Lord would not govern Himself, but suffered Himself to be carried by whoever wished to carry Him, and wherever they wished to carry Him. It seemed as if He did not consider Himself wise enough to guide Himself or His Family, but allowed the Angel to arrange all things just as he pleased, although he had no wisdom or knowledge to compare with that of His divine Majesty.

And now, as regards ourselves, shall we dare to say that we can very well govern ourselves, and

that we have no need of the help and direction of those whom God has given to us for our guidance, not esteeming them, indeed, capable enough for us? Tell me, was the Angel in any way superior to Our Lord or to Our Lady? had he a better intellect or more judgment? By no means. Was he more qualified for the work of guidance? was he endowed with any special or peculiar grace? That could not be, seeing that Our Lord is both God and man, and that Our Lady, being His Mother, had, in consequence, more grace and perfection than all the Angels together; nevertheless the Angel commands and is obeyed. But more than this, see what rank is observed in the Holy Family! No doubt it was the same as it is among sparrow-hawks, where the hen-bird rules and is superior to the male. Who could doubt for a moment that Our Lady was much superior to St. Joseph, and that she had more discretion and qualities more fit for ruling than her spouse? Yet the Angel never addresses himself to her as regards anything that has to be done, either as to going or coming, or whatever it might be. Does it not seem to you that the Angel commits a great indiscretion in addressing himself to St. Joseph rather than to Our Lady, who is the head of the house, as possessing the treasure of the Eternal Father? Had she not just reason to be offended by this proceeding and by this mode of treatment? Doubtless she might have said to her spouse: "Why should I go into Egypt, since my Son has not revealed to me that I must go, still less has the Angel spoken to me on the subject?" Yet Our Lady makes no such remark; she is not in the least

offended because the Angel addresses himself to St. Joseph ; she obeys quite simply, knowing that God has so ordained it. She does not ask : "Why ?" It is sufficient for her that He wills it so, and that it is His pleasure that we should submit without hesitation. "But I am more than the Angel," she might have said, "and more than St. Joseph." No such thought occurs to her.

Do you not see that God delights to deal thus with men, in order to teach them holy and loving submission ? St. Peter was an old man, rough and uncultured ; St. John, on the contrary, was young, gentle, and sweet in manners ; yet God willed that St. Peter should guide the others and be their universal superior, and that St. John should be one of those who were ruled by him, and obeyed him. What a lesson for the proud human intellect, which will not bow down to adore the secret mysteries of God and His most holy will unless it has some sort of knowledge why this or that is so ! "I have a superior mind," we say, "I have more experience," and so on, giving specious reasons which are really only calculated to produce disquietude, variableness of temper, and murmuring. Why is this order given ? to what end was that said ? why was such a thing done for this person rather than for the other ? Ah ! what a pity it is, to start to inquire so closely into what we see done ! why take so much pains to destroy our peace of heart ? We really need no other reason than that God wills it, and that ought to suffice. But who will assure me that it is the will of God ? We would have God reveal all things to us by secret inspirations. Would we

wait until He sends Angels to announce His will? He did not do this even to Our Lady (at least not on this matter), but wished it to be made known to her by the intervention of St. Joseph, to whom she was subject as to her superior. Perhaps we should like to be told and informed by God Himself, through extasies, raptures, visions, and what not! Such are the follies which we weave in our brains, rather than submit ourselves to follow the ordinary and most sweet method of holy submission to the guidance of those whom God has given us, and to the direction of the Rules and of Superiors.

Let it, then, be enough to know that God wishes us to obey, without occupying ourselves with considering the capability of those whom we are called upon to obey. In this way we shall bring down our minds to walk simply in the happy path of a holy and tranquil humility which will render us infinitely pleasing to God.

We must now pass on to the third consideration, which I have made on the command given by the Angel to St. Joseph to *take the Child and His Mother*, and to go into the land of Egypt and remain there until he should bid him return. Truly the Angel spoke very briefly, and treated St. Joseph in every way like a good Religious: Go, and do not return *until I tell thee*. By this conduct of the Angel to St. Joseph we are taught, in the third place, how we should embark on the sea of divine Providence without store of biscuit, without oars or sculls, without sails, in a word without preparing anything at all, leaving to Our Lord all the care of ourselves and the result of our affairs, without doubts or

questionings or fears as to what may happen. For the angel simply says: *Take the Child and His Mother and fly into Egypt*; without telling St. Joseph either by what route to journey, or what preparations they must make for the way, or into what part of Egypt they should go, or how they should be fed when they arrived there, or who should receive them. Would not poor St. Joseph have had some reason to reply: "You tell me to depart, must it be at once?" "Instantly." This shows us the promptitude which the Holy Ghost requires of us when He says: "Arise, come forth out of thyself and such an imperfection." How great an enemy is the Holy Ghost to all procrastination and delay!

Consider, I entreat you, the great patron and model of all perfect Religious, holy Abraham. See how God deals with him: *Abraham, go forth out of thy country and from thy kindred; and go to the mountain which I shall show thee.* "Thou sayest, O Lord, that I must go forth from the city; but tell me, then, in what direction I must go, to the east or to the west?" The Patriarch makes no such reply, but instantly sets forth, and goes whither the Spirit of God leads him, till he reaches a mountain which was afterwards called *the Vision of God*, because there he received great and marvellous graces, to prove how pleasing promptness in obedience is to Him. Might not St. Joseph have said to the Angel: "Thou hast told me to take the Child and His Mother; tell me then, please, how I am to feed them on the journey; for Thou knowest well, my Lord, that we have no money." Nothing of all this did he say, but

was absolutely confident that God would provide for everything, as indeed He did, though sparsely, giving them the means of subsisting in a simple way, either by St. Joseph's trade, or the alms bestowed upon them. Certainly all those old Religious were admirable in their confidence that God would always provide what they might need for their support, leaving the whole care of themselves to divine Providence.

I consider, however, that it is not only requisite to rest on divine Providence in all that concerns temporal matters, but still more in all that belongs to our spiritual life and to our perfection. It is certainly only the too great care which we take of ourselves which makes us lose our tranquillity of mind and ruffles our unsteady temper; for as soon as any contradiction arises, or if we only notice in ourselves some small sign of an unmortified spirit, or if we commit the most trifling fault, it seems to us that all is lost. Is it so great a wonder that we sometimes find ourselves stumbling on the path of our perfection? "But I am so miserable, so full of imperfections!" Do you really recognise that? Then thank God for having given you such knowledge, and do not lament so much: you are most happy indeed in knowing your own absolute misery. After having thanked God for this knowledge, cut off at once the useless softness which makes you complain of your infirmity.

We are far too tender over our bodies, but incomparably more so as regards our souls, and this tenderness in both cases is very contrary to perfection. "Alas! I am not faithful to Our Lord, and



therefore I have no consolation in prayer." What a pity, to be sure! "But I am so often dry and cold that I think I cannot be in God's favour, since He is so full of consolation." Truly, that is a wise speech! as if God always gave consolation to His friends. Were there ever creatures more worthy of being loved, or more actually loved by God, than Our Lady and St. Joseph, and had they always consolations? Could a greater affliction be imagined than that experienced by St. Joseph when he knew that the glorious Virgin was with child, and not by him? His grief and affliction were as much greater, as the passion of love is more vehement than the other passions of the soul; and, moreover, in love, jealousy is the extremity of its pain, as the Bride in the Canticle of Canticles declares: \* *Love is strong as death*, for love produces the same effects on the soul as death does on the body; but *jealousy is hard as hell*. I leave you, then, to imagine what was the grief of St. Joseph and of Our Lady also when she saw how he whom she loved so dearly, and by whom she knew herself to be so dearly loved, must regard her. Jealousy made St. Joseph full of irresolution. Not knowing what course to take, he determined, rather than blame her whom he had always honoured and loved so much, to quit her and depart without saying a word.

"But," you will say, "I feel so strongly the trouble which this temptation or my imperfection causes me." Very likely, but is it to be compared to that of which we have just been speaking? It is impossible. Consider, then, I pray you, if we are

\* Cap. ult. 6.

justified in complaining or lamenting, when St. Joseph never complains at all, nor gives the slightest outward sign of disturbance: there is no bitterness of speech, no severity of look or behaviour towards Our Lady; he simply bears his trouble, and will not take any other step except that of leaving her: what, indeed, could he do in this matter! But some one may say: "I have such an antipathy towards this particular person that it is all I can do to speak to her; so displeasing is her conduct to me." Never mind, you must disregard your antipathy and not be cross with her, as if she could help it. Your conduct must resemble that of Our Lady and St. Joseph; you must be calm in the midst of your annoyance, and leave Our Lord to remove it when it pleases Him. It was in Our Lady's power to appease that tempest, but she would not do it, leaving the issue of the affair wholly to divine Providence. In playing the lute the two strings which are the most different from one another, and yet the most necessary to harmonise, are the treble and the bass. The high and the low are the most opposed, yet unless these two strings are in perfect tune the music of the lute cannot be agreeable. In the same way, in our spiritual lute there are two things equally opposed, and yet equally necessary to be brought into harmony; to be very careful about perfecting ourselves, and yet to have no care at all about our perfection, but to leave it entirely to God. By this I mean that we must take all the care which God wishes us to take about perfecting ourselves, and yet leave the care of arriving at perfection entirely to Him. God wishes our care to be a calm and

peaceful one, which shall make us do whatever is judged to be fitting by those who guide us, and always proceed faithfully along the road marked out for us by the Rules and Directory given to us; and for the rest, that we should repose in His fatherly care, trying as far as is possible to keep our soul at peace, for *the place of God is in peace* \* and in the peaceful and restful heart. You know that when the lake is very calm, and when the winds do not agitate its waters, on a very serene night, the sky with all its stars is so perfectly reflected in it, that looking down into its depths the beauty of the heavens is as clearly visible as if we looked up on high. So when our soul is perfectly calm, unstirred, and untroubled by the winds of superfluous cares, unevenness of spirit and inconstancy, it is very capable of reflecting in itself the image of Our Lord. But when the soul is troubled, tossed and agitated by the tempests of the passions, and when we allow ourselves to be governed by them, and not by that reason which makes us like to God, then we are wholly incapable of reflecting the lovely and beloved image of our crucified Lord, or the variety of His incomparable virtues; neither can our soul be fit to serve as His nuptial couch. We must therefore leave the care of ourselves to the mercy of divine Providence, and yet at the same time do simply and cheerfully all that is in our power to amend and perfect ourselves, taking always careful heed not to allow our minds to be troubled and disquieted. I remark further that the Angel told St. Joseph to remain in Egypt until he should bid him return, and

\* Ps. lxxv. 2.

that this glorious saint never replied: "At what time, Lord, wilt Thou bid me do so?" This was to teach us that when we are desired to take up some duty, we must not say "Will it be for a long time?" but must take it up quite simply, imitating the perfect obedience of Abraham when God commanded him to sacrifice his son.\* He made no reply, no complaint, no delay in fulfilling God's command: therefore God, being satisfied with Abraham's good will, showed him great favour, directing him to find a ram, which he sacrificed on the mountain instead of his son. I will conclude by calling your attention to the simplicity practised by St. Joseph when, at the command of the Angel, he went down into Egypt, a country in which he well knew that he would find as many enemies as there were inhabitants. Might he not have said: "Thou commandest me to take the Child away from here, but in fleeing from one enemy Thou dost put us into the hands of thousands whom we shall meet with in Egypt, seeing that we are Israelites." But no, he makes no reflection of any sort upon the command, and so sets forth on his way full of peace and of confidence in God. In like manner, my daughters, when any charge is given to us, let us not say: "Alas! I am so impulsive; if this charge is given to me I shall commit innumerable acts of impatience; I am already so distracted, if I am put in such a post as that I shall be still more so. If I were only left in my cell I should be so modest, so quiet, so recollected." Go down quite simply into Egypt, into the midst of all the enemies whom you will find

\* Gen. xxii. 1-13.

there ; for God, Who sends you thither, will also preserve you, and you will not die in that land ; but if, on the contrary, you remain in Israel, where there is also an enemy, namely your self-will, it will doubtless take your life. To take upon ourselves charges and offices would not be well, for fear we should not do our duty in them ; but when it is a matter of obedience let us never make any excuse, for God is on our side, and He will make us advance further in perfection than if we had nothing to do. Besides, do you not know what I have already told you many times,\* and what there is no harm in repeating once more, that virtue does not require that we should be deprived of the occasion of falling into the imperfection which is its opposite ? “It is not enough,” says Cassian,† “in order to be very gentle and patient in ourselves, that we should be shut out from intercourse with men, for, being quite alone in my cell, I have on occasion fallen into such impatience when I could not strike a light, that I have actually thrown away my flint and steel in anger !”

But it is time to leave off speaking, and so to leave you in Egypt with Our Lord, Who, as I believe, and many others hold, began from this time forth to make little crosses, when He had time left after helping St. Joseph in his work, showing thus early His fervent longing for the work of our redemption.

\* See, for instance, Conf. xvi., which is anterior in date to the present Conference.

† Instit., lib. viii. c. xviii.

## CONFERENCE IV

### ON CORDIALITY

*(I. On Cordiality—II. On the Spirit of Humility.)  
In which the question is asked how the sisters  
ought to love each other with a cordial love yet  
without too much familiarity.*

#### I. ON CORDIALITY

IN order to satisfy your demand, and to make it clearly understood in what consists that cordial love which the sisters ought to bear one another, you must know that cordiality is nothing else than the essence of true and sincere friendship, which can only exist between reasonable beings, who foment and nourish their friendships by the dictates of reason, for otherwise it cannot be friendship, but only love. Thus the brute beasts have love, but it is impossible for them to have friendship, because they are irrational. They have love among themselves on account of some natural affinity; they even have love for man, as experience shows us every day. Various authors have written admirable things on this subject:\* among others we are told of a certain dolphin, which was so passionately attached to a young child whom it had seen several times

\* Vide Plin., Hist. Nat., bk. ix. c. viii.

on the sea-shore, that when the child died the dolphin itself died of grief. But that must not be called friendship, since it is absolutely necessary for friendship that reciprocity should exist between the two who love one another, and that this friendship should be contracted through the action of reason. Thus the greater number of friendships which men form, not having a good object in view, and not being guided by reason, do not deserve the name of friendship (1).

Moreover, besides this action of reason there must also be a certain affinity, either in vocation, or aim, or state, between those who contract friendship, as experience teaches us very plainly. Is there any stronger or more real friendship than that which exists between brothers? We do not call the love which fathers bear to their children, or that which children have for their fathers, friendship, because there is not that correspondence of which we speak. The two kinds of affection are different: the love of a father being a grave love, full of authority, and that of children for their fathers a love of respect and submission. Between brothers, on account of their similarity of condition, the reciprocity of their love makes a firm, strong, solid friendship. This is why the early Christians all called one another

(1) *The name of friendship.* For example, in Carnival time, you will find a number of young madcaps who will assemble together and swear an eternal friendship. They will call one another brothers, and neglect nothing to make it believed that they love each other dearly. This, however, is not at all the case, seeing that the foundation of their friendship is nothing but the plan they have formed of doing many things contrary to reason, without which there can be no true friendship.

(Addition.)

brethren; and when this first fervour of the primitive Church grew cold, the Religious Orders were instituted, and it was enjoined that Religious should call one another brothers and sisters, as a mark of the sincere and cordial friendship which they entertain, or ought to entertain, for each other, and because there is no friendship to be compared to that of brothers. All other friendships are either unequal or do not spring naturally, like those of married persons, in whose case they are made by contracts written and pronounced by notaries, or by verbal promises. Hence those friendships which people of the world contract with each other, either for some private interest or for some frivolous reason, are very liable to perish and be dissolved, but that which exists between brothers is quite different, for it is not made up, and hence is much to be praised. This being so, you can understand why Religious call one another brothers, showing that theirs is a love truly deserving the name of friendship, and that it is not ordinary but cordial friendship, that is, one which is rooted deep down in the heart.

We must then remember that love has its seat in the heart, and that we can never love our neighbour too much, nor exceed the limits of reason in this affection, provided that it dwells in the heart; but as regards the manifestations of this love, we can very easily go wrong by excess, passing beyond the rules of reason. The glorious St. Bernard says that "the measure of loving God is to love Him without measure," and that in our love there ought to be no limits, but that we should



allow its branches to spread out as far as they possibly can. That which is said of love to God may also be understood to apply to our neighbour, provided, however, that the love of God always keeps the upper hand and holds the first rank. Then, in the next place, we should love our sisters with all the compass of our heart, and not be content with loving them as ourselves, which the Commandments of God oblige us to do, but love them more than ourselves, in order to observe the rules of evangelical perfection which requires that of us. Our Lord Himself says: \* *Love one another as I have loved you.* This *love as I have loved you*, ought to be well considered, for it means: more than yourselves. And just as Our Lord has always preferred us to Himself, and does so still as often as we receive Him in the Blessed Sacrament, making Himself therein our food, so in like manner He wishes us to have such a love for one another that we shall always prefer our neighbour to ourselves. And just as He has done all that He could do for us except condemning Himself to hell (which indeed He could not and ought not to do, for He could not sin and it is sin alone which leads to damnation), so He wishes, and the rule of perfection requires, that we should do all that we can do for one another except losing our soul. With that sole exception, our friendship ought to be so firm, cordial, and solid that we should never refuse to do or to suffer anything for our neighbour and our sisters.

Now this cordial love ought to be accompanied

\* John xiii. 34; xv. 12.

by two virtues, one of which may be called affability, and the other cheerfulness. Affability is a virtue which spreads a certain agreeableness over all the business and serious communications which we hold with one another; cheerfulness is that which renders us gracious and agreeable in our recreations and less serious intercourse with one another. All the virtues have, as you know, two contrary vices, which are the extremes of the virtue. The virtue of affability, then, lies between two vices (2): that of too great gravity and seriousness on the one hand, and on the other of too many demonstrations of affection, and using expressions which incline to flattery. Now the virtue of affability holds the golden mean between these two extremes, making use of affectionate terms according to the necessity of those with whom it has to deal, preserving at the same time a gentle gravity according to the requirements of the persons and affairs of which it treats. I say that we must show signs of affection at certain times, for it would not be suitable to carry into a sick room as much gravity of demeanour as we should display elsewhere, not showing more kindness to an invalid than if she were in full health. But we must not make such demonstrations too frequently, or be ready on every occasion to speak honeyed words, throwing whole handfuls of them over the first person we meet. Just as if we put too much sugar on our food it would disgust

(2) *Extremes of the virtue*—as for example, liberality has on the one side prodigality, on the other avarice and parsimony. A man who gives more than he ought, falls into the vice of prodigality, and on the contrary, when he does not give according to his means, he becomes avaricious and stingy. (*Var.*)

us, becoming insipid by being too sweet, so, in the same way, too frequent signs of affection would become repulsive, or at any rate we should cease to value them, knowing that they were given almost mechanically. The food on which salt is scattered in quantities would be disagreeable on account of its tartness, but that into which either salt or sugar is put in proper proportions becomes agreeable to the taste; so also caresses bestowed with measure and discretion are rendered profitable and agreeable to those who receive them.

The virtue of cheerfulness requires that we should contribute to holy and temperate joy and to pleasant conversation, which may serve as a consolation and recreation to our neighbour, so as not to weary and annoy him with our knit brows and melancholy faces, or by refusing to recreate ourselves at the time destined to recreation (3). We have already treated of this virtue in the Conference on *Religious Modesty* (I). I will therefore pass on, only saying that it is a very difficult thing always to hit

(3) *Destined to recreation*—behaving like those who mete out all their words, pondering upon each before uttering it, to see if their sentences are well arranged and require no alteration, so much afraid are they that their speech and actions may be exposed to censure. Such people are constantly examining themselves, not that they may know if they have offended God, but to find out if they have given occasion to any one to hold them in less esteem. Truly, such people make themselves very disagreeable to those with whom they converse, and fail greatly in the practice of the virtue of cheerfulness, which requires us to converse frankly and pleasantly with our neighbour, contributing all in our power to his profit or consolation.

(Addition.)

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(1) Given two years before the present Conference.

the centre of our target. It is perfectly true that we ought all to intend to pierce the central white of that perfect virtue which we desire so ardently, but still we must not lose courage if we do not attain its very essence, provided that we hit the target at all, and as close to the centre as we can; for the very saints themselves could not perfectly attain all the virtues, none but Our Lord and Our Lady could. The saints practised them very differently (4). What a dissimilarity there is between the spirit of St. Augustine and that of St. Jerome! it may be remarked in their writings. Nothing can be more gentle than St. Augustine; his writings are sweetness itself. St. Jerome, on the contrary, was very austere; to be convinced of this, look at him in his epistles, he is almost always angry. Yet both were extremely virtuous, only one had more gentleness, the other a greater austerity of life, and both (although not equally gentle or equally stern) were great saints (5). Thus we see that we must not be disappointed if we are not all equally gentle and sweet, provided that we love our neighbour with the love of our heart,

(4) *What a difference*—is there between the spirit of St. Jerome and that of our Blessed Father St. Augustine, whose writings are gentleness and sweetness itself. St. Jerome, on the contrary, had a severity quite out of the common, and seems to repel one. See him with his long beard, holding the stone with which he strikes his breast. (*Var.*)

(5) *Great saints*—St. Paul and St. John were very great saints, but not equally gentle and sweet, for the difference in their spirit is shown in their Epistles. St. John displays nothing but this gentleness and sweetness; he always calls those to whom he writes *my little children*, on account of the tenderness which he felt for them. St. Paul loved them with a love which doubtless was not so tender, but which was nevertheless very solid.

(*Addition.*)

and to its fullest extent, and as our Lord loved us, that is to say, more than ourselves; always preferring him to ourselves in all things relating to holy charity, and never refusing him anything which we can contribute for his advantage, excepting to lose our own souls, as we have already said. We must, however, try to make the outward manifestations of our affection conformable, as far as we can, to the dictates of reason; we must *rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep.*\*

I have said that we must show that we love our sisters (and this is in answer to the second part of the question), without making use of any foolish familiarity: the Rule tells us this,† but let us see exactly what it means. Nothing less than that holiness must appear in our familiarity and in all our manifestations of friendship, as St. Paul tells us in one of his Epistles:‡ *Salute one another with a holy kiss.* It was the custom among the early Christians to kiss one another when they met. Our Lord also used this form of salutation towards His Apostles, as we learn from the betrayal of Judas.§ The holy Religious of olden times, when they met, said: *Deo gratias*, as a proof of their great satisfaction in seeing one another, as if they would say: “I thank God, my dear brother, for the consolation which He has given me in seeing you.” Thus must you too, my dear daughters, give signs of your love for each other and of your satisfaction in meeting,

\* Rom. xii. 15.

† Chap. xxii. ; cf. Constit. xxiii. on Religious Modesty.

‡ Rom. ult. 16, cf. 1 Cor. ult. 20; 2 Cor. ult. 12.

§ Matt. xxvi. 48, 49.

provided that these signs of affection be always accompanied by holiness, and that so God may not only not be offended, but, on the contrary, may be glorified and praised by them. The same St. Paul who teaches us to express our affection in a holy manner, wishes us also to do it graciously, and teaches us this by his own example: *Salute*, he says, "such a one who knows that I love him with all my heart and such a one who ought to be sure that I love him as my brother, and his mother, who knows well she is also mine."\*

You ask me if you may venture to show more affection to one sister whom you consider especially virtuous than to another. To this I reply that although we are bound to love most those who are the most virtuous with the love of complacency, yet we ought not to love them more with the love of benevolence, neither ought we to show them more tokens of friendship; and this for two reasons. First, because Our Lord did not do so; indeed, He seems to have shown more affection for the imperfect than for the perfect, since He tells us that He had *not come for the just, but for sinners*.† It is to those who have the most need of us that we ought to show our love more especially, for in such cases we give a better proof that we love through charity than in loving those who give us more consolation, than trouble. In doing this we must act as the needs of our neighbour may require. But, excepting in such cases, we must try to love all equally, since Our Lord does not say: "Love those who are the most virtuous," but simply: *Love one another as*

\* Rom. ult. 5-13.

† Matt. ix. 13.

*I have loved you*, without excluding any one, however imperfect.

The second reason for which we should not give tokens of friendship more to some than to others, or allow ourselves to love them more, is that we cannot possibly judge who are the most perfect and most virtuous, for external appearances are deceitful, and very often those who seem to be the most virtuous (as I have said elsewhere)\* are not so in the sight of God, who alone can absolutely know them as they are. It may be that a sister whom you often see stumbling and committing many imperfections is more virtuous and more pleasing to God (either because of the great courage which she preserves in the midst of these imperfections, never allowing herself to be troubled or cast down by seeing herself so liable to fall, or because of the humility which she extracts from them, or, again, by the love of her abjection) than another who may have a dozen virtues, natural or acquired, and who will therefore strive and labour less, and perhaps be less humble and courageous than she who is so apt to fail. St. Peter was chosen to be the chief of the Apostles, although he was subject to so many imperfections that he even committed some after he had received the Holy Ghost, because, notwithstanding these defects, he was always full of courage, never allowing himself to be dismayed by them. Therefore Our Lord made him His Vicar, so that no one may with reason say that he did not deserve to be exalted and distinguished above St. John and the other Apostles.

\* Conference on Self-renouncement.

We must then bestow on our sisters the affection which we owe to them, as equally as we possibly can, for the above-mentioned reasons. And they ought all to know that we love them from our hearts, and therefore there is no need to use so many words about it, saying "that we love them dearly," "that we are disposed to love them specially," and so on. For indeed, if we have an inclination to love one more than another, our love for her will not be more perfect on that account, yea, perhaps more liable to change at the least little thing which she may do in our regard. If, as a fact, we are inclined to love one more than another, we ought not to waste our time in thinking about it, still less in telling her of it; for we should not love by inclination, but love our neighbour either because he is virtuous, or because we hope that he will become so, but chiefly because it is the will of God.

Now, in order to show that we love him we must do him all the good that we possibly can, as well for soul as for body, praying for him and serving him cordially when the occasion offers. The friendship which ends in fine words is not of great worth, neither is it loving as Our Saviour loved us; for He was not content with assuring us that He loved us, He went far beyond, doing all that He has done as a proof of His love. St. Paul, speaking to his beloved children,\* says: "I am ready to give my life for you, and to spend myself for you absolutely and unreservedly to show how dearly and tenderly I love you; yea," he says, "I am prepared to suffer for you or through you whatever you like." By this

\* 2 Cor. xii. 14, 15, 19.



he teaches us that to labour or even to give our life for our neighbour, is not so great a thing as to be ready to let ourselves be employed at the pleasure of others, either by them or for them. This was what he had learnt from our sweet Saviour on the cross.\* It is to this supreme height of the love of our neighbour that Religious, and we who are consecrated to the service of God, are called: for it is not enough to assist our neighbour with our temporal goods; it is not even enough, says St. Bernard,† to make our own selves suffer for this love; we must go further, allowing ourselves to be used for him by holy obedience, and by him just as he pleases, without ever resisting. For to govern ourselves and to act by our own will or our own choice, always gives much satisfaction to our self-love; but to allow ourselves to be employed in things which others will and we do not—that is, which we do not choose—in this lies the highest point of abnegation; for instance, when we would like to preach, and we are sent to wait on the sick; or when we wish to pray for our neighbour, and are sent to serve him. Always better, and incomparably better, is whatever others make us do (I mean, of course, in that which is not contrary to God, and does not offend Him) than what we do or choose of ourselves.

Let us then love one another heartily, and in order to do so let us make use of the motive so potent to stimulate us to such holy love, namely, that Our Lord upon the cross shed the last drops of His Blood upon the earth, as it were to make thereby a sacred mortar ‡ with which He would cement, con-

\* Phil. ii. 8.

† De Consid., bk. iv. c. ii.

‡ Col. i. 20.

join, and attach to one another the faithful, who are the stones of His Church, in order that this union might be so strong that there should never be any division therein; so much did He fear that from division might follow eternal damnation.

Bearing with the imperfections of our neighbour is one of the chief characteristics of this love. Our Lord showed us this upon the cross. His heart was full of tenderness and love for us; for us, I say, and even for those who caused His death, and who thereby committed the most monstrous sin that man could ever commit. Yes, most monstrous in its iniquity was the sin of the Jews; yet our sweet Saviour had thoughts of love even for them, giving us an example beyond all that we could ever have imagined, since He made excuses for those who mocked and crucified Him in their barbarous fury, seeking for motives whereby to obtain for them His Father's forgiveness\* at the very moment of their sin and outrage. Oh, how miserable are we poor children of earth! for we can scarcely forget an injury, even long after we have received it! But he who shall *prevent* his neighbour with *the blessings of sweetness*,† will be the most perfect imitator of Our Lord.

We must, moreover, remark that cordial love is attached to another virtue, which is as it were a consequence of that love, namely a childlike confidence. When children have, say a fine feather, or something else which they think pretty, they cannot rest until they have found their little companions to show them the said feather, and make

\* Luke xxiii. 34.

† Ps. xx. 4.

them share in their joy; and just in the same way they want them to share their grief, for if they have but a finger-ache they go telling every one they meet about it, to get pity and have the poor finger breathed upon. Now I do not say that you must be exactly like these children, but I do say that this confidence ought to make you willingly communicate to your sisters all your little satisfactions and consolations, with no fear lest they should remark your imperfection. I do not say that if some extraordinary gift is bestowed upon you by God you must tell every one about it—no; but as regards your smaller consolations and joys, I wish you not to be so reserved about them, and, when the occasion presents itself, to speak of them frankly and simply to one another, not in a spirit of boasting and self-satisfaction, but of childlike confidence. So too as regards your faults, I should wish you not to take so much pains to hide them, for they are none the better for not being outwardly visible. The sisters will not think you have none because they are concealed, and your imperfections will perhaps be more dangerous than if they were detected, and caused you the confusion which they do to those who are more ready to let them appear on the surface. You must not, then, be astonished or discouraged when you commit some fault or imperfection before your sisters, but, on the contrary, you must be very glad to be seen as you really are. You may have been guilty of some fault or silliness, it is true; but it was before your sisters, who love you dearly, who can very well bear with you in your faults, and who will feel more compassion for

you than indignation against you. Such confidence would greatly strengthen the cheerfulness and calmness of our minds, which are liable to be troubled when we are found out to be faulty in something, however small it may be, as if it were any great wonder that we should be seen to be imperfect!

In conclusion, remember always that if we should sometimes, through inadvertence, fail in gentleness and sweetness of behaviour, we must not distress ourselves, or think that we are absolutely devoid of cordiality, for this is not so. An act committed now and then, and not frequently, does not make a man vicious, especially when he has a hearty purpose and will to amend.

(I) *Omitted from the Conference on Cordiality*

Do you ask me, my daughter, if you may laugh in the choir or in the refectory when others are laughing at some unexpected occurrence? I reply that in the choir we must not in any way contribute to the amusement of others; it is not the proper place, and such a fault ought to be seriously corrected. As regards the refectory, if I were to see every one else laughing I should laugh with them, but if I saw a dozen who were not doing so, I

(I) This addition, title included, is an extract from a compilation, prepared by the order and under the supervision of St. Jane Frances de Chantal, and printed in Paris under the title of *Little Customs of the Convent of the Visitation of Holy Mary of Annecy* 1642. From the same collection are taken the additions to Conferences xv. and xvi. The testimony of St. Jane gives them an authority equal to that of the text to which they are attached. (See, in vol. v. of her *Letters*, a circular dated July 4, 1638.)

would not laugh, and not trouble myself in the least if I were called too serious.

When I said that our love for our sisters ought to be so impartial, that we should love one as much as another, I meant, as far as we can do so; for it is not in our power to have as tender and sweet an affection for those whose tempers and dispositions are not in accordance with our own, as for others with whom we are in sympathy. But that is nothing; it remains that the love of charity must be universal, and the signs and manifestations of our friendship must be impartial, if we wish to be true servants of God.

We do not exactly know how to distinguish between what are idle words and what are not; very few idle words are spoken in these houses of observance (6). Do you want to know what would be idle words? Well, if, when serious and holy things were being talked about, a sister were to begin telling a dream, or some little amusing tale, then her talking, not being in order, would be idle. Or again, if in relating a thing which could be told in a dozen words, I use twenty, quite unnecessarily and out of mere lightness of heart, it is idle speaking, unless indeed this multiplication is due to the ignorance of the speaker, who does not know how to explain herself better, in which case there is no sin.

As regards recreation, however, you must not

(6) *Observance*—for if all that is said is not strictly necessary, it is usually either a simple communication of ideas by way of fostering social intercourse, or the words are said for recreation, and that general conversation to which each one rightly contributes. What would be idle at another time is not so in recreation, because the object makes it useful. (*Addition.*)

imagine that the little insignificant things which are said are idle words, since they have a very holy and useful end. The sisters must have proper recreation, and it is specially important that it should be made cheerful for the novices. Our minds must not be kept always on the stretch; there would be danger of our becoming melancholy. I should not like you to give way to scruples when you have spent the whole of recreation on some occasion in talking about unimportant things; another time you will speak of good ones.

Cheerful and at the same time holy conversation is that in which no evil is spoken, which does not attack our neighbour's imperfections (for this fault must never be committed), in which one does not speak in any unbecoming way, in which one does not take pleasure in speaking much about the world and its vanities. If two or three words of this sort are spoken in passing, and we then check ourselves, there is no need to trouble ourselves about the matter at all. Neither is there any harm whatever in laughing a little at something that a sister may have said. To utter some light, merry word, which may perhaps mortify her a little, provided it does not make her sad, and provided also that I said it not to hurt, but simply for recreation, is not matter for confession. When we aim at perfection, we must aim at the centre, but yet we must not be troubled if we do not always hit it. We must go on our way simply and straightforwardly, properly taking our recreation for God's sake, so as to praise Him and serve Him better. If we have not the actual intention, the general one will suffice.

## II. ON THE SPIRIT OF HUMILITY

*What it is to do all things in a spirit of Humility as the Constitutions prescribe.*

IN order to understand this, you must know that as there is a difference between pride itself, the habit of pride, and the spirit of pride. (For if you commit one act of pride, that is pride; if you commit such acts continually, on every occasion, that is the habit of pride; if you take pleasure in these acts, and seek for the occasions of committing them, that is the spirit of pride); so in the same way there is a difference between humility, the habit of humility, and the spirit of humility. It is humility to perform some act in order to humiliate ourselves; the habit of it is the performance of such acts frequently, and whenever the occasions present themselves; but the spirit of humility is taking pleasure in humiliation, is seeking in all things for abjection and contempt. It is, in fact, making it our chief aim to humble and abase ourselves in all that we do, say, or desire, and taking a real delight in meeting with opportunities of self-humiliation, loving the very thought of it. That is what is meant by doing all things in a spirit of humility, or, in other words, the seeking humility and abjection in all things.

It is a good practice of humility (7) not to study

(7) You ask if you are wanting in humility, when you laugh at the faults the sisters acknowledge, or the mistakes made by the reader during meals. No, not at all, my dear daughter, for laughter is a passion which is stirred without our consent, and which it is not in our power to prevent, especially when we are

the actions of others save to find out their virtues, for as to their imperfections, as long as we are not in charge of them we must never turn either our eyes or our consideration in that direction. Whatever we may see our neighbour do, we must always interpret his conduct in the best manner possible. In doubtful matters, we must persuade ourselves that what we noticed was not wrong, but that it was our own imperfection which made us think it was, in order to avoid rash judgments of the actions of others, which is a most dangerous evil, and one which we ought to have in the highest aversion. As regards things which are undoubtedly wrong, we must be full of compassion, and humble ourselves for our neighbours' faults as for our own (8), praying to God for their amendment with the same fervour as we should use if we were subject to the same faults.

moved to laughter on unforeseen occasions. That is why Our Lord could not laugh, for nothing was unforeseen to Him who knew all things before they happened, but He could smile, when He saw good. Fools laugh on all occasions because things take them by surprise; but wise men are not so prone to laughter, because they make more use of reflection, which enables us to foresee what is likely to happen. This being the case, it is not contrary to humility to laugh, provided that we do not go further, dwelling too much in our own mind or talking with some other person on the subject which moved us to laughter. This we must not do, especially when some imperfection of our neighbour is the cause of our amusement. That would be quite inconsistent with the question which you asked about the way to conceive or to maintain a good opinion of our neighbour, since that can only be done by fidelity in studying his virtues and refusing to dwell upon his imperfections. (*Addition.*)

(8) The example of St. Joseph is admirable on this subject. He saw that Our Lady was with child, and knew not how; yet he would not for a moment judge her, he left the judgment to God. (*Addition.*)



“But what can we do,” you say, “to acquire such a spirit of humility as you have described?” Well, like all the other virtues, it can only be acquired by repeated acts.

Humility makes us annihilate ourselves in all things which are not necessary for our advancement in grace, such, for instance, as a gift of expression, gracefulness of manners, great talent for business matters, a capable mind, eloquence, and so on, for in all these outward matters we ought to desire that others should do better than we do.

## CONFERENCE V

### ON GENEROSITY

THAT you may thoroughly understand the nature of that strength and generosity of spirit about which you have questioned me, I must first reply to a very frequent inquiry of yours as to the nature of true humility; for in resolving this point I shall make myself better understood when I come to speak of the second matter, namely that generosity of spirit of which you now wish me to treat.

Humility, then, is nothing else than the recognition of the fact that we are absolute nothingness, and it keeps us constant in this estimation of ourselves. In order to understand this better, you must know that there are in us two kinds of good gifts; some which are both in us and of us, and others which are in us but not of us. When I say that we have good gifts which are of us, I do not mean that they do not come from God, and that we receive them from ourselves; for, in truth, of ourselves we are nothing but misery and nothingness; but I mean that they are gifts which God has put into us in such a manner that they seem to be actually of us. Such gifts are health, riches, learning, and the like. Now, humility prevents us from glorying in or esteeming ourselves on account of

these gifts, which it holds as of no account at all; and with reason, seeing that they are most unstable possessions, that they do not render us more pleasing to God, and are mutable, and subject to the caprices of fortune. Indeed, is there anything less secure than riches, which depend on the weather and seasons; than beauty, which may fade in a moment, and which some little disfigurement on the face suffices to blemish; than learning, seeing that some little brain trouble can make us forget and lose all that we once knew? It is then with great reason that humility takes no account of all these gifts. But the more it makes us humble and abase ourselves, through the knowledge of what we are of ourselves and through the small esteem in which it holds all that is in us and of us; so much the more, on the other hand, does it make us greatly esteem ourselves on account of the good gifts which are in us but not of us: faith, hope, the love of God (little though it be, in us), a certain capacity which God has given us of being united to Him by grace. I add, as regards ourselves, our vocation, which gives us an assurance, as far as may be in this life, of the possession of eternal glory and happiness. And this esteem in which humility holds all these good gifts, namely faith, hope, and charity, is the foundation of generosity of spirit.

Take notice that the first gifts of which we spoke belong to the exercise of humility, and the others to generosity. Humility believes that it can do nothing, considering its poverty and weakness as far as depends on ourselves; while, on the contrary, generosity makes us say with St. Paul: *I can do all*

*things in Him Who strengthens me.\** Humility makes us mistrust ourselves, generosity makes us trust in God. You see, then, that these two virtues of humility and generosity are so closely joined and united to one another, that they never are and never can be separated. There are persons who deceive themselves by a false and foolish humility, which prevents them from looking at the real good which God has implanted in them. In this they are quite wrong, for the gifts which God has bestowed on us ought to be recognised, esteemed, and highly honoured, and not placed in the same rank, or held in the same low estimation, as those which belong to the gifts which are in us and of us. Not only have true Christians always recognised that these two kinds of gifts which are in us must be regarded in different aspects, the one kind as given for our humiliation, the other to glorify the divine Goodness which bestowed them, but the philosophers have done the same. Their maxim: "Know thyself," must be understood as referring not only to the knowledge of our vileness and misery, but also to that of the excellence and dignity of our souls, which are capable of being united to the Divinity. His infinite goodness has implanted in us a certain instinct, impelling us always to tend towards and aim at that union in which all our happiness consists. The humility which does not produce generosity is undoubtedly false, for after it has said: "I can do nothing, I am only absolute nothingness," it suddenly gives place to generosity of spirit, which says: "There is nothing

\* Phil. iv. 13.

and there can be nothing that I am unable to do, so long as I put all my confidence in God, who can do all things;" and buoyed up by this confidence, it courageously undertakes to do all that is commanded.

But notice that I say, all that is commanded or counselled, however difficult it may be, for I can assure you that humility would consider it no impossible thing for her to work miracles if commanded to do so. For if the humble soul sets herself to the execution of the command in simplicity of heart, God will rather work a miracle than fail in giving her the power to accomplish what she attempts, because she undertakes it not relying on her own strength, but on the gifts which God has bestowed on her. And so she reasons thus with herself: "If God calls me to a state of perfection so high that in this life there is none higher, what can prevent my attaining to it, since I am well assured that *He Who has begun the work of my perfection will finish it?*"\* But take note that all this is done without any presumption, for such confidence as I have described does not make us less on our guard for fear of failing; on the contrary, it renders us all the more watchful over ourselves, more vigilant and careful to do whatever may serve for our advancement in perfection.

Humility does not only consist in mistrust of ourselves, but also in confidence in God; and indeed mistrust of ourselves and of our own strength produces confidence in God, and of this confidence is born that generosity of spirit of which we are

\* Phil. i. 6.

speaking. The Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, gives us a striking example of this in the words: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word.*\* For in calling herself *the handmaid of the Lord*, she made the greatest act of humility that could be, since in opposition to the praises bestowed on her by the Angel, when he tells her that she shall be the Mother of God, that the Child Who shall be born of her shall be called *the Son of the Most High*;† a dignity the greatest that could ever be imagined—in opposition to all this praise and this greatness, I say, she brings forward her own lowliness and unworthiness: *behold the handmaid of the Lord*. Yet observe that as soon as she has paid this debt to humility, she instantly makes an act of perfect generosity: *be it done unto me according to thy word*. “It is true,” she would say, “that I am not in any respect capable of this grace, as of myself; but since what is good in me is of God, and since what you tell me is His most holy will, I believe that it can and will be done;” and therefore without hesitation she says: *be it done unto me according to thy word*.

It is likewise for want of this generosity that so very few acts of true contrition are made; because, after having humbled and abased ourselves before the divine Majesty, when we remember and ponder over our grievous infidelities, we do not go on to make this act of confidence, reviving our courage by the assurance which we ought to have that the divine Goodness will give us grace to be henceforth faithful to Him, and to correspond more perfectly

\* Luke i. 38.

† Ibid. 32.

to His love. After this act of confidence, we ought instantly to make the act of generosity, saying: "Since I am fully assured that the grace of God will never fail me, I will also believe that He will not permit me to fail in corresponding with that grace." But you may reply: "If I fail grace, it will also fail me." That is true. "If it is thus, who then shall assure me that I, who have so often failed to correspond to grace in the past, shall not fail in the future?" I answer that generosity makes the soul say boldly and without fear: "No, I will never more be faithless to God;" and because she feels in her heart this resolution firmly fixed, she fearlessly sets herself to do all that she can to render herself pleasing to God, without any exception whatever; and undertaking all, she believes that she can do all, not of herself, but in God, in Whom she places all her confidence, and for Whom she does all that she is commanded or advised to do.

You ask me, however, if we are never permitted to doubt our capability of doing the things which we are commanded to do. I reply that generosity of spirit never permits us to entertain the slightest doubt on the subject. In order that you may understand this better, you must distinguish, as I have often told you, between our higher nature and our lower. When I say that generosity will not allow us to doubt, I am speaking with regard to our higher nature, for it is quite possible that our lower may be full of these doubts, and may experience great difficulty in accepting the charge or employment which is given to us. But the generous soul

pays no heed to any such considerations, and simply sets herself to work to fulfil this charge, without saying a single word or giving the slightest evidence of her feeling of incapacity. We, on the contrary, are eager to show that we are very humble, and that we have a very poor estimation of ourselves, and so on. This is anything but true humility, which never permits us to resist the judgment of those whom God has given to us for our guidance.

In my book of "The Introduction" \* I have given an example which is to the point, and very remarkable; it is that of King Achaz.† Being reduced to great misery by the fierce war made upon him by two other kings who had besieged Jerusalem, God commanded the prophet Isaias to go and console him in His name, promising him that he should gain the victory, and triumph over his enemies. Moreover, Isaias told him that, as a proof of the truth of what he had promised, he was to "ask of God a sign, either in the heavens or earth," † and it would be given him. Then Achaz, distrusting the goodness and liberality of God, answered: *I will not do it, because I am not willing to tempt God.* But the miserable man did not say this because of the honour that he bore to God; on the contrary, he refused to honour Him, seeing that God on that occasion willed to be glorified by miracles, and Achaz would not ask for one which He had signified that He desired to perform. Achaz offended God by refusing to obey the Prophet sent to him by God to intimate His will.

We must, then, never doubt for a moment our

\* Part iii. c. v.

† Isa. vii. 3, 12.



power of doing what we are commanded to do, more especially because those who so command us know perfectly well what our capabilities are. But you say that perhaps you have many interior miseries and great imperfections which your Superiors do not know of, and that they found their opinion of you on outward appearances, by which you may have led them into error. I reply that you are not always to be believed when you say, perhaps under pressure of discouragement, that you are miserable and full of imperfections; nor, on the other hand, must it be believed that you have none because you say nothing about them, since, generally speaking, you are such as your works show you to be. Your virtues will be known by the fidelity with which you practise them, and so in like manner will your imperfections be known by your deeds. Unless you feel that there is malice in your heart, you will not mislead the judgment of your Superiors.

You tell me, however, that many saints have opposed a firm resistance when they have had charges offered to them. What, however, they did on such occasions was not done only on account of the low estimation in which they held themselves, but chiefly because they saw that those who wished to place them in these positions were relying on apparent virtues, such as fasting, almsgiving, penances, and bodily austerities, and not on real internal virtues which they kept hidden and veiled by holy humility. Then, again, they were sought out and pursued by people who only knew them by reputation. In such a case it would, I think, be allowable

to make a little resistance; but do you know who might be permitted to do this? Well, for instance, a sister of Dijon, to whom a Superior of Annecy might send a command to become Superior without ever having seen or known her. But a sister of this house to whom the same command might be given, must never consider it her duty to bring forward any reason to explain her repugnance to this command; she must set to work to fulfil the duties of her office with as much calmness and courage as if she felt herself perfectly capable of acquitting herself well. But I quite understand this subterfuge; we are afraid of not coming out of the affair with credit to ourselves; we hold our own reputation so dear that we would not be looked upon as apprentices to the work, but rather as masters and mistresses who never make mistakes.

You can now understand sufficiently what is this spirit of strength and generosity which we so much desire to see among you. It banishes by its presence all the little follies and softnesses which only serve to hinder us on our road, and prevent us from making progress in perfection. These softnesses are nourished by the idle reflections which we make about ourselves, chiefly when we have stumbled in our path by committing some fault. I say stumbled, for here, by the grace of God, we do not fall outright; that has not yet occurred amongst us; but we stumble, and then, instead of quietly humbling ourselves and rising up again courageously, as I have said, we begin to dwell too much upon the thought of our wretchedness, and to lament over ourselves. "Alas!" we cry, "how miserable I am! I am fit for

nothing !” From that we pass on to discouragement, which makes us exclaim : “ Oh no ! you must not hope for anything from me again ; I shall never do any good, you are wasting time in speaking to me ; ” and we sink to a state where we would almost rather be left to ourselves, as if it were fully recognised that nothing could be done with us. Ah ! how different is all this to the behaviour of the generous soul, who, as we have said, holds in high estimation the good gifts with which God has endowed her. Such a soul is never dismayed, either by the difficulties of the road which she has to traverse, or by the greatness of the work which she is called upon to perform, or by the length of time which she must give to it, or finally, by the delay in the progress of the work undertaken. The Daughters of the Visitation are all called to very great perfection, and their undertaking is the loftiest, the most exalted, that can be imagined ; since they not only aim at uniting themselves with the will of God, as all God’s creatures should, but more than this, they aim at uniting themselves with His desires, yea, even with His intentions, anticipated as it were, rather than signified. Indeed, if one could imagine anything more perfect, or a step higher in perfection, than that of conformity with the will, desires, and intentions of God, they would certainly undertake to ascend there, since theirs is a vocation which obliges them to do so. Therefore the devotion of this house ought indeed to be strong and generous, as we have said many times.\*

\* Conference i. ; *cf.* Conference xiv.

But besides what we have said of this generosity, we must add that the soul which possesses it welcomes dryness equally with the sweetness of consolation, welcomes interior weariness, sadness, and heaviness of heart, equally with the fervour and satisfaction of a mind all filled with peace and tranquillity. This is because she remembers that He Who gave her these consolations is the very same Who sends her afflictions, moved in both instances by the same tender love; and this love she acknowledges to be very great, inasmuch as through internal affliction He would draw her on to the very highest perfection, which is the abnegation of every sort of consolation, resting assured that He Who deprives her of it here below will not deprive her of it eternally in heaven.

You will say to me that in such a state of gloom it is impossible to make these considerations, since it seems as if we could speak not even one word to Our Lord. Certainly you do right in saying, *it seems*, for it is not really so. The sacred Council of Trent has determined that,\* and we are bound to believe that God and His grace will never so far abandon us, that we cannot have recourse to His goodness, and protest that, in spite of all the trouble of our soul, we will to be wholly His, and never to offend Him. But observe that all this goes on in the higher part of our soul, and because the lower part perceives nothing of it, and still remains troubled, we are disturbed, and fancy ourselves very miserable. Thereupon we begin to grieve over

\* Sess. vi., cc. xi. xiii

ourselves, as if to be so devoid of consolation were a state of things deserving much compassion. Ah! do we remember that Our Lord and Master willed to be tried by these interior desolations, and in a manner beyond all compare? Listen to His words upon the cross: *My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?*\* He was reduced to extremity, for only the very highest point of His spirit was exempt from oppression, yet observe that He proceeds to speak with God, to show us that it can never be impossible for us to do the same.

You will ask whether, at times like these, it is better to speak to God of our trouble and misery, or of something different? I tell you that in this, as in all other temptations, it is best to divert our mind from its trouble and distress by speaking to God of something else rather than of our pain. For undoubtedly, if we do, the tenderness which we have for ourselves will be moved, and we shall only aggravate and stir up our pain afresh, our nature being such that we cannot look at our troubles without feeling great compassion for them. But you say that, if you pay no heed to your troubles, you will not remember them well enough to tell them. And what does that matter? Truly we are like children who love to run to tell their mother how they have been stung by a bee, so that she may pity them, and breathe upon the wound which is already healed. We too wish to go and tell our Mother that we have been in great trouble, enhancing our affliction by going into every detail, not

\* Matt. xxvii. 46.

forgetting the smallest circumstance which may excite a little pity for us. Now is not this very great childishness? If we have been guilty of any infidelity, it is quite right to tell it; if we have been faithful, we should say so too (but briefly, without exaggerating either the one or the other); for all must be told to those who have the care of our souls.

You tell me now that when you have experienced some great emotion of anger, or when any other temptation has assailed you, you always feel scruples if you do not confess it. I reply that you should mention it in your review of conscience, but not in the way of confession, and only that you may learn how to behave under such circumstances. I speak of the case when you do not clearly see that you gave some sort of consent. For if you were to say: "I accuse myself of having felt great stirrings of anger for two whole days, but I never consented to them," you would be telling your virtues instead of your faults. "But," you say, "I am doubtful whether I did not commit a fault!" Well, you must steadily consider whether this doubt has any foundation. Perhaps, for about a quarter of an hour in the course of these two days, you may have been a little careless about diverting your thoughts. Well, if this be so, say quite simply that you were a little careless for a quarter of an hour in keeping yourself from dwelling on a thought of anger. You need not add that it lasted for two days, unless you wish to get advice from your Confessor, or because it concerns your review of conscience, in which cases it is well to do so. But in ordinary

confessions it would be better not to speak of it, since you would only do so for self-satisfaction; and if silence with regard to it causes you a little mortification, you must bear it as you would anything else which you could not help. Blessed be God.

## CONFERENCE VI (I)

### ON HOPE

*On the Departure of the Sisters of the Visitation who were setting out to found a new House of their Institute (I).*

AMONG the praises which the saints give to Abraham, St. Paul\* places above all the others that: *he believed in hope even against hope.*† God had promised him that his *seed* should be multiplied *as the stars of the heaven and the sand on the seashore*, and at the same time he received the command to slay his son Isaac.‡ Abraham in his distress did not, however, lose hope, but hoped, *even against hope*, that if he obeyed the command and slew his son, God would not fail to keep His word. Truly,

(I) *Conference of our holy Founder on the subject of Foundations. On the departure, sending forth on mission of the Daughters of the Visitation, and how they ought to demean themselves. (Var.)*

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(I) The occasion of the delivery of this Conference by St. Francis de Sales was the departure of Mother Claude Agnes Joly de la Roche and several other Religious of Annecy, sent in July 1620 to found the Convent at Orleans. It was originally called the Conference *on Hope*, and although that designation never figures as its principal title, it appears as the page heading in all the editions.

\* Rom. iv. 18.

† Gen. xv. 5; xxii. 17.

‡ Ibid. xxii. 2.



great was his hope, for he saw no possible foundation for it, except the promise which God had given him. Ah! how true and solid a foundation is the word of God, for it is infallible! Abraham then went forth to fulfil the will of God, with unexampled simplicity, for he made no more hesitation or expostulation than he had done when God told him to depart from *his country and his kindred*, and go into the place which He would show him,\* without specifying what place, in order that he might embark with more simple confidence on the vessel of His divine Providence. Journeying on then for three days and three nights, with his son Isaac bearing the wood for the sacrifice, that innocent soul said to his father: *Where is the victim for the holocaust?* to which holy Abraham replied: *My son, the Lord will provide.*† O my God, how happy should we be if we could accustom ourselves to make this reply to our hearts when they are anxious and troubled about anything: "The Lord *will provide*," and after saying that, to have no more care, anxiety, or disturbance, any more than had Isaac, for he was silent from that moment, believing that the Lord would provide, as his father had told him.

Great indeed is the confidence which God requires us to have in His paternal care and in His divine Providence; but why should we not have it, seeing that no one has ever been deceived in it? No one ever trusts in God without reaping the fruits of his confidence. I say this as regards us, for in the case of people of the world, their confidence is very often accompanied by presumption,

\* Gen. xii. 1.

† Ibid. xxii. 6-8.

and is therefore of no value in the sight of God. Consider, I beseech you, what Our Lord and Master said to His Apostles, in order to establish in them this holy and loving confidence: *I sent you forth through the world, without scrip, money, or any provision, either for your food or for your clothing, and did you want anything? They answered: Nothing.\** Go, He then said to them, and *take no thought what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or wherewithal you shall be clothed,†* nor even what you shall have to say when you are brought before the rulers and magistrates of the provinces through which you have to pass; for on each occasion your heavenly Father will furnish you with all that is necessary for you. *Think not of what you shall have to say,* for He will speak in you, and will put into your mouth the words which you must say.‡ “But I am so ignorant,” one of our sisters will say, “I do not know how I ought to behave towards the great, I have no education.” That is no matter: go forth trusting in God, for He has said:§ *Can a woman forget her child, yet will not I forget you, for I carry you, graven on My heart and in My hands.* Think you that He who takes care to provide food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, which *neither sow nor reap,||* will ever forget to provide all that is necessary for the man who trusts wholly in His Providence, seeing that man is capable of being united to God, our sovereign good?

This, my dearest sisters, it has seemed good to

\* Luke xxii. 35, 36.

† Ibid. xii. 29.

‡ Luke v. 11; Matt. x. 19, 20.

§ Isa. xlix. 15, 16.

|| Matt. vi. 26; Luke xii. 24.

me to say to you on your departure; for though indeed you are not capable of receiving the apostolic dignity on account of your sex, you are nevertheless capable in some sort of the apostolic office (2), and you can render many services to God by procuring to a certain extent the advancement of His glory, like the Apostles. Assuredly, my dear daughters, this ought to be to you a cause of great consolation, that God should make use of you for a work so excellent as that to which you are called, and you ought to consider yourselves greatly honoured by His divine Majesty. For what is it that God desires of you? Is it not just what He commanded His Apostles, sending them for that purpose out through the world? that work which Our Lord Himself came on earth to do, namely to give *life* to men, and not only that, He says,\* but that they might have it *more abundantly*, that they might have life and a better life; which He did by giving them the life of grace. The Apostles were sent by Our Lord throughout the world for this purpose, for He said to them: † *As My father hath sent Me, so send I you; go, and give life to men.* But do not content yourselves with that; make them live, and live a more perfect life by means of the doctrine which you shall teach them. They will have life by believing My word which you will unfold to them, but they will have a *more abundant* life because of

(2) And also the apostolic merit. But not to make use, amongst you and me, of this word *merit*, which I have always some repugnance in using as a motive to stimulate us to do right, I will tell you that you can. (*Addition.*)

\* John x. 10.

† Ibid. xx. 21.

the good example which you will give them. And trouble not yourselves as to whether or not your labour will be followed by the fruit which you expect from it; for it is not of you that the fruit will be demanded. You will only be asked if you have striven faithfully to cultivate this dry and barren soil; you will not be asked if you have reaped an abundant harvest, but only if you took care to duly sow the seed.

So you too, my dear daughters, are now commanded to go here and there into various places, that souls *may have life* and that they may live a better life: for what else are you going to do but to try to make known the perfection of your Institute, and by means of this knowledge to draw many souls to embrace all the observances contained and included in it? For, without preaching, or giving the Sacraments, or remitting sins, are you not still going to give *life* to men, or to speak more exactly, to give *life* to the female sex? Since probably hundreds of persons, who from your example will be induced to enter Religion, would have been lost, had they remained in the world, and will now in heaven through all eternity enjoy unimaginable happiness. And is it not through your means that life will be given to them, and that they will have life *more abundantly*, that is to say a life more perfect and more pleasing to God, a life which will render them capable of uniting themselves more closely to the divine Goodness, for they will receive from you the instructions necessary for acquiring the true and pure love of God, which is that *more abundant life* which Our Lord came upon earth to give to men.

*I am come, He says,\* to cast fire on the earth, and what do I ask or intend but that it be kindled? And in another place† He commands that the fire on His Altar shall always burn and never be extinguished, to show with what ardour He desires that the fire of His love should always be burning on the altar of our hearts. Ah! what grace is that which God bestows upon you! He makes you Apostles, not in dignity but in office and in merit. You will not preach, it is true, for your sex does not permit it, although indeed St. Magdalen and her sister St. Martha did so, but you will not cease to exercise the apostolic office by the communicating of your manner of life, as I have just said.*

Go then, full of courage to do whatever you are called to do, but go in simplicity; if you have any fears, say to your soul: *The Lord will provide* for us; † if the consideration of your weakness troubles you, cast yourselves upon God and trust in Him. The Apostles were for the most part ignorant fishermen; but God rendered them learned, so far as was necessary for the charge which He willed to give them. Trust in Him, lean upon His Providence, and fear nothing. Do not say: "I have no talent for speaking." No matter, go without demur, for God will give you what to say and to do when the time comes. Even if you have no virtues or perceive none in yourselves, do not be distressed on that account, for if you undertake the guidance of souls, or any other work, whatever it may be, for the glory of God and to satisfy obedience, He will take care of you, and has pledged Himself to provide all that will be necessary

\* Luke xii. 49.

† Lev. vi. 12.

‡ Gen. xxii. 8.

for you as well as for those whom He has committed to your charge.

It is true that what you are undertaking is a matter of great consequence and of immense importance, but still you would be very wrong not to hope for good success in it, seeing that you do not undertake it by your own choice, but by obedience. Doubtless, we have great cause for fear when we have sought charges or offices, whether in Religion or elsewhere, and they have been given to us in consequence of our own seeking; but when that is not so, let us bow our neck meekly beneath the yoke of holy obedience, and accept the burden with a good heart; let us humble ourselves indeed, for that must always be done, but let us never forget to build up generosity on acts of humility, which without that generosity would be worth nothing.

I have a very strong desire to engrave upon your minds a maxim which is of incomparable utility: To ask for nothing, and to refuse nothing. No, my dear daughters, ask for nothing and refuse nothing. Receive what is given to you and do not ask for what is not offered to you, what is not going to be given; in this practice *you will find peace to your souls.*\* Yes, my dear sisters, keep your hearts in this state of holy indifference, ready to receive all that shall be given you, and desiring nothing that shall not be given you. I would say, in one word, desire nothing, but leave yourselves and all your affairs, wholly and absolutely in the care of divine Providence. Suffer yourselves to be dealt with by that Providence exactly as children let their nurses

\* Matt. xi. 29.

deal with them ; let it carry you, as it were, on the right arm or on the left as it pleases, for so does the child ; leave it free to lay you down or take you up ; for it is a good mother, and knows what you need better than you do yourself. I mean that if divine Providence permits afflictions or mortifications to come upon you, you must not refuse them, but accept them courageously, lovingly, and calmly ; if Providence does not send you any, or does not permit them to come to you, then do not desire them or ask for them. In the same way, if consolations are given to you, receive them in a spirit of gratitude, recognising that they come from the divine Goodness ; but if you have none, do not desire them, but try to keep your heart prepared to accept each event as sent by divine Providence, and, as far as possible, with an equal mind (3). If in Religion things are given to you, as matters of obedience, which seem to you dangerous, as for instance the office of Superior, do not refuse ; if it is not given to you do not desire it, and so with all things. I am, of course, speaking of things of earth, for as regards virtues we may and should desire them and ask them of God ; the love of God comprehends them all. You would not believe, unless you knew by experience, how much profit this practice will bring to your souls ; for instead of wasting time in wishing for first one means of perfecting yourselves and then another, you will apply yourselves more simply and faithfully to those which come across your path.

(3) For I would have you remember that there are two wills and non-wills, one of which must in no way be regarded, viz. that which is led by the senses. (*Addition.*)

Thinking over the subject of your departure, and the unavoidable grief which you will all feel in parting from one another, it occurs to me that I ought to say something which may soften this grief. I do not, however, mean that it is not allowable to shed a few tears—indeed that must be: you could not do otherwise, having lived so happily and lovingly together for a long time in the practice of the same duties. This has united your hearts so closely that they cannot bear division or separation. Indeed, my dear daughters, you will not be separated or divided, for all will go away and all will stay: those who go away stay, those who stay go away, not indeed in their own person but in the person of those who go away; and in the same way those who go away will remain in the person of those who stay. One of the principal fruits of Religion is this holy union which is formed by charity, a union of such a nature that there is only one heart though made up of many, and only *one body*\* though composed of many members. In Religion all are so made one, that all the Religious of an Order seem to be one single Religious (4). The lay-sisters sing the divine Office in the person of those who are dedicated to that work, just as the latter, on their part, discharge all domestic offices in the person of those who are actually employed about them. Why is this?

(4) For example: all are Superiors in the place of the Superior, all are cooks in the person of the cook, all are sacristans in the person of the sacristan, and so on, with all the other offices. (*Addition.*)

\* Acts iv. 32.



The reason is very evident—viz. that if those who are in the choir to sing the Office were not there, the others would be there in their place; if there were no lay-sisters to prepare the dinner, the choir sisters would be employed to do it; if such a particular sister were not Superior, there would be another. In the same way, those who go away remain, and those who remain go away, for if those who are chosen to go could not do so, those who remain would go in their place.

But what ought to make us either go or stay with equal cheerfulness, my dear daughters, is the almost infallible certainty which we ought to feel that this separation takes place only as regards the body, for as regards the soul you will always remain united. This bodily separation is, after all, but a small matter; and, besides, it must take place one day, whether we will or not; but the separation of hearts and disunion of spirits—that, and only that, is to be dreaded. As to us, we shall not only remain always united together, but, far more than that, our union will go on becoming more and more perfect from day to day. This sweet and loving *bond* of holy *charity* will be continually drawn tighter and closer, as we advance farther and farther on the way of our own *perfection*;\* for as we become more and more capable of union with God, we shall unite ourselves closer and closer with one another. Thus at each Communion which we make, our union will be rendered more perfect, for, uniting ourselves with Our Lord, we shall remain always more closely united together,

\* Eph. iv. 2, 3; Col. iii. 14.

and therefore it is that the holy reception of this celestial Bread and of this most adorable Sacrament is called Communion—that is to say, common union. O my God, what a union is that which exists between all the Religious of one and the same Order!—a union so close that all spiritual as well as exterior goods are thrown into one heap, as it were, and then shared in common! The Religious has nothing of his own, on account of his sacred vow of voluntary poverty; and by the profession which Religious make of holy charity, all their virtues are in common, and all are sharers in the good works of one another and enjoy the fruit of these works, provided that they abide in charity and in the observance of the Rules of the Order into which God has called them. Thus, those who are busy about some domestic office, or any other duty, practise contemplation in the person of those who are praying in the choir; those who rest, participate in the labours of those who are working by command of the Superior.

Understand, then, my dear daughters, how it is that those who go away remain, and those who remain go away, and how you ought all of you equally to embrace obedience lovingly and courageously, on this occasion as on every other, since those who remain will share in the labour and in the fruit of the journey of those who go; and these in their turn will have their part in the tranquillity and repose of those who stay behind. Doubtless, my dear daughters, all of you need many virtues, and much diligence in practising them, whether you go or stay. Those who go need much courage and

confidence in God, in order to undertake humbly and lovingly what He desires of them, in spite of all the little regrets which may agitate them in quitting the house in which God first lodged them; the sisters whom they have loved so dearly, and whose companionship has brought them so many consolations; the tranquillity of their retreat, which is so sweet to them; their relations and acquaintances; and, in a word, all the many things to which nature clings as long as we are in this life. Then, on the other hand, those who remain have the same need of courage, both to persevere in holy submission, humility, and tranquillity, and to prepare to go forth when the command shall come; for, as you see, my dear sisters, your Order is extending in every direction and into many various places. So too should you endeavour to increase and multiply your acts of virtue, and so too ought your courage to grow stronger and stronger, to render you capable of being employed according to the will of God.

It certainly seems to me, when I look at and think over the beginning of your Institute, that it is a very good reproduction of the history of Abraham. God had promised him that his *seed* should be multiplied *as the stars* of the firmament and *as the sand that is on the seashore*; nevertheless He commanded him to sacrifice his son, through whom this promise must be fulfilled; Abraham hoped, and persevered in his hope *even against hope*, and his hope was not vain, but fruitful. In the same way, when the three first sisters associated themselves together and embraced this manner of life, God had decreed from all eternity to bless their genera-

tion \* and to multiply it exceedingly. Yet, who could have believed this, seeing that in shutting them up in their little house we only thought of enabling them to die to the world? They were sacrificed, yea, they sacrificed themselves of their own free will; and God was so well pleased with their sacrifice that He not only gave them a new *life* for themselves, but a *life* so *abundant* that they can through His grace communicate it to many souls, as we see at this present time.

Certainly it appears to me that these three first sisters are exceedingly well represented by the three grains of wheat which were found among the straw which was round the weapons of Triptolemus in his chariot of war.† This straw being carried into a country where there was no wheat at all, these three grains were taken and sown in the ground, and they produced others in such quantities that in a few years all the fields in that country were fertilised. The providence of our good God cast with His blessed hand these three sisters into the soil of the Visitation, and after having remained for a time hidden from the eyes of the world, they produced *the fruit* ‡ which is now seen, and so in a short time all these countries will become participators in the blessings of your Institute. Oh, how happy are the souls which dedicate themselves truly and absolutely to the service of God, for He never leaves them barren or unfruitful! In place of a nothing which they abandon for God, He gives

\* Ps. cxi. 2.

† Ovid (Metamor., bk. v.), Plin. et alii; sed aliter.

‡ John xii. 24, 25.

them a recompense beyond compare, as well in this life as in the next. How great a favour is it to be employed in the service of souls whom God loves so dearly, and to save whom Our Lord suffered so much! Assuredly it is an unparalleled honour, and one, my dear daughters, which you ought to value most highly. To do this work faithfully you must complain of no trouble or care or labour, for you will be richly repaid for all; although you must not use this motive for your encouragement, but that of rendering yourselves more pleasing to God, and of advancing His glory more and more.

Go, then, and remain courageously for this purpose, not wasting your time in trying to see whether you have the talents fitting for the duties in which you will be employed. It is better that we should not see these in ourselves, for that keeps us humble, and induces us to mistrust our strength and ourselves, and to cast all our confidence more absolutely upon God. As long as we have no need to practise some one particular virtue, it is better that we should not possess it (I). When we really require it, provided that we are faithful in those which have to be practised at the time, we may rest assured that God will give us each thing in its own proper time. Do not let us

(I) It is quite certain that the meaning of St. Francis of Sales is neither clearly understood nor exactly rendered here. The Saint could never teach that it is better to be deprived of virtuous habits than to possess them, but only that there are certain occasions in which the experience of our own weakness, and the humility which results from it, are more profitable than the possession of any other virtue. This teaching is still more strongly accentuated in the Conference on Simplicity.

waste time in desiring anything or seeking anything; let us leave ourselves entirely in the hands of divine Providence, to do with us what pleases Him; for what use is there in desiring one thing rather than another? Ought not all to be equally indifferent to us? Provided that we please God and love His divine will, it should be enough. As for me, I wonder how we can have more inclination to be employed in one thing than in another, especially seeing that we are in Religion, in which one office or one work is as pleasing to God as another, since it is obedience which gives value to all the exercises of Religion. If a choice were given to us, then the meanest would be the most desirable, and to be embraced the most lovingly; but when no choice is given us, then let us embrace either the one or the other with equal courage. When the charge which is given us is honourable in the eyes of men, let us keep ourselves humble before God; when it is abject in men's opinion, let us consider ourselves the more highly honoured before the divine Goodness.

In a word, my dear daughters, I beg you to remember affectionately and faithfully all that I have told you, whether as regards the interior or the exterior: desire nothing but what God desires for you; embrace lovingly the events and the different effects of His divine will, without wasting your time upon anything else.

After this, what more should I say to you, my dear sisters, since it seems that all our happiness is comprised in this delightful practice? I will conclude by presenting you the conduct of the

Israelites\* as an example. Having remained for a long time without having a king, they suddenly desired to have one. What a thing the human mind is! As if God would have left them without guidance, or as if He would not have had care to rule, govern, and defend them! They applied to the Prophet Samuel, who promised them that he would entreat God in their name to give them a king. This he did, and God, incensed by their demand, replied that He would indeed give them one, but that the king whom they had desired would assume such authority and dominion over them that he would seize upon their children, making their sons *sergeants*, private *soldiers*, or *captains*; and their daughters, some *cooks*, others *bakers*, and others *perfumers*. Our Lord does the same, my dear daughters, with the souls who dedicate themselves to His service, for, as you see in the Religious Orders, there are various charges and different offices. But what do I mean when I say this? Simply that in my opinion the divine Majesty has made choice of you to go forth as *perfumers*, seeing that He has commissioned you to go and scatter far and wide the sweet odours of the virtues of your Institute. And as young maidens love sweet odours (for the Bride in the Canticle of Canticles says that the name of her Beloved is *as oil* or balm shedding on all sides the sweetest perfumes, and *therefore*, she adds, the *young maidens* have followed Him, attracted by His divine perfumes), so do you, my dear sisters, as perfume-bearers of the divine Goodness, go forth,

\* 1 Kings viii. 5-13.

shedding all around the incomparable sweetness of sincere humility, gentleness, and charity, so that many young maidens may be attracted thereby, and may embrace your manner of life, and that they may even in this world enjoy, like you, a holy, loving peace and tranquillity of soul, and in the world to come, eternal happiness.

Your Congregation is like a bee-hive which has already sent forth various swarms; but with this difference, that when bees go forth to settle in another hive and begin a new household, each swarm chooses a particular king, under whom they live and dwell apart. You, my dear souls, though you may go into a new hive—that is, begin a new house of your Order—have always only one and the same King, our crucified Lord, under Whose authority you will live secure and safe wherever you may be. Do not fear that anything will be wanting to you, for as long as you do not choose any other King, He will ever be with you; only take great care to increase in love and fidelity towards His divine Goodness, keeping as close to Him as possible, and then all will be well with you. Learn from Him all that you will have to do; do nothing without His advice; for He is the faithful Friend who will guide you and govern you and take care of you, as, with all my heart, I beseech Him to do. Blessed be God!



## CONFERENCE VII (I)

### THREE SPIRITUAL LAWS

*In which the manners of Doves are applied to the Religious Soul, in the form of laws (I).*

You have asked me for some new laws for the beginning of this new year, and thinking over what I should give you which would be (2) both useful and agreeable, I turned my attention to the Gospel of to-day,\* which makes mention of the Baptism of

(1) V.+J. *Sermon on the Laws which the Bishop gave us in the octave of the Epiphany.*

(2) Holy Scripture relates that Jephthe's daughter asked of her father two whole months to bewail her virginity among the mountains before being put to death; and afterwards, imitating her, the daughters of Israel, every year at the same time, wept and lamented. If any one had asked these maidens why they lamented, they would have replied: We weep every year because the daughter of Jephthe once wept at this period of the year. So, too, if any one should ask why we rejoice every year at the Feast of Kings, and why, even in regions out of

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(I) With the traditional custom of drawing lots for the portions of the Twelfth cake, that of reserving one portion for their Founder had been introduced among the first sisters of the Visitation. It happened that in 1620 this portion contained the bean, and the Community wrote instantly to the Saint to protest their fidelity and to ask him for laws. He replied to this request on January 13 by giving his daughters the Conference which follows. (See a letter to St. Jane Frances de Chantal, dated January 8, 1620.)

\* Matt. iii. 13.

Our Lord and of the glorious appearing of the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove, on which appearing I paused and dwelt. Remembering that the Holy Ghost is the love of the Father and of the Son, I thought that I ought to give you laws which should be wholly laws of love, and these I have taken from the doves, remembering that the Holy Ghost deigned to take the form of a dove, and, moreover, that all souls which are dedicated to the service of the divine Majesty are bound to be like pure and loving doves. Thus we see that the Bride, in the Canticle of Canticles,\* is oftentimes called by this name, and certainly with good reason, for there is great resemblance between the qualities of the dove and those of the loving Spouse of Our Lord.

The laws of doves are all extremely delightful, and form a most pleasing subject for meditation. What more admirable law can there be than that of purity, for there is nothing more spotlessly clean than a dove! However dirty the dovecots and places where they make their nests may be, you never see a dove with sullied plumage; it is always unruffled

France, we choose a king as a form of rejoicing, we might answer: We rejoice every year because our glorious Lady and Mistress once rejoiced at this very time of year, when she saw the kings come from afar to adore her Son, Who was thus acknowledged as supreme King, and Monarch of all the world.

As, happily, the lot has fallen to me to be your king, I think I ought to give you some laws before the octave ends, after which I shall be no longer king. I here bring them to you; you will observe them all through this year, until God sends you a new king or queen, who will also give you new ones.

*(Addition.)*

\* Cap. ii. 10, 14; v. 2; vi. 8.

and beautiful when the sun shines upon it. Consider, too, how pleasing is the law of their simplicity, since Our Lord Himself praises it, saying to His Apostles: *Be ye therefore simple as doves and wise as serpents.*\* And, in the third place, how delightful is the law of their gentleness, for they are without gall or bitterness! And hundreds of other laws have they which are extremely lovable, and which are useful to be observed by souls who are dedicated in Religion to the more especial service of the divine Goodness.

I have, however, been considering that if I were to give you laws which you already have, you would not think much of them. I have therefore selected three only, which, if well observed, are of the greatest possible utility, and which cause a wonderful sweetness in souls who ponder over them, since they are all full of love, and most delicately adjusted for the perfection of the spiritual life. They are three secrets which are so much the more excellent towards gaining perfection, as they are less well known to the majority of those who profess to aspire to it.

And what, then, are these laws? The first which I intend to give you is that doves do all for their mate and nothing for themselves: they seem to say nothing but this: "*My dearest mate is wholly mine, and I am wholly his.*" He is always turned towards me to think of me, and I on my part expect this and rely upon it. Let him, then, go questing where he pleases, this beloved mate, and I will never doubt his love, but trust absolutely in his

\* Matt. x. 16.

care for me." You may perhaps have seen, but without paying much attention, that the dove, while hatching her eggs, never leaves them until the young birds have burst the shells, and even then continues to sit on them and cherish them as long as they need it. All that time she never goes out in search of food, but leaves all the care of that to her dear mate. He, on his part, is so faithful that he not only goes in quest of grain for her, but he even brings her water in his beak to quench her thirst; he takes the most extraordinary care of her, so that she may want nothing which she ought to have; and, indeed, so great is this care that no dove has ever been found dead for want of nourishment during that time. She then does everything for her mate, and cherishes her young in order to give him the pleasure of offspring, while he carefully nourishes his beloved partner who relies so entirely upon him; she thinks only of pleasing him, he only of feeding her.

Oh, what a delightful and profitable law this is, to do nothing except for God, and to leave to Him the whole care of ourselves! I do not say only as regards temporal things, for when you and I are by ourselves that goes without saying, but I refer to spiritual things, and the advancement of our souls in perfection. You see that the dove thinks only of her beloved mate, and of pleasing him by never stirring from her eggs, and yet nothing is wanting to her, because he, as a reward for her confidence, takes all possible care of her. Ah! how happy should we be if we did all for our sweet Dove, who is the Holy Ghost! He would then take absolute

care of us, and according to the measure of our peaceful reliance on His providence, would be His watchfulness over all our necessities. And we must not fear that God may fail us, for His love is infinite for the soul which rests on Him. How happy is the dove to have such confidence in her dear mate! It makes her life full of peace and of a marvellous tranquillity. But a thousand times happier is the soul who, leaving all care of herself and of all that she needs to her dear and beloved Dove-partner, thinks only of hatching and cherishing her little ones, that she may please Him and give Him offspring. Doing thus, she enjoys even here below peace and tranquillity beyond compare, for her repose is only second to that which she will enjoy in heaven for all eternity in the tender embraces of her celestial Bridegroom.

But what are these eggs from which we are to bring our little doves? They are our desires which, being well dwelt upon and cherished, will produce little doves—that is, the effects of our desires. Among all our desires, however, there is one which is pre-eminent, and which deserves especial cherishing and care in order to please the divine Dove, the Holy Ghost, Who always wishes to be called the sacred Spouse of our souls, so great is His goodness and love towards us. This special desire is the one which we brought with us into Religion—namely, that of embracing the religious virtues. This is one of the branches of the love of God, and one of the topmost branches of that divine tree. It is, however, a desire which must be limited as to its realisation by those means marked out for us

in our Rules and Constitutions, by which we may attain that perfection to which we aspired and to which we obliged ourselves. But we must be prepared to brood over and cherish this desire all our life long, until it becomes a fair and perfect dove like to its Father, Who is absolute perfection.\* Meantime let us give our whole attention to the work of incubation—that is, of using all the means prescribed for our perfection—leaving all care of ourselves to our one and well-beloved Dove-mate, Who will not allow us to want anything which is necessary to make us pleasing to Him.

It is certainly a great pity to see souls—and there are only too many such—who, while aiming at perfection, imagine that it consists in a great multitude of desires, and are always eagerly seeking for means to attain to it, now here, now there. They are never contented or tranquil, for as soon as they have formed one desire they try to conceive another. They are like hens, which have no sooner laid one egg than they begin to busy themselves about laying another, not attempting to sit on the first, so that no chicken is hatched by them. The dove never does like this, for she broods over and fosters her young until they are able to fly and to seek for food for themselves. If the hen has hatched out a brood she is quite excited, and clucks loudly and incessantly; but the dove remains still and tranquil; she neither clucks nor shows any excitement. So, too, there are souls who never cease clucking and bustling over their little ones—that is, over their desires of perfection; they can never find

\* Matt. v. ult.

people enough to talk to about them, and to ask for suitable and novel measures towards its attainment. In short, they waste so much time in talking about the perfection which they aim at, that they forget to practise the principal means, which is to remain calm, casting all their confidence upon Him who alone can give the increase to what is sown and planted.\* All our well-being depends on the grace of God, in which we ought to place all our confidence; and yet it would seem, by the eagerness which these souls display to do a great deal, that they trust in their own labours, and in the multiplicity of the exercises which they undertake, and of which they never appear able to undertake enough. That would be all very good if it were accompanied by calmness and a loving care to do well whatever they do, and to depend at the same time entirely on the grace of God, and not on their own performances; I mean, to expect no fruit of their labours without the grace of God.

It seems as if these souls, so eager in the quest of their own perfection, have forgotten, or do not know, the words of Jeremias:† Ah, foolish man, why dost thou trust in thy own labour and skill? Dost thou not know that it is for thee indeed to cultivate the soil, to plough and sow it, but that it is God Who gives the increase, Who grants the bounteous harvest, Who sends the fertilising rain on the land which you have sown? Thou indeed mayest water, but it will be of no avail unless God blesses thy toil, and gives thee, by His pure grace and not by thine exertions, an abundant

\* 1 Cor. iii. 6, 7.

† Cap. v. 24; ix. 23; xii. 13.

crop; depend then entirely on His divine goodness. It is indeed for us to labour diligently, but it is for God to crown our labours with success. Holy Church sings on every feast of confessors: *God made him honourable in his labours, and accomplished his labours,\** to show that of ourselves we can do nothing without the grace of God, in which we must place all our confidence, expecting nothing from ourselves.

Let us not be at all eager in our work, for, in order to do it well, we must apply ourselves to it carefully indeed, but calmly and peacefully, without trusting in our labour, but in God and His grace. Those anxious searchings of heart about advancing in perfection, and those endeavours to see if we are advancing, are not at all pleasing to God, and only serve to satisfy our self-love, that subtle tormentor which grasps at so much but does almost nothing. One single good work done with a tranquil spirit is worth far more than several done with eagerness.

The dove simply occupies herself in doing her work as well as she possibly can, leaving all other care to her beloved mate. The soul who is truly dove-like—that is, who loves God dearly—applies herself quite simply, without any eagerness, to use the means prescribed to her for advancing in perfection, without seeking for any others, however perfect they may be. “My Beloved,” she says, “thinks for me, and in Him I trust; He loves me, and I give myself wholly to Him in proof of my love.” A short time ago, some pious nuns asked me: “My lord, what shall we do this year? Last

\* Sap. x. 10.



year we fasted three days a week, and also took the discipline thrice; what shall we do all through this year? We must do something more, both to thank God for the blessings of the past year and to help ourselves to increase more and more in His love." "You are quite right," I replied, "in saying that we must always be advancing. Our advancement, however, is not brought about, as you think, by the multitude of our pious exercises, but by the perfection with which we do them, always trusting more and more in our heavenly Dove, and distrusting ourselves more and more. Last year you fasted three days in the week, and took the discipline three times; if you wish always to double your exercises, this year you will fill up the whole week; but then, what will you do the following year? You will have to make a week of nine days, or you must fast twice a day."

How foolish are those who waste time and thought in desiring to be martyred in the Indies, but do not apply themselves to the duties of their state of life! And how mistaken are those who wish to eat more than they can digest! We have not sufficient spiritual warmth to be able to digest thoroughly all that we take in for our perfection, and yet we will not cut off our fretting desires to be always doing more and more. To read many spiritual books, especially if they are new; to speak eloquently of God and of all the most spiritual subjects, in order, we say, to excite ourselves to devotion; to hear many sermons, to assist at conferences on every occasion, to go very often to Communion, to confession still oftener; to tend the

sick ; to speak fluently of all that passes within us, so as to make it evident to others that we are aiming at perfection, and wish to attain it as soon as possible ; are not all these things calculated to make us perfect, and to bring us quickly to the goal of our desires ? Yes, provided that we do them in the manner prescribed, and always in dependence on the grace of God ; that is, provided that we do not put our trust in all this, good though it may be, but in God alone, *Who alone can increase the growth of the fruits* \* of all our exercises.

But, my dear daughters, I entreat you to consider a little the lives of the great and holy Religious. Look at St. Anthony, honoured by God and by men on account of his great sanctity. Tell me, how did he reach such heights of holiness and perfection ? Was it by much reading, or by conferences and frequent Communions, or by the multitudes of sermons which he heard ? Not at all ; he became so great a Saint by making use of the example of the holy hermits, taking the abstinence of one, the prayer of another, like a diligent bee, going hither and thither, pilfering and storing up the virtues of the servants of God, to make the honey of sanctity by these holy examples. Or, again, did St. Paul, the first hermit, arrive at his sanctity by the reading of good books ? He had none at all. Or by the Communions which he made, or the confessions ? He made but two in all his life. Or by conferences or sermons ? He never heard any ; and the only human being whom he

\* 2 Cor. ix. 10 ; 1 Tim. vi. 15.

saw in the desert was St. Anthony, who came to visit him at the close of his life. Do you know what made him holy? It was the fidelity with which he devoted himself to all that he had undertaken to do, when he first began to follow the vocation to which he had been called (3), without wasting his time about anything else.

Look, again, at those holy monks who lived under the charge of St. Pachomius; had they books, sermons? None. Conferences? They had them at times, but very rarely. Did they go often to confession? Sometimes, at the great feasts. Did they hear many Masses? On Sundays and Holydays, but none at any other times. But how was it, then, that partaking so sparingly of that spiritual food which nourishes our souls for immortality, they were still always in such good condition—that is to say, so strong and courageous in undertaking the pursuit of virtue, and in arriving at perfection and at the goal of their desires? And we, who are fed so abundantly, are yet so spare—that is, so languid and indolent—in pursuing our enterprise, and, if spiritual consolations fail us, seem to have neither courage nor vigour in the service of Our Lord! Well, we must imitate those holy monks, applying ourselves to our work—that is to say, to what God requires of us according to our vocation—fervently and humbly, thinking of nothing else, and feeling sure that there is no better way to be found of perfecting ourselves.

“But,” you may reply, “you say *fervently*: Alas!

(3) *devoted himself*—To Him Who had once made known to him why He had called him. (Var.)

how can I, who have no fervour in me, do this?" You may, it is true, have no fervour as you understand the word—that is, fervour of feeling, which God gives to whomsoever He pleases, and which it is not in our power to obtain just when we wish to feel it. I added, also, *humbly*, so that there might be no means of excuse; for you cannot say: "I have no humility; it is not in my power to possess it," seeing that the Holy Spirit, Who is goodness itself, gives it to all who ask Him for it.\* Not that humility which is the sentiment of our unimportance, and which makes us humble ourselves so graciously in all things, but the humility which makes us know our own abjection, and makes us love it when we have so recognised it in ourselves; for that is true humility.

Never was there a time when people studied as they do now. Those great Saints, Augustine, Gregory, Hilary (whose feast we are keeping to-day), and many others, did not study much; they could not have done so, writing as many books as they did, preaching, and discharging all the other duties of their office. They had, however, such great confidence in God and in His grace, and so great a mistrust of themselves, that they neither placed their dependence nor their trust in their own skill or labour, so that all the great works which they did were done purely by means of their reliance on His grace and almighty power. "It is Thou, O Lord," they said, "Who givest us to work, and it is for Thee that we work; it is Thou Who wilt bless our labours, and give us a rich harvest." Therefore

\* Luke xi. 13.

their books and their sermons bore marvellous fruit; while as for us, who trust in our fine words, in our eloquent language, and our knowledge, all our labours end in smoke, and yield no fruit but vanity. To sum up, then, all that I would say to you regarding this first law; I bid you trust wholly in God and do all things for Him, abandoning the entire care of yourselves to your beloved Dove-mate, Who will have an incomparable forethought for you; and the truer and the more perfect is your confidence, the more special will be His providence!

I wish to give you for your second law these words, expressed by the doves in their own language: The more they take away from me, the more I produce. What does this mean? Well, when the little doves are somewhat grown, the owner of the dovecot comes to take them away from the mother, who then instantly sets to work to hatch others. If, however, they are not taken away, the mother spends a good deal of time over her first brood, and therefore produces less. For this reason the doves say: "The more they take away from me, the more I produce;" and to make you understand better what I mean, I will give you an example. Job, that great servant of God, who was praised by the mouth of God Himself,\* never allowed himself to be conquered by any affliction which befell him, but the more of his little doves God took away from him, the more he produced. When he was in his original state of prosperity, what good works did he not do? He says himself: † *I was a foot to the lame*—that is to say, I had them

\* Job i. 8; ii. 3; xlii. 7, 8.

† Ibid. xxix. 15, 16.

carried, or put them on my ass or my camel; *I was an eye to the blind*—that is, by leading or guiding them; I was, in fact, the reliever of the starving, and the refuge of all the afflicted. Now see him reduced to the extremest poverty. He does not complain in the least that God has deprived him of the means of doing so many good works, but he says with the dove: "The more they take away from me, the more I produce;" not in almsgiving, for he has not the means for that; but in the single act of submission and of patience which he made when he saw himself deprived of all his wealth, and even of his children, he did more than he had done by all his great charities in the time of his prosperity, and rendered himself more pleasing to God, by this single act of patience, than by all the many good works which he had done throughout his life; for a stronger and more generous love was needed for that act alone than for all the others put together.

In order, then, to obey this sweet law of the doves, we must, like them, allow ourselves to be deprived by our Sovereign Master of our little doves—that is to say, of the means of fulfilling our desires—when ever it pleases Him to take them away, however good they may be, without lamenting or ever complaining of Him as if He were doing us a wrong. We ought rather to apply ourselves to redouble, not indeed our desires or our exercises, but the perfection with which we make them, trying by this means to gain more by one single act, as undoubtedly we shall, than we should by a hundred others made according to our own fancy and in-

clination. Our Lord does not wish us to carry His Cross except by one end ; He desires to be honoured as are great ladies, who will have the train of their dress carried for them ; but He would have us carry the cross which He lays upon our shoulders, and which is our very own. Alas ! we do nothing of the kind ; for when His Goodness deprives us of the consolation which He has been accustomed to give us in our exercises, it seems to us that all is lost, and that He has taken from us the means of carrying out what we had undertaken to do.

Look, I pray you, at this soul ; see how well she hatches her eggs in the time of consolation, and leaves all care of herself to her dearest partner. If she is praying or meditating, what holy desires she entertains in order to please Him ! She is full of emotion in His presence ; she is wholly absorbed in her Beloved ; she leaves herself absolutely in the arms of His divine Providence. And the eggs are so excellent, and all goes so well, and the little doves which are the effects of her love never fail, for what does she not do ? Her works of charity are so numerous ! Her modesty shines forth before all the sisters ; she edifies each one of them by her conduct ; she is the admiration of all who see and know her. "Mortifications," she says, "cost me nothing then ; they were actually consolations to me ; obedience was a joy. I no sooner heard the first sound of the bell than I was up ; I did not neglect a single opportunity of practising virtue, and I did all this with the greatest peace and calmness. Now all is changed ; full of disgust with myself, and almost always dry and cold in my prayers, I have no courage, it seems

to me, for my amendment; I have none of that fervour which I used to feel in my exercises; in a word, frost and cold have seized upon my soul." Alas! I can well believe it. Look at the poor soul as she laments and bewails her misfortunes; see what discontent is expressed in her face, and in her downcast and melancholy demeanour; she walks sorrowful and is utterly confounded. "Whatever is the matter with you?" we are constrained to say. "What is the matter with me? Oh, I am so miserable! Nothing pleases me; everything disgusts me, and now I feel so confounded!" "But what kind of confusion do you feel?—for there are two kinds: one which leads to humility and to life, the other to despair, and consequently to death."\* "I assure you," she replies, "I feel so confounded that I almost lose courage to persevere in my struggle after perfection." Alas! what weakness! because consolation fails, courage fails also! Ah! this must not be; for the more God deprives us of consolation, the more we ought to labour, to show our fidelity to Him. One single act done with dryness of spirit is worth more than many done with great fervour and sensible devotion; because, as I have already said in speaking of Job, it is done with a love which is stronger, although it is not so tender and pleasant to ourselves. The more, then, they take away from me, the more I produce: this is the second law which I greatly desire to see you observe.

The third law of the doves to which I would call your attention is, that they lament in the *same* way that they rejoice; they only sing one air, which is

\* Cf. 2 Cor. vii. 10, 11.



the same for their most joyous songs as for those in which they bewail themselves and express their sadness. Look at them perched on the branches, where they are lamenting over the loss of their young, of which the weasel or the night-owl has robbed them (for when any other than the owner of the dovecot takes them away they are much afflicted). See them again when their mate approaches, how entirely they are comforted, and yet they do not change their note; it is the same soft, plaintive, inward sound which they use whether to show their joy or their grief. It is this holy equableness of spirit, my dear souls, which I wish you to possess. I do not say equableness of temper or of inclination, but of spirit; for neither do I take account, nor do I desire that you should take account, of that which goes on in the inferior part of our soul. It is this which causes us disturbance and inequality of humour, when the superior part does not do its duty by making itself the mistress, and is not alert and watchful so as to discover its enemies, as the *Spiritual Combat* says we must be. For without this careful watch the soul will not be promptly warned of the provocations and assaults of the inferior part, springing from our senses, our inclinations, and our passions, which are always striving to conquer and subject the superior part. But, I say, we must always remain firm, resolute in the superior part of our mind, following the virtue of which we make profession, and must keep steadfast, in adversity as in prosperity, in desolation as in consolation, or again in dryness as in fervour.

Job, of whom we have already spoken in the

second law, furnishes us again with an example on this subject; for he sang always to the same air the canticles which he composed, which are, in fact, simply the story of his life. What did he say when God multiplied his goods, gave him children, and, in fact, fulfilled all his desires, sending him everything that he could possibly wish for in this life? What did he say but: *Blessed be the name of the Lord?* This was his canticle of love which he sang on all occasions; for what says he when brought down into the lowest depths of affliction? His canticle of lamentation is set to the same air as that to which he sang his song of rejoicing: *We have received good things from the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil things?\** *The Lord gave children and goods, the Lord has taken them from me; may His holy name be blessed!* † It is ever: *Blessed be the name of the Lord!* Truly, this holy soul was a chaste and loving dove, fondly cherished by its tender mate. Thus let us, my dear daughters, on all occasions take good and evil, consolations and afflictions, from the hand of God, always singing the same most sweet canticle: *Blessed be the name of the Lord,* to the same unvarying air; for if we are so happy as to succeed in doing this, whatever may befall us, we shall live in great peace. But let us not imitate those who weep when consolation is withdrawn from them, and when it is restored do nothing but sing, like the monkeys and apes, who are always gloomy and fierce in dull and rainy weather, but when it is fine do nothing but skip and jump. These, then,

\* Cap. ii. 10.

† Cap. i. 21.

are the three laws which I give you, which laws, however, being wholly of love, are only binding by love. The love, then, which we bear to Our Lord will constrain us to observe and keep them; so that we may say, imitating the fair dove, who is the sacred Spouse: "*My beloved is mine and I am His.* I do nothing except to please Him; His Heart is always turned towards me in watchful care, as mine is always turned towards Him in confidence." Having done all things for our Beloved in this life, He will have care to provide us with His eternal glory as the reward of our confidence; and there we shall see how happy are those who cast away all the anxious and superfluous cares which we generally have about ourselves and our perfection, devoting themselves simply to their work, abandoning themselves without any reserve into the hands of the divine Goodness, for which alone they have laboured. Their labours will at last be followed by a peace and repose surpassing all description, for they will rest for ever in the bosom of their Beloved. The happiness of those who have observed the second law will also be great; for, having allowed themselves to be deprived by the Master, Who is Our Lord, of all their little doves, without the least vexation or displeasure; having, on the contrary, had the courage to say: "The more they take away from me, the more I produce;" and having ever remained submissive to the will of Him Who so despoiled them, they will in heaven sing the glorious canticle: *Blessed be God*\* with as much

\* Apoc. v. 9-13; vii. 12.

more fervour amid the eternal consolations, as they sang it more heartily amid the desolations, languors, and disgusts of this mortal and transitory life, during which we must try to preserve carefully and continually evenness of spirit which is so greatly desirable.

## CONFERENCE VIII

### ON SELF-RENOUNCEMENT

*On Self-renouncement and the despoiling of ourselves of all things.*

THE little affections of thine and mine are remnants of "the world," in which there is nothing so precious; for it is the world's highest felicity to have many things of its own, and of which it can say: "This is mine." Now, what makes us so fond of anything which is our own is that high esteem in which we hold ourselves, for we consider ourselves so excellent that as soon as a thing belongs to us we think much more of it, and the small esteem in which we hold others makes us feel a repugnance to anything that they have used. If, on the contrary, we were truly humble and detached from ourselves, regarding ourselves as a mere nothing before God, we should think very little of our own special belongings, and consider that we were highly honoured by being allowed to make use of what others had had for their use. Still, in this as in all other things, we must discriminate between inclinations and affections, for when it is only a matter of inclination and not of affection, we need not be concerned, because to have no bad inclinations does not depend on ourselves, while to have bad affections does. If,

then, it happens that a sister who has had her habit changed for a shabbier one, feels some annoyance in the inferior part of her soul, this is not a sin, if with her reason she cheerfully accepts it for the love of God; and the same with all the other feelings which arise within us (1). Now, these emotions proceed from the fact that we have not made a community of wills; a thing which, on entering Religion, ought to be established, for every sister ought to leave her own private will outside the door, so as to have none but God's.

Most happy indeed is he who has no other will than that of the Community, and who each day takes as he requires, from the common stock. This is how we should understand that sacred saying of Our Lord: \* *Be not solicitous for to-morrow*; it refers not so much to food and clothing as to spiritual exercises. For if you were asked: "What will you do to-morrow?" you should answer: "I do not know; to-day, I shall do such a thing, which is commanded; to-morrow, I do not know what I shall do, because I cannot tell what will be commanded."

(1) For, if I am told that some one has spoken ill of me, or that I am being opposed in some way, in an instant anger flames up, and every vein swells as the hot blood mounts; but if amidst all this I turn to God, making an act of charity for the person who has offended me, there is no sin. I say, even if a thousand kind of thoughts should rise up against this person, and not for the space of one day but of several, provided that from time to time I disavow them, there is nothing wrong at all, for it is not in my power to check these feelings. But if that sister consented to the annoyance which she felt about that change of habit, undoubtedly she would do very wrong, and would commit great infidelity towards God and her own perfection. (*Addition.*)

\* Matt. vi. 34.

He who acts in this way will never feel vexation or anxiety, for where there is true indifference there can be no trouble or sadness (2).

If any one wishes to have any mine or thine, she must go outside the house for it, as inside there is never question of it. Now, we must not be satisfied with willing to have self-renunciation in general; we must come to particulars. There is nothing easier than to lay down the principle: we must renounce ourselves and give up our own will, but when it comes to practice the difficulty begins (3). This is why we must consider carefully what renunciation really is, and, in detail, all the things which follow from it. Thereupon we must, in particular, renounce now one point of our own will, now another, until we are absolutely stripped of it, and this is done in three gradations: the first is an affection for the despoiling of ourselves because of its excellence; the second is the resolution which follows our affection, for we soon resolve to embrace a good which we love; the third is the actual practice, which is the most difficult.

The goods of which we must despoil ourselves are of three kinds: external goods, bodily goods, and goods of the soul. External goods are all the things which we left behind us on entering Religion:

(2) But this is a virtue which cannot be acquired in five years; ten at least are necessary. We must not, therefore, be disappointed, since all our sisters have a good will to get it, if they have not yet succeeded. (*Addition.*)

(3) *nothing easier*—than to say: We must go to the Visitation. There the general principle is laid down: You must renounce yourselves and give up your own will. "Oh! we will easily do all that." But it is when we come to practice and to the details that the difficulty begins. (*Part of Var.*)

houses, possessions, relations, friends, and so on. The way to divest ourselves of these is to yield them all up into the hands of Our Lord, and then (4) to ask Him to give us just such affections as He wishes us to feel for them; for we must not live without affection, or love every one equally and in an indifferent manner; we must love each individual in his degree; charity puts the affections in their right order. The second division of goods are those which relate to the body: beauty, health, and similar things, which must be renounced; and then we must no longer go to a mirror to see if we are beautiful, nor care any more for health than for sickness, at least as far as our higher nature is concerned, for nature always feels and sometimes cries out, particularly when we are not very perfect. We must, then, be as contented in sickness as in health, and take remedies or food just as it comes; I mean, of course, in our reason, for it is not worth while talking about our inclinations. The goods of the heart are those consolations and sweetnesses which are to be found in the spiritual life; these goods are indeed very good. "Why, then," you will say, "must we give them up?" It must be done all the same: you must yield them all up into the hands of Our Lord, to dispose of them as He pleases, and serve Him without them as with them.

There is another kind of goods, neither interior nor exterior, neither of the body nor of the heart: imaginary goods, which depend on the opinion of others; they are called honour, esteem, reputation.

(4) Having thus yielded them up, we must return to Our Lord. (*Addition.*)



Now, we must strip ourselves entirely of these; desiring no other honour than the honour of the Congregation, which consists in seeking in all things the glory of God; no other esteem or reputation than that of the Community, which is to give edification in all things. All these abandonings and renunciations of the above-mentioned things must be made not out of contempt, but solely out of abnegation, for the pure love of God.

Here we must remark that the satisfaction which we feel in meeting with those whom we love, and the signs of affection which we show on seeing them, are not at all contrary to this virtue of renunciation, provided that they are not excessive, and that our hearts do not run after absent friends; for how is it possible that in the presence of the objects the corresponding faculties should not be stirred? You might as well say to a person who met a lion or a bear: "Have no fear." It is not in our power. So, in the same way, when we meet those whom we love, it would be impossible for us not to be moved by feelings of joy and satisfaction; hence it is not contrary to virtue. More than this, I say that if I am desirous to see some one about a useful matter, the success of which would redound to the glory of God, if his intention of coming is thwarted, and I feel rather pained about it, and am even somewhat eager in removing the obstacles in the way of his coming, I am doing nothing contrary to the virtue of detachment, provided always that I do not lose my quiet of mind.

Thus you see that virtue is not so terrible a thing as people imagine. Many fall into an error here:

they form false ideals in their mind, and think that the way to heaven is extraordinarily difficult. In so doing they are deceived and make a great mistake, for David tells Our Lord \* that His Law is most sweet, and while the wicked proclaim it to be hard and difficult, that good king declared that it is *sweeter than honey*.† We ought to say the same of our vocation, esteeming it not only good and excellent, but also sweet, pleasing, and desirable; if we do this, we shall take great delight in observing all that it includes.

It is true, my dear sisters, that we can never attain to perfection while we have an affection for any imperfection, however small it may be, even nothing more than the harbouring of an idle thought. Indeed, you would hardly believe how much evil that does to the soul; for if once you give your mind liberty to stay and dwell upon a useless thing, it will begin to think upon harmful things; we must therefore cut short the evil as soon as we see it, however small it may be. We must also examine in good faith whether it is true, as it sometimes seems to us, that in our affections we are really detached. For example, if when you are praised you say some little word which will serve to swell the praise already given; or, again, when you seek praise by artfully saying that your memory or your intellect is not what it used to be, and therefore you cannot speak so well as you used to do—alas! who does not see that you are trying to make them say that you still speak extremely well? Probe your conscience thoroughly, then, and see if

\* Ps. cxviii. 4, 96, 167.

† Ps. xviii. 11; cxviii. 103.

you do not find there some affection to vanity. You can also easily find out whether you are attached to a thing or not, when you are deprived of the power of doing what you had proposed to do; for if you have no clinging to it, you will be just as contented to abstain from doing it as to have done it; but if, on the contrary, you are disturbed at not being able to do it, that is a sign that you have set your affection upon it. Now, our affections are so precious, seeing that they ought all to be employed in loving God, that we must take care not to fix them upon useless things; and one fault, however small it may be, for which we keep an affection, is more contrary to perfection than a hundred others committed inadvertently and without affection.

You ask how we should love creatures. I tell you briefly that there are certain kinds of love which appear very great and perfect in the eyes of creatures, but which in the sight of God will be found small and of no value, because these friendships are not based on true charity, which is God,\* but only on certain natural inclinations and connections, and on considerations which are worthy and acceptable only from a human point of view. On the other hand, there are friendships which in the eyes of the world appear mean and empty, but in the sight of God are full of all that is excellent, because they are built up solely in God and for God, without any admixture of our own private interests. Now, the acts of charity which we perform for those whom we love in this way are a

\* 1 John iv. 8, 6.

thousand times more perfect, inasmuch as they all tend purely to God, while the services which we render to those whom we love from inclination are very inferior in merit, on account of the great delight and satisfaction which we feel in rendering them, and because, generally speaking, we do them more from this motive than for the love of God. There is another reason which makes this first class of friendships of which we have spoken inferior to the second: it is that they are not lasting. The motive of them is so weak, that as soon as anything goes contrary with them, they grow cold and change; but this does not happen to those which have their foundation in God, because their motive-power is solid and abiding.

St. Catherine of Sienna makes a beautiful simile on this subject.\* “If,” she says, “you take a glass and fill it in a fountain, and if you drink from this glass without taking it out of the fountain, you may drink as much as you like, the glass will never become empty; but if you take it out of the fountain, when you have drunk the glass will be empty.” So it is with friendships; if we never withdraw them from their source, they never dry up. Even the caresses and signs of friendship which we bestow against our inclination upon people for whom we have an aversion, are better and more pleasing to God than those which are drawn from us by sensible affection. And they ought not to be regarded as proceeding from duplicity or simulation, for though I may have a feeling contrary to what I seem to express, it is only in my lower nature,

\* Dialog. c. lxiv.

and the acts which I perform are done by force of reason, which is the highest part of my soul. So that even if those whom I caress were to know that I did so because I have an aversion from them, they ought not to be offended, but rather value and cherish it more than if it were given from sensible affection; for aversions are natural, and not in themselves bad so long as we do not follow them. On the contrary, they are a means of practising a thousand different virtues, and Our Lord Himself is better pleased with us when we draw near to kiss His feet with extreme reluctance than when we approach Him with great sweetness. Thus, those who have nothing amiable about them are very fortunate, for they are well assured that the love which one bears them is excellent, being all for God's sake.

Very often we think that we love persons for God when we really love them for ourselves. We make use of this pretext (5), and say that is why we love them, but in reality we love them for the consolation which they give us. For is it not much pleasanter to see a soul coming to you full of good dispositions, following your advice exactly, faithfully and quietly pursuing the way marked out by you, than to see another, restless, hesitating, and weak in following the right path, and who must be told the same thing a thousand times? It is easy to see where the satisfaction is greater. It is not, then, for God that you love this person, because the latter belongs just as much to God as the former, and ought indeed to be loved more, because

(5) *pretext*—of their virtues. (*Addition.*)

herein there is more for God. It is true that wherever there is more of God—that is to say, more virtue, which is a participation of the divine qualities—there we owe more affection; as, for example, if there are souls more perfect than that of your Superior, you ought to love them more on that ground. Nevertheless, we must always love our Superiors more still on the ground that they are our fathers and our directors.

With regard to your question as to whether we ought to be glad when one sister practises virtue at the expense of another, I reply that we ought to love the good in our neighbour as in ourselves, and especially in Religion, where all things should be absolutely in common, and we must never be grieved when a sister practises some virtue at our expense. For example, I find myself waiting at a door with a sister younger than myself, and I draw back to give her precedence. As it is for me to practise this humility, it is for her to practise sweet simplicity, and try to be ready for some other occasion to forestall me. In the same way, if I hand her a seat, or leave my place for her, she ought to be pleased that I gain this little merit, and by this means she will share it; as if she said: "Since I could not perform that act of virtue, I am glad that this sister has done it." And not only must we not be grieved, but we must be ready thus to contribute all that we can, even what is most intimate to us if necessary. Provided that God be glorified, we must not care by whom; so much so that if an occasion presented itself of doing some good work, and if Our Lord were to ask us whom

we should like best to do it, we ought to answer: "Lord, whoever will do it most to Thy glory." But as the choice is not left to us, we should wish to do it ourselves, for charity begins at home; but if we are unable to do it, we should rejoice, be pleased, and exceedingly glad that another should do it; thus perfectly arriving at *having all things in common*.\* This applies quite as much to temporal matters, for if the house gains an advantage, we need not trouble ourselves as to whether it comes from us or from another. If this goes a little against the grain, it is a sign that we still cling to the "thine" and "mine."

Lastly, you ask whether we can know if we are advancing towards perfection or not (6). I reply that we ourselves shall never know of our own perfection, for we are like those who are at sea; they do not know whether they are making progress or not, but the master pilot knows, knowing the course. So we cannot estimate our own advancement, though we may that of others, for we dare not assure ourselves when we have done a

(6) When [by the bell] we hear the sign for obedience, we must believe that it is the voice of Our Lord which calls us, and go instantly, even though we may be already working for God; so a young bride, hearing the voice of her husband, although she may be doing something for him at the moment, leaves all to go where he calls her. And although a little delay would not be an infidelity, yet it is an act of great fidelity, and a virtue most pleasing to God, not to delay for an instant. In the same way, there are a thousand things which not to do is no sin, yet to do them is a great virtue; such as speaking softly, walking quietly, keeping our eyes cast down, passing the time of recreation well, and so on—things, nevertheless, most necessary for religious modesty and recollection. (*Addition.*)

\* Acts ii. 44; iv. 32.

good action that we have done it perfectly; humility forbids us to do so. Now, even if we are able to judge of the virtues of others, we must never determine in our minds that one person is better than another, because appearances are deceitful, and those who seem very virtuous outwardly and in the eyes of creatures may be less so in the sight of God than others who appear much more imperfect. Beyond all other perfections, I desire that you should have that of humility, which is not only charitable, but gentle and yielding; for charity is an ascending humility, and humility is a descending charity. I love you better with more humility and less of other perfections, than with more of other perfections and less humility (7).

(7) Humility will have reached the highest step of its perfection when we have no more self-will; by humility *all justice* is fulfilled. (*Addition.*)



## CONFERENCE IX

### ON RELIGIOUS MODESTY

*Treating of Religious Modesty, the manner of receiving correction, and the means of so establishing one's soul in God that nothing can turn it aside from Him.*

You ask what is meant by true modesty. I reply that there are four virtues which bear this name. The first, and that which bears it pre-eminently, is propriety in our external deportment; and to this virtue are opposed two vices: want of gravity in our gestures and behaviour—that is to say, levity—and, what is no less contrary to the virtue, an affected behaviour. The second virtue bearing the name of modesty is the interior propriety of our understanding and our will, which also has two opposite vices: curiosity in the understanding—that is, a multiplicity of desires to know and understand all things—and instability in our undertakings, passing from one exercise to another without staying in any. The other vice is a certain stupidity and carelessness of mind which is unwilling even to know or learn the things necessary for our perfection, and this is an imperfection not less dangerous than the other. The third sort of modesty relates to our style of conversation and to our

words—that is to say, to our manner of conversing with our neighbour—avoiding the two opposite imperfections, which are rusticity and loquacity; rusticity, which prevents us from contributing our share towards keeping up good conversation; loquacity, which makes us talk so much that we give others no opportunity of talking in their turn. The fourth virtue is neatness and propriety as to our clothing, and the two contrary vices are untidiness and superfluity.

These are, then, the four distinguishing sorts of modesty. The first is most highly recommendable for several reasons, and especially because it keeps us in great subjection. There is no virtue which needs such special attention. Now, in the subjection which it imposes lies its great value, for all that brings us into subjection for the love of God is of great merit and wonderfully pleasing to Him (1). The second reason is that it keeps us in subjection not only for a time, but always; both in all places, whether we are alone or whether we are in company, and at all times, even when we are asleep. A great Saint wrote to one of his disciples, telling him to lie down at night as in the presence of God, exactly as any one would have done if commanded by Our Lord when He was on earth to lie down and sleep in His presence. It is true, the Saint added, that you do not see Him and cannot hear the command which He is giving you, but none the less you should act as if you saw and heard Him, since He is truly present and guards you while you sleep. O my God,

(1) Although I am not very fond of using this word merit amongst ourselves. (*Addition.*)

how modestly and devoutly we should lie down to rest if we saw Thee! Doubtless, we should fold our arms upon our breast with the deepest devotion. Religious modesty, then, keeps us in subjection at every moment of our lives, because the Angels are always present, and God Himself, for Whose eyes we practise it.

This virtue is also much recommended on account of the edification of our neighbour. I assure you that a simple and modest exterior has converted many, as in the case of St. Francis, who passed once through a town with such great modesty in his deportment that, though he did not speak a single word, a great number of young men followed him, attracted only by this, and desiring to be instructed by him (2). A modest demeanour is a silent sermon; it is a virtue which St. Paul recommends most especially to the Philippians, in the fourth chapter of his epistle, saying: *Let your modesty be known to all men.* And when he tells his disciple St. Timothy that a Bishop must be adorned,\* he means not with rich clothing but with modesty, so that by his modest bearing he may encourage all to approach him, avoiding alike rusticity and levity, so that while giving liberty to worldlings to come to him, they may not think that he is worldly like themselves.

(2) A short time ago a Capuchin Father, pointing out to me one of their friars whom he had brought with him, said: "You see this Father; well, he does not preach, and scarcely converses with any one, being of a very silent disposition, yet his modest demeanour alone has attracted many to enter our Order."

(Addition.)

\* 1 Ep. iii. 2.

Now, the virtue of religious modesty observes three things: time, place, and person. For, tell me, would not one who was unwilling to show more cheerfulness in recreation than out of recreation be very unsociable? There are gestures and behaviour which would be unseemly out of recreation, but are not at all so at that time; so those who would laugh and relieve their mind in the midst of serious occupations, as they may very reasonably do at recreation, would they not be considered frivolous and giddy? We must also take into consideration place, persons, the circle of which we may form part, and most especially the condition of the person. The modest demeanour of a woman of the world is not the same as that of a nun; a young lady in the world who kept her eyes lowered as do our sisters would not be approved, any more than our sisters would be if they in this particular did not exceed persons in the world. A demeanour which would be modest in one man would not be so in another, on account of his rank; a gravity extremely suitable in an elderly person would be affectation in a younger one, to whom a lowlier and humbler modesty belongs.

I must tell you something which I was reading lately,\* because it relates to our present subject—namely, that of religious modesty. The great St. Arsenius (who was chosen by Pope St. Damasus to bring up and instruct Arcadius, who was destined to succeed his father Theodosius in the government of the Empire), after having been honoured at the court for many years, and as much favoured by the

\* Surius, ad diem 19 Julii.

Emperor as could be any man in the world, grew weary at last of all these vanities, although his life at the court had been as truly christian as it had been honourable, and resolved to retire into the desert amongst the holy hermit Fathers who were living there, a design which he courageously carried out. The Fathers, knowing the virtuous reputation of this great Saint, were filled with joy and consolation at receiving him into their company. He attached himself especially to two monks, one of whom was named Pastor, and formed a great friendship with them. Now, one day when all the Fathers were assembled together for a spiritual Conference (a custom which has prevailed among pious persons from all time), one of the Fathers informed the Superior that Arsenius was in the habit of failing in religious modesty by crossing one leg over the other. "It is true," replied the Superior, "I have remarked it myself, but the good man has lived a long time in the world, and brought this habit with him from the court. What can be done?" The Superior made this excuse, for it was painful to vex him by reproving him for so slight a thing, in which there was no sin; at the same time, he was anxious to induce him to correct himself of this the only fault which could be brought against him. The monk Pastor then said: "O Father, do not distress yourself; there will be no difficulty in telling him of it, and he will be very glad to be told. Tomorrow, if you please, when we are all assembled together, I will put myself in the same posture; you will correct me for it before all the company, and he will then understand that it must not be done."

The Superior therefore administering the correction to Pastor, the good Arsenius threw himself at the feet of the Father and humbly asked pardon, saying that although perhaps no one had remarked this fault in him, he had always committed it; it was his usual habit at court, and he begged a penance for it. The penance was not given, but he was never again seen in that posture.

In this story I find several things most worthy of consideration. In the first place, the prudence of the Superior in fearing to grieve Arsenius by a correction on such slight grounds, though at the same time he tried to find some way of correcting him, proving thereby the exactness of all with regard to the smallest details of religious modesty. In the next place, I notice the goodness of Arsenius in acknowledging his fault, and his fidelity in correcting himself, although it was so slight a matter that at court it was not even considered an impropriety, although it was so among these Fathers. I observe also that we must not be troubled if we find some old habit of the world still clinging to us, since Arsenius retained this one after having lived for a long time in the desert in the company of these Fathers. We cannot get rid so quickly of all our imperfections; we must never be disturbed at finding many still remaining in us, if only we have the will to struggle against them. Moreover, observe that you are not judging rashly if you think that the Superior is correcting another for a fault which you yourself commit, in order that, without directly reproving you, you may amend; but you must humble yourself profoundly, seeing that the Superior

holds you weak, and knows that you would feel too much a reproof addressed to yourself. You must also love this abjection cordially, and humble yourself as did Arsenius, confessing that you are guilty of the same fault, taking care always to humble yourself in a spirit of gentleness and tranquillity.

I see that you wish me to speak of the other virtues which fall under modesty. I tell you, then, that the second, which is interior, produces the same effects upon the soul as the first does upon the body. As this controls the gestures and deportment of the body, avoiding the two extremes or contrary vices of levity or licence, and of a too affected carriage, so in the same way inward modesty maintains the powers of our souls in tranquillity and moderation, avoiding, as I have said, curiosity of the understanding, over which it chiefly exercises its control, retrenching also from our will its innumerable desires, and directing it simply to that *one thing which Mary chose, and which shall not be taken away from her*\*—that is, the will to please God. Martha represents very well the want of control in the will, for she is too eager: she sets all the servants of the house to work; she goes hither and thither without pausing for a moment, so anxious is she to treat Our Lord well; and she seems to think she will never have enough dishes prepared to entertain Him. In the same way, the will which is not restrained by moderation flits from one subject to another, in order to stimulate itself to love God, and to desire many means of

\* Luke x. ult.

erving Him, and yet so many things are not needed. Better is it to cling to God like Magdalene, sitting at His feet, asking Him to give us His love, than to be thinking how and by what means we can acquire it. This modesty keeps our will confined to the exercise of those means of advancement in the love of God which belong to our own particular vocation.

I have said that this virtue chiefly exercises its control over the understanding; and this because our natural curiosity is very hurtful, and prevents us from ever knowing a thing perfectly, because we never take time enough to learn it thoroughly. It also avoids the vice which lies at the other extreme—namely, that stupidity and carelessness of mind which cares not to know what is necessary. Now, this subjection of the understanding is of great importance as regards our perfection. The will does not properly cling to its object, because the understanding shows it the beauty of something else, and so draws it away.

Bees cannot rest as long as they have no king. They flutter about incessantly, wandering hither and thither—there is scarcely any repose in the hive; but as soon as their king is born, they all gather round him, and stay there, never leaving him except to go and gather their spoils, at his command. In like manner, our understanding and will, our passions and the faculties of our soul, like spiritual bees, have no repose until they have a king—that is, until they have chosen Our Lord for their King. Our senses never cease to wander curiously about, drawing our interior faculties after them, wasting them-



selves now on one subject, now on another. Thus we are in continual affliction of spirit, in continual restlessness, which destroy that peace and tranquillity of mind so necessary to us; and this it is which is produced by want of control of the understanding and will. But as soon as our souls have chosen Our Lord for their sole and sovereign King, all our powers get quiet, like chaste and mystic bees, cluster around Him, and never leave their hive, except for those exercises of fraternal charity which this sacred King commands them to practise. As soon as these are accomplished, they return to recollection and holy, desirable quiet, in order to distil and store up the honey of the sweet and holy thoughts and affections which they draw from His sacred presence. Thus they will avoid the two extremes mentioned above, cutting off, on the one hand, curiosity of the understanding by simple attention to God, and, on the other, stupidity and carelessness of mind by the exercises of charity which they practise towards their neighbour when required.

Here is another example for you on this subject.\* A Religious once asked the great St. Thomas what he must do to become very learned. "You must read only one book," replied the Saint. I have lately been reading St. Augustine's Rule for nuns,† in which he says distinctly that the sisters are never to read any books but those which are given to them by the Superior. Later on he gave the same command to his monks,‡ so well did he know the evil

\* Del Castiglion Hist. S. Dominici et Ord. sui, Pars. I<sup>a</sup>, lib. iii., c. xxxvii.      † Epist. cexi. § 13.      ‡ Regula ad Servos Dei, § 9.

which follows from curiosity to know more than is needed to make us serve God better. This is very little, for if you walk in simplicity, by the careful observance of your Rules, you will serve God perfectly, without going any further afield in the pursuit of knowledge (3). Great learning is not necessary in order to love God, as St. Bonaventure says (4), for a simple woman is as capable of loving God as the most learned men in the world.\* Very little knowledge and much practice is necessary in the matter of perfection.

Speaking of the danger of curiosity with regard to all sorts of means of arriving at perfection, I remember talking to two nuns, of two different well-reformed Orders. One of them, from having read the works of the blessed Mother Teresa, had learnt to speak so much like her that you might have fancied her a little Mother Teresa. Indeed, she believed it herself, having so vivid a sentiment of what the saintly Mother did during her life that she felt as if she herself did it also, even so far as to have abstraction from the senses and suspension of the powers, just as she had read about the Saint; and really she could talk about it all very well. There are others who, from having meditated a great deal on the life of the Saints Catherine of Sienna and Genoa, think themselves to be second St. Catherines by imitation. Certainly these souls

(3) Spiritual conferences and sermons are not solely intended for our instruction, but sometimes to recreate and invigorate our minds. (*Addition.*)

(4) Whose Feast we are keeping. (*Addition.*)

\* *Chronica Fratrum Min.*, lib. vii., c. xiv.

have, at any rate, the satisfaction of imagining themselves to be saints, although their satisfaction is vain. The other nun whom I told you I knew was of a very different temperament; never was she satisfied or at rest, because she was always seeking out and desiring some way and method for becoming perfect; and always, in spite of her exertions, she kept fancying that there must be some other means of arriving at perfection than that which she had been taught. The one of these nuns lived contented in her imaginary holiness, seeking and desiring nothing else; the other lived in discontent, because the perfection which she sought was hidden from her, and she was therefore always desiring something else. Interior modesty keeps the soul in a state between these two extremes, in that happy mean of desiring to know what is necessary, and nothing more. Moreover, I must remind you that the exterior modesty of which we have spoken greatly helps the interior, and the acquisition of peace and tranquillity in the soul. The proof of this is that all the holy Fathers, who were specially given to prayer, judged a well-regulated attitude contributed greatly to its efficacy, such as kneeling with clasped hands or arms outstretched (5).

(5) You ask if keeping the head bent or turned a little over the shoulder, or casting up the eyes, is contrary to modesty of demeanour. I reply that if this is done sometimes without thinking about it, there is no great harm, provided that we do not affect this manner of acting as a sign of extraordinary devotion; for every kind of affectation in these matters is most objectionable. We must carefully avoid acting the *sanctificetur* with no *nomen tuum* after it; I mean, to act the devotee and the saint in our exterior deportment, as I did once. There is no harm in telling you here this amusing little story, as it is to the

The third department of religious modesty concerns our words and conversation. There are words which would be unsuitable at any other time than that of recreation, in which it is just and reasonable to relax our minds a little. Indeed, at recreation, any one who would not talk, or allow others to talk, on any but lofty and sublime subjects would act improperly; for have we not said that propriety takes account of times, places, and persons? On this point I must tell you that I was reading the other day\* that St. Pachomius, when he first retired into the desert to lead a monastic life, had great temptations, and the evil spirits often appeared to him in various manners. The writer of his life tells us that on one occasion, when he had gone into the forest to cut wood, a great troop of these infernal spirits came upon him, seeking to terrify him, ranging themselves in order of battle, like well-armed soldiers keeping guard, and crying out to one another: "Make way for the holy man!" St. Pachomius, at once recognising this as a bravado of the evil one, began to smile, saying: "Ah! you are laughing at me, but, please God! I shall be

point. When I was a young student in this town, I was seized with a fervour and a great longing to be saintly and perfect. I began by fancying that, in order to become so, I must twist my head on one side when I was saying my Breviary, because another student who really was a saint did so. This practice I continued steadily for some time, but without becoming any holier. Now let us return to our subject. This second kind of modesty has been called by many a close application—that is, a very especial care—to keep the mind within the limits of a holy moderation, only wishing to know what is necessary, and restraining all curiosity about other things. (*Addition.*)

\* Vitæ Patrum, I. i.

one." Then the devil, seeing that he could not entrap the Saint by making him depressed, thought he would try to catch him on the side of levity, since he had laughed at his first attempt. He therefore fastened a quantity of great cords to a single leaf of a tree, and then a troop of demons took hold of the cords and began to pull at the leaf, pretending to make most violent efforts, crying out and sweating as if it were a work of immense difficulty. The Saint, raising his eyes and seeing this folly, pictured in his mind Our Lord crucified upon the Tree of the Cross; and they, perceiving that the Saint was occupying himself with the fruit of the tree and not the leaf, fled, covered with shame and confusion.

*There is a time to laugh and a time to weep, and there is also a time to speak and a time to keep silence,\** as this glorious Saint shows us in these temptations. This holy modesty regulates our manner of speaking, so that it becomes pleasing, neither too loud nor too low, too slow nor too quick; it keeps us within the bounds of holy moderation, so that when others are speaking we allow them to do so without interrupting them, for that partakes of loquacity, and yet we speak when it is our turn, so as to avoid rusticity and self-sufficiency, which are such hindrances to good conversation. Often, too, occasions arise in which it is necessary to say much without speaking, by our modesty, serenity, patience, and calmness.

The fourth virtue named modesty refers to dress and the manner of dressing. Of this nothing need

\* Eccles. iii. 4, 7.

be said except that we must avoid any lack of cleanliness and neatness in our apparel, as much as the other extreme of too great attention to dress and an over-care to be well dressed, which is vanity. St. Bernard, however, insists very much upon cleanliness as a good indication of purity and cleanness of soul.\* There is a thing which seems rather to hamper us on this point in the life of St. Hilarion,† for, speaking one day to a gentleman who came to see him, he told him that “there was no use in expecting to combine cleanliness with a hair-shirt;” meaning that we must not trouble ourselves about the cleanliness of our bodies, which are vile and putrid carrion. But this was rather admirable than imitable in this great Saint. We must not, indeed, be fastidious; but, on the other hand, we must never disregard cleanliness. If I am not mistaken, the Saint spoke in this manner because he was addressing courtiers, whom he saw to be so much inclined to over-refinement that he was forced to use severe language. So those who wish to straighten a young tree, not only bring it to the direction in which they wish it to grow, but even bend it somewhat beyond, so that it may not return to its former direction. This is all that I have to say about Religious Modesty.

In the second place, you want to know how we should receive correction without letting remain in us any sensitiveness or bitterness of heart. To prevent the feeling of anger from stirring within us, and to keep the blood from showing itself in our face, cannot be. Happy, indeed, shall we be if we attain to this perfection a quarter of an hour before

\* Vita I<sup>a</sup> S. Bern., lib. iii. c. ii.

† Apud S. Hieron.

we die! But to maintain bitterness in our minds in such wise that after this feeling has passed we do not speak with the same confidence, gentleness, and calmness as before—Oh, this we must take all pains to avoid! You say that you do all in your power to drive away the feeling, but it remains all the same. I assure you, my dear daughter, that in all probability you only drive away this feeling in the same way as the citizens of a town, in which a riot breaks out at night, disperse these seditious enemies. They do not actually drive them out of the town, so that they can go about secretly from street to street, and at daybreak they spring out upon the inhabitants and remain the masters. You, indeed, drive away the feeling which you have about being corrected, but not so vigorously and completely as to prevent some little of it lurking secretly in some corner of your heart. You do not wish to have this feeling, but yet you do not wish to submit your judgment, which makes you believe either that the correction was made improperly, or from temper or some such cause. Who cannot see that this rebel will fall on you and put you to utter confusion if you do not promptly drive him away?

But what, then, must we do at such a time? We must cling closely to Our Lord, and speak to Him of something else. But your feelings are not yet calmed down; they are still suggesting to you to dwell upon the wrong done to you. Ah! this is not the time to bring your judgment into subjection, to make it believe and own that the correction is good and made properly! Oh no! that must be done after your soul is calmed and quieted, for while it is

troubled you must neither do nor say anything, only remain firm and resolved not to yield to passion, whatever excuse we might have; for at such times excuses will never be wanting—they will come in crowds—but we must not listen to a single one, however good it may seem. We must simply, as I have said, keep close to God, diverting our minds by speaking to Him of other things, after having humbled and abased ourselves before His divine Majesty. But take note of these words, which I am glad to insist upon on account of their utility. When you humble yourselves, it must be with a gentle and peaceful, not with a querulous and impatient humility. Unfortunately, we offer to God acts of humility so much against the grain, and so unwilling, that they do not calm our minds, and are fruitless. But if, on the contrary, we made these acts in the presence of the divine Goodness with a sweet confidence, we should rise up serene and calm, able easily to reject all those reasons which our private judgment and self-love suggest, and which are often, one may say habitually, unreasonable; and we should be ready to converse just as before with those who reprovèd or contradicted us. You can easily, you say, so far overcome yourselves as to speak to these people, but if they do not reply as you would like, the temptation recurs. Well, all this proceeds from the evil of which we have already spoken. What ought it to signify to you whether they speak to you in one way or another, provided that you do your duty?

But, all said and done, there is no one who does not dislike reproof. St. Pachomius, after having



lived a most perfect life in the desert for fourteen or fifteen years, had a revelation from God that he would win a great number of souls, and that many would flock to the desert to place themselves under his guidance. He had already several Religious with him, and the first whom he had received was his own elder brother, John. St. Pachomius then, having received this revelation, immediately set to work to enlarge his monastery, adding many cells to it. His brother John, either not knowing his intention, or out of his great zeal for poverty, addressed a severe reproof to him one day, asking him, for instance, if it was by building so great a monastery that he expected and wished to imitate Our Lord, Who *had not where to lay His head* \* while on earth. St. Pachomius, saint though he was, felt this reproof so keenly that he turned away, in order, if I am not mistaken, to conceal his annoyance. Then he went and threw himself on his knees before God, asking pardon for his fault, and lamenting that, after so many years spent in the desert, he should still, as he said, be so immortified. His prayer was so fervent and so humble that he obtained the grace of never again being guilty of impatience. † Even St. Francis (I) towards the close of his life, after so

(I) The sisters who wrote down this Conference made a mistake here. The circumstance which they relate happened not to St. Francis of Assisi, but to one of his disciples named Barbarus. (See Thom. de Celano, *Appendix ad Vitam primam S. Francisci*; cap. xc. ii.) It is not unlikely, however, that in treating of the repression of our first imperfect emotions, St. Francis de Sales may have made some allusion to the seraphic Patriarch himself. (See the Fioretti, cap. iii.)

\* Matt. viii. 20; Luke ix. 58.

† Vitæ Patrum, l. I.; Vita St. Pach., c. xvi.

many ecstasies and loving unions with God, after having done so much for His glory, and after having conquered himself in so many ways, one day, when he was planting cabbages in the garden, being reproved by one of the brothers for not planting them well, was affected by such a strong movement of anger that an abusive word against the brother half escaped his lips. He actually opened his mouth to pronounce it, but restrained himself instantly, and stooping to take up some of the manure which he was digging in with the cabbages—"Ah! wicked tongue," he cried, "I will teach thee what it is to abuse thy brother;" then suddenly throwing himself on his knees, he entreated the brother to forgive him. Now, what right, I ask you, have we to be surprised at finding ourselves quick to anger, and ready to resent reproof and contradiction? We must follow the example of these Saints, who instantly conquered themselves, the one having recourse to prayer, the other humbly asking pardon of his brother, and neither the one nor the other doing anything to foster their sensitiveness, but turning away from it, and profiting by it.

You say that you accept the reproof cheerfully, that you approve of it and consider it to be just and reasonable, but that it causes you a certain confusion as regards the Superior, as having displeased her or given her cause for displeasure, and that this deprives you of confidence in approaching her, although you love the abjection which is the result of your fault. This, my daughter, proceeds from self-love. You are not, perhaps, aware that there is within us a certain monastery, in which

self-love is the superior, and therefore imposes penances. Well, the confusion which you feel is the penance which it imposes on you for the fault of having displeased the Superior, because, perhaps, she will not esteem you so much as she would have done if you had not committed this fault.

I have said enough for those who receive the reproof; now I must say a word about those who give it. Besides these being obliged to use great discretion in choosing times and seasons and other conditions for giving it, they must also never be disappointed or offended to see that it is felt by those to whom they administer it; for it is very painful to any one to be reproved (6).

You ask, in the third place, how you can succeed in raising your mind direct to God, without turning to the right or to the left. My dear daughter, your question pleases me very much, because it contains its own answer: you must do as you say—go straight to God, without looking to the right or to the left. That is not, however, what you ask, I see very well, but rather what you must do, in order so to fix your mind steadfastly in God, that nothing can weaken its hold or withdraw it from Him. For this two things are necessary: to die and to be saved, for after that there will be no more separation, and your spirit will be indissolubly

(6) There is no doubt, my dear daughter, that a multitude of words on a subject on which but very few are needed should be avoided as an immoderation; especially on the point of which you speak—namely, self-excuse. For, besides the excess in words, it is another kind of imperfection to be unwilling to be recognised as faulty or imperfect; it is contrary to humility, which makes us love our abjection. That is enough on this point. What else have you to ask? (*Addition.*)

attached and united to its God. Again, you say that this is not what you ask, but what you can do to prevent the smallest insect, as you express it—that is, the smallest distraction—from withdrawing your mind from God as it does. Pardon me, my daughter, the smallest distraction does not withdraw your soul from God, as you say, for nothing withdraws us from God but sin; and our resolution, made each morning, to keep our soul united to God and attentive to His presence, keeps us always there, even when we are sleeping, since we sleep in the name of God and according to His most holy will. It even seems as if His divine Goodness said to us: Sleep and rest; meanwhile I will watch over you to guard and defend you from the *roaring lion that goeth about seeking whom he may devour*.\* Have we not, then, good reason to lie down to rest modestly, as we have already said? The means of doing well all that we do is to be very attentive to the presence of God, for no one would offend Him if he remembered that He is watching him. Venial sins are unable to turn us aside from the path which leads to God. They will doubtless delay our progress a little, but yet they will not turn us aside, still less will simple distractions, and this I have said in the *Introduction*.†

As regards prayer, it is not less profitable to us or less pleasing to God when it is full of distractions; nay, it will perhaps be more useful to us than if we had much consolation in it, because there will be more labour; provided, however, that we are faithful in withdrawing from these distractions, and in re-

\* 1 Peter v. 8.

† Part I., caps. v., xxii.

fraining from dwelling upon them voluntarily. It is the same with regard to the difficulty which we experience throughout the day in dwelling upon the thought of God and of heavenly things; provided that we are careful to restrain our minds as far as possible from running after these flitting butterflies, as a mother restrains her child. If she sees the poor little one longing to run off after the butterflies, hoping to catch them, she holds him back and says: "My child, you will only exhaust yourself by running after these butterflies in the sun; you had much better stay with me." The child stays with her, indeed, until he sees another, after which he would be as eager to run as ever if his mother did not hold him back in the same way. What, then, can we do except have patience and not weary of our labours, since they are undertaken for the love of God?

If I am not mistaken, however, when we say that we cannot find God, and that He seems so far away, we only mean that we cannot feel His presence. I have before observed that many people do not distinguish between God and the feeling of God, between faith and the feeling of faith—which is a very great defect. It seems to them that when they do not feel God they are not in His presence, which is a mistake. A person who was about to suffer martyrdom for God, and yet did not actually think of Him, but rather of his pain, although the feeling of faith may be wanting, yet does not fail to merit because of his first resolution, and makes an act of great love. There is a difference between possessing the presence of God (I mean being in His

presence) and having the feeling of His presence. God alone can give us the latter; as to my giving you the means of acquiring this sentiment, it is an impossibility.

Do you ask what you must do in order to keep yourself always with the deepest reverence before God, as being most unworthy of this grace? Well, there is nothing to do but just what you say: to remember that He is our God, and that we are His feeble creatures, all unworthy of this honour. St. Francis did this, who spent a whole night asking God: "Who art Thou, and who am I?" \*

If you ask me, in fine: "What can I do to acquire the love of God?" I answer: By willing to love Him; and instead of setting to work to try and find out how you can unite your soul to God, put the thing in practice by a continual application of your mind to Him, and I assure you that you will arrive much more quickly at your object by this means than by any other. For the more we pour ourselves out, the less recollected we shall be, and the less capable of union with the divine Majesty, Who would have all we are without reserve. One actually finds souls who are so busy in thinking how they shall do a thing that they have no time to do it; and yet, in what concerns our perfection, which consists in the union of our soul with the divine Goodness, there is no question of knowing much, but of doing (7). It seems to me that those of

(7) In this holy business we must walk with the greatest simplicity, for those who are continually inquiring which is the shortest way to get to the town for which they are bound, run

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\* See the *Chronica Frat. Min.*, lib. i., c. viii.

whom we ask the road to heaven are very right in answering us like those who tell us that, in order to reach such a place, we must just go on putting one foot before the other, and that by this means we shall arrive where we desire. Walk ever, we say to these souls so desirous of their perfection, walk in the way of your vocation with simplicity, more intent on doing than on desiring; that is the shortest road.

But here I perceive a little artifice which you must allow me to reveal to you, without being offended. I see that you want me to teach you a sort of ready-made way of perfection, one that you have only to put your head into it, or put it on like a dress, and thus be perfect, without taking any trouble. You want me, I say, to give you a ready-made perfection, for what I tell you must be done is not pleasing to nature; it is not what we wanted. Certainly, if that were in my power I should be the most perfect man in the world; for if I could give perfection to others without their having anything to do, I assure you that I should take it first of all for myself. You fancy that perfection is an art of which, if you can only discover the secret, you will instantly obtain possession, without any trouble. Certainly this is a great mistake, for, in aspiring to union with the Beloved, there is no other secret than to do what we aspire to—that is, to labour faithfully in the exercise of divine love.

the chance of arriving there after those who went straight along the high-road without turning aside. For the former will be told: "You are not on the right track. The road you are taking is the longest; you must turn back and take such a road." While they are walking back they do not advance, nor again while they are busy asking the way. (*Addition.*)

I wish you, however, to observe that when I say we must do this, I am always referring to the superior part of our soul, for as regards all the feelings of repugnance in the inferior part, we must pay no more heed to them than passers-by do to dogs which they hear barking in the distance. Those who at a banquet try every dish, eating a little of each, so disorder their stomachs that they cannot sleep, and pass the night with the usual consequences of indigestion. So it is with those souls who wish to try all methods and means which lead or may lead them to perfection, for their spiritual stomach not having sufficient heat to digest and put in practice so many methods, a certain discomfort and indigestion succeeds, which deprives them of that peace and serenity of mind in the presence of Our Lord which is *the one thing needful* which *Mary chose, and which will never be taken from her* \* (8). Let

(8) Let us pass on now to answer the question which you put to me as to how we are to obey God and our Superiors simply and purely. The question is excellent, and brings with it its own answer. Pure obedience is to obey God simply, and our Superior for the love of God. You can attach various linings to the intention for which you obey; for instance, you can clothe yourself with the will of God, because you know that the rewards of the obedient are eternal, and that the disobedient will be deprived of the enjoyment of God. All this is good, but it is neither simple nor pure, because these motives are mixed and lined. So, too, you obey indeed your Superiors for the love of God, but you add to this robe the linings of which we have spoken, and also a certain desire of pleasing the Superior and gaining her approbation, which is not obeying simply and purely for the love of God. This desire to please the Superior very often robs us of the merit of obedience, and also of peace of mind, for as soon as we see that she is not pleased with us, instead of embracing this abjection and caressing it in the depths of our

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\* Luke x. ult.



us pass on now to the other question which you put to me—namely, what you can do to strengthen your resolutions and make them succeed? There is no better means, my daughter, than to put them in practice. But you say that you are still so weak that, although you often make strong resolutions not to fall into the particular imperfection of which you want to cure yourself, no sooner does the occasion present itself than down you go. Shall I tell you why we are still so weak? It is because we will not abstain from food which does not agree with us. It is as if a person who wished to be free from pains in the stomach were to ask a physician what he should do. He would reply: “Do not eat such and such food, because it has that effect which brings you pain;” and yet the person will not abstain from it. We do the same: for example, we should like to love reproof, and yet we obstinately cling to our own opinion. That is foolishness; it cannot be. You will never be strong enough to bear reproof courageously while you are nourishing yourself with the food of self-esteem. I should wish to keep my soul recollected, and yet I will not restrain all sorts of idle thoughts; the two things are incompatible. Ah! how much I wish that I could be steadfast and regular in my religious exercises; at the same time, I should also wish not to find them so trying—in heart, we are as disquieted and troubled as if our happiness depended on it. Oh, how great a blessing it would be for a soul to do nothing for her Superiors out of regard to their own person, but always to see in them God and His most holy love; for thus the end and aim of their obedience would be most pleasing to God, and to this we should aspire, not to gaining reward. So doing, all differences in Superiors would be indifferent to us because we should find God in all. (*Addition.*)

fact, I should like to find the work ready done for me. That cannot be in this life, for we shall always have to labour. The Feast of the Purification, as I have told you before, has no octave.

We must make two equally firm resolutions: one, to be ready to see weeds growing in our garden; the other, to have the courage to see them pulled up, and to pull them up ourselves, for our self-love, which produces these miseries, will never die while we live. Besides, to sometimes fall into venial sin does not make a weak soul, provided that we rise up quickly, by turning the soul towards God and quietly humbling ourselves. We must not imagine that we can live without committing any sins, for only Our Lady had that privilege. Certainly, even if they retard our progress a little, as I have said, they do not turn us aside from the way; one single look at God effaces them (9).

(9) When it is said that the blessing of the bishop and holy water efface them, that is not in virtue of the blessing, but in virtue of the act of humility which we make on receiving it, and of the turning of our soul to God.

You ask if in taking holy water we must always do so with the thoughts which certain books propose. Oh! do not think that all which they teach must be practised by persons who have already reached the point of being able, on every occasion, to turn their thoughts to the divine Majesty by contemplative affection! Such practices would mar their simplicity. Those who would make a little meditation while taking holy water, others when bowing to the crucifix or genuflecting to the Blessed Sacrament, or making the sign of the Cross, and so on, or who would consider each point of the life, death, and passion of Our Lord, will assuredly not have time during a whole Mass to form a single good affection or resolution, which is more useful still. It is clear that the intention of going to the church to adore God includes all these special considerations in a more eminent way, and to keep ourselves in this affection, or in another, if it comes to us during Mass, is a very good way of hearing it. In fact, a

Lastly, I would have you know that we must never cease to make good resolutions, even though we may be well aware that, generally speaking, we do not carry them into effect ; yea, even if we should see that it will be out of our power to do so when the opportunity offers. Indeed, we must make them with still more firmness than if we felt within ourselves courage enough to succeed in our enterprise, saying to Our Lord : “ It is true that I shall not have strength enough to do or to bear such and such a thing of myself, but *I rejoice in my infirmity*, because it will be Thy *strength* which will do it in me.” \* Relying on this help, go forth courageously to the battle, and doubt not but that you will gain the victory. Our Lord treats us as a good father and a good mother treat their child, who is allowed to walk alone as long as he is on the soft grass of a meadow, or some mossy carpet, because even if he were to fall he could not do himself much harm ; but on rough and dangerous roads they carry the little one tenderly in their arms. We have often seen souls courageously sustaining great assaults, without being vanquished by their enemies, and yet afterwards defeated in very slight combats. Why is this, if not that Our Lord, seeing that they would not do themselves much harm by falling, has allowed them to walk alone, which He did not do when they were among the precipices of great temptations, from which His all-powerful hand extricated them.

multiplicity of subjects distracts our heart and mind, hindering and diverting them from that loving simplicity which renders our souls so pleasing to God. (*Addition.*)

\* 2 Cor. xii. 9. 10.

St. Paula, who so bravely renounced the world, quitting Rome and all its luxuries, and who could not even be shaken by her maternal affection for her children, so resolute was her heart in forsaking all for God—even she, after having effected these marvellous things, allowed herself to be overcome by the temptation of private judgment, which made her believe that she ought not to submit to the counsel of various holy persons, who would have her give up some of her accustomed austerities; in which St. Jerome confesses \* that she was to blame.

In conclusion, let me observe that all that we have said in this Conference relates to delicate points of perfection, and therefore none of you who have been listening to my words must be disappointed, if you find that you have not yet attained to such perfection, since all of you, by the grace of God, have the courage to wish to aim at it. May Jesus ever live!

\* Ep. cviii., ad Eustoch.

## CONFERENCE X

### ON OBEDIENCE

OBEDIENCE is one of the moral virtues, depending upon justice. Now, there are certain moral virtues, such as penitence, religion, justice, and obedience, which have so great an affinity with the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, that they seem almost theological, although they hold a very inferior rank. Taking obedience, it consists in two points. The first is to obey our superiors; the second, to obey our equals and inferiors. The latter, however, belongs rather to humility, gentleness, and charity than to obedience; for the humble think that all others surpass them, and are far better than they, so that they make them their superiors and believe that they ought to obey them.

As regards, however, the obedience due to those Superiors whom God has set over us to rule us, it is just and necessary, and ought to be rendered with an entire submission of our understanding and will. We practise this obedience of the understanding when, being commanded to do anything, we accept and approve the command, not only with the will but also with our understanding, approving and esteeming the thing commanded, and judging it

better than any other thing which we could have been commanded on that occasion. When we have reached this point, we so love to obey that we have an insatiable desire to be commanded, so that all that we do may be done from obedience; and this is the obedience of the perfect, which I desire for you. It is a pure gift from God, or else it is acquired with much time and labour, by means of a series of acts, often repeated and earnestly effected, by means of which we form the habit. Our natural inclination always leads us to wish to command, and makes us dislike, to obey, and yet it is certain that we have a great capacity for obeying, and perhaps none at all for commanding.

Ordinary obedience has three conditions. The first is to accept the thing which we are commanded to do, and to bend our will gently to it, loving to be commanded; for to have no one to command us is not the way to make us become truly obedient, any more than living alone in a desert is the way to become meek. Cassian relates that when he was in the desert he sometimes became angry, and that when he took up a pen to write, and found it would not mark, he threw it away. Thus, he says, living alone is of no avail, since we carry our anger about with us. Virtue is something positive, not a mere absence of its contrary. The second condition of obedience is promptitude, to which is opposed spiritual sloth or sadness; for it seldom happens that a soul in sadness does a thing promptly and diligently. In theological language sloth is called spiritual sadness, and as such prevents us from yielding brave

and prompt obedience (1). The third condition is perseverance; for it is not enough to accept the command and execute it for a certain space of time, if we do not persevere in so doing, for it is this perseverance which wins the crown.\*

Admirable examples of perseverance are to be found everywhere, but especially in the life of St. Pachomius. There have been monks who throughout their whole lives have, with incredible patience, persevered in doing only one kind of work; like the good Father Jonas, who, besides gardening, never did anything in his life but make mats, and who was so much accustomed to this occupation that he continued it with the light shut out (no glass in their windows or holes) while he prayed and meditated, the one occupation not interfering with the other; and at last they found him dead, his legs crossed and his mat stretched above them. He died doing what he had been doing all his life. It is an act of great humility to go on all our lives doing from obedience one same and mean work, tempted possibly to think that we are quite capable of greater things.

Now, this third condition is the most difficult of all, on account of the levity and inconstancy of the human spirit, for at one moment we love to do a thing, and the next we will not even look at it. If we would follow all the motions of our spirit, and if it were possible to do so without disedification

(1) We cannot pass over rivers more safely than in a ship or boat; so, too, we cannot make the voyage of life more securely than by means of obedience. (*Addition.*)

\* Matt. x. 22 ; xxiv. 13.

or loss of due self-respect, we should see nothing but change (2): one moment we should wish to be in one condition, and the next we should seek another, so extravagant is this inconstancy of the human mind. But we must bring the strength of our first resolutions to bear upon this inconstancy, so as to arrest it, and so live an equable life amid the diversities of our own feelings and of what happens around us.

Now, when we are tempted to disobedience, we must, in order to increase our love for obedience, represent to ourselves its excellence, beauty, and merit, as well as its utility, so as to encourage ourselves to hold firm. This applies, however, to souls not yet well grounded in obedience; but when it is only a question of simple disinclination and dislike of the thing we are commanded to do, we must just make an act of love and then set to work (3). Even Our Lord in His Passion shrank

(2) When we had been Jesuits for an hour, we should wish to be Capuchins the next, and a little later on we should want to enter some other state. There are men who have lived in perfect peace with their wife to the end of their days, and yet, if they could, would have changed her for another a dozen times. If we could, we would change our very father and mother. (*Addition.*)

(3) I do not mean an act of sensible love, for such is not in our power, nor is it at all necessary; I mean an act of reasonable love, springing from the higher part of our soul, for this is the duty of true servants of God, and in no other way shall we make any progress. If we cling to these little softnesses and spiritual sweetnesses, and do not make our resolutions of God's service in our higher will, we shall never attain to true virtue or solid love. A gentleman of my acquaintance, seeing another passing by one day, said to me: "There is a man whom I love with a great ardour, but I have never spoken to him, nor will I ever speak to him, for I avoid as far as I can every opportunity of doing so." "But why," I said, "since you love him so much?"



with an unspeakable horror and loathing from the pains of death; He says so Himself,\* but in the superior part of His soul He was resigned to the will of His Father; all the rest was only the struggle of nature.

The most difficult kind of perseverance is that which is required for interior matters, for in those which are material and exterior it is tolerably easy. The reason of this is that it costs us so much to submit our understanding, which is the very last thing we give up; and yet it is absolutely necessary that we should bring our thoughts into control with regard to certain objects, so that when certain exercises or virtuous practices are marked out for us, we may persevere in them and make our mind accept them. I do not call it a failure in perseverance when we occasionally allow little interruptions in our obedience, provided that we do not abandon it altogether; just as it is not failing in obedience when we neglect to observe some of its conditions, the substance of virtues and not their accidents being incumbent upon us. For even though we may obey with repugnance, and almost as if forced by the obligation of our state, our obedience remains intact by virtue of our first resolution; but its value and merit are unboundedly

“Because,” he answered, “If I were to accost him, perhaps he would not speak so nicely as I have imagined he would do; or he might do something awkward or ungracious, and then I could no longer love him.” You see that when our affections depend on so many little things they are subject to a thousand disorders. We must pay no heed at all to dislikes or difficulties, provided that in the higher region of the soul we cling always to our sovereign object. (*Addition.*)

\* Matt. xxvi. 38, 39; Mark xiv. 34, 36.

great when it is yielded with the conditions which I have mentioned, however small the thing, when done with such obedience as this it is of very great worth.

Obedience is so excellent a virtue that Our Lord condescended to direct the whole course of His life on earth by it. He tells us often that He came *not to do His own will, but the will of His Father*; \* and the Apostle says that He *made Himself obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*.† He was pleased to add to the infinite merit of His perfect charity the infinite merit of a perfect obedience. Obedience takes precedence of charity, because obedience comes under justice, as again it is better to pay our debts than to give alms; hence it is better to obey than to perform an act of charity of our own choice (4).

The second point of obedience is rather humility than obedience; for it is a certain flexibility of our will in following that of others, and it is a most attractive virtue, which makes us prompt to turn our own will in any direction, and disposes us to do at all times the will of God. [For example, if when I am going in one direction I meet a sister who tells me to go in another, the will of God for

(4) The spiritual life of this house ought to be of the noblest kind, quite independent of all sorts of softness, relish, and sensible consolations. We must not desire to be rid of our difficulties, of our natural dislikes and antipathies, for they do us no harm whatever. On the contrary, when we are commanded to do something at which our whole nature rebels, and yet we do it by the strength of an intelligent love, there is no doubt that such an action is of infinitely greater merit than if we had done it without repugnance. (*Addition.*)

\* St. John iv. 34, v. 30, vi. 38; Heb. x. 9.

† Philip. ii. 8.

me is that I should do what she wishes rather than what I wish ; but if I oppose my opinion to hers, the will of God for her is that she should give way to me, and thus it is in all indifferent matters. If, however, it should happen that in this initial difference of opinion both would wish to give way, there must be no lingering over the discussion ; it must quickly be decided which is the better and more reasonable thing to choose, and do it simply. Discretion must come in, for it would not be right to give up something of necessity in favour of some matter of indifference. If I was going to perform some act of great mortification, and a sister came to desire me not to do it, or to do some other, I would if possible put off to another time my first plan, so as to do her will, and then later on I would carry out my own. If, however, I could neither omit nor defer it, and if what she desired of me were not necessary, I would do what I had first designed, and then, if I could, I would find the means of carrying out the sister's wishes.

Supposing, however, that a sister should ask us to do something, and that we, being taken by surprise, should show some repugnance to doing it, the sister must not take umbrage, nor even seem to notice it ; neither must she beg us not to do what she had asked, for it is not in our power to prevent our colour, our eyes, our behaviour, from betraying the struggle going on within us, even while our reason consents to do the thing ; for these are messengers who come unsummoned, and who, even when we bid them depart, seldom do anything of the sort. Why, then, should this sister

be unwilling to let me do what she had asked, simply because I show some repugnance to doing it? She ought to be glad that I should gain this profit for my soul. You may say: "Because she fears to have vexed you." No; it is self-love, unwilling that I should entertain the smallest thought that she is troublesome. Indeed, it is just that thought that I have, though I do not consent to it. If, however, to the signs of my repugnance, I add words showing plainly that I have no wish to do what this sister asks, she may and should tell me gently not to do it, supposing that we are on an equality. Those, however, who are in authority must remain firm and make their inferiors yield. But even if a sister may have absolutely refused to do a thing for me, or however much repugnance she may have shown, I must not hesitate to ask her services on another occasion, nor must I even be disedified by her imperfection; for at present I have to bear with her, and very soon she will have to bear with me—just now she dislikes doing the thing, and another time she will do it willingly. If, however, I knew by experience that hers was a disposition as yet incapable of acting in this manner, I would wait a while until she was more enlightened.

We must all of us make allowance for one another's faults, and must not be at all put out when we come across them. If for a time we ourselves go on quietly without falling into any, another time will come when we shall find ourselves failing continually, and committing considerable imperfections; by which, however, we must

profit, on account of the humiliation which they will bring upon us. We must suffer with patience the delay in our perfection, while ever cheerfully doing what we can for our advancement therein.

Oh, how happy are those who, if made to wait all their lives, never grow weary of waiting! (5) I say this for the sake of many who, having the desire to attain perfection by acquiring virtues, would like to have them at once, as if perfection consisted in desiring it. It would indeed be a fine thing if we could become humble as soon as we desired it, and without any more trouble. We must accustom ourselves to seek the attainment of our perfection by the usual paths, in tranquillity of heart, doing all in our power to acquire virtues, by our fidelity in practising each of them according to our condition and vocation; but we must be content to wait as regards sooner or later attaining the result of our aims, leaving that to divine Providence, which will not fail to console us at the appointed time, and even if that should not be till the hour of our death, we ought to be satisfied, so long as we fulfil our duty by ever doing all that depends on us, all

(5) As to temptations, where there is danger of sin we may ask God to deliver us from them, after the example of St. Paul, who, being troubled by *the sting of the flesh*, thrice besought God to deliver him therefrom, and would have continued his prayer had Our Lord not answered him. As soon, however, as Our Lord said: *My grace is sufficient for thee, for power is made perfect in infirmity*, he remained in peace amid this war. In this manner is God glorified in our temptations when, notwithstanding their number and variety, we offend Him not; for His grace and power must be very great to keep us up amidst infirmities so many and so immense, and to give us the strength to become perfect. So long as we remain in our imperfections, God will not be glorified by them.

that is in our power. We shall always have quite soon enough what we desire, whenever we have it, and whenever it pleases God to give it to us. This waiting and resignation are very necessary, for the want of them disturbs the soul greatly. We must be contented to know that we are doing our duty through those who are over us, not seeking for any satisfaction or knowledge of things in particular, but walking blindfold, as it were, in firm reliance on the Providence of God, in the midst of all the desolation, fears, gloom, and other crosses which it may please Him to send us. Give yourself up, then, my dear daughter, wholly, wholly to His guidance, without any reserve or exception whatever, and leave Him to act, confiding all the care of body and soul to His goodness, remaining always resigned, composed, and resting upon God, under the guidance of Superiors, without any care but to obey.

Now, the means of acquiring this ready yielding to the will of others, is to make very often in our prayer acts of indifference, and then to put them in practice when the occasion presents itself. For it is not enough to renounce ourselves before God; that is no great matter, seeing that it is only done in imagination; but when it has to be done actually, and when having just given ourselves wholly to God, we come in contact with a fellow-creature who orders us about, that is quite a different thing, and it is then that we must show our courage.

This gentleness and yielding to the will of our neighbour is a virtue of great price; it is the symbol of the prayer of union. For as that form of prayer is nothing but the renouncing of ourselves in God,

so, when the soul says with truth: "I have no longer any will but Thine, Lord!" she becomes entirely united to God. In like manner, the renunciation of our own will to do our neighbour's is true union with that neighbour; in all things acting for the love of God.

It often happens that a person, mean and feeble both in body and mind, and who only attempts small things, will do them with so much charity that they far surpass the merit of great and exalted actions, which, generally speaking, are done with less charity, on account of the thought and attention which have to be given to their various circumstances. If, however, a great work is done with as much charity as the small one, doubtless the doer of it will obtain much greater merit and reward. In a word, it is charity which gives price and value to all our works, so that all the good which we do must be done for the love of God, and the evil which we avoid must be avoided for the love of God. The good actions which we do, but not by any special command, and which cannot therefore derive any merit from obedience, must acquire that merit through charity, although we can really do them all from obedience (6). In short, we must be generous and depend only upon God; for the characteristic of the daughters of the Visitation is to regard in all things the will of God, and to follow it.

You asked me before whether you might say special private prayers. I reply that as regards those little prayers which you sometimes have a devotion to say, there can be no harm in doing so,

(6) Because God has commanded all the virtues. (*Addition.*)

provided that you do not make too great a point of saying them, so that any omission of them excites scruples in your mind; or provided, again, that you do not make a resolution to say some particular prayer which you fancy, every day, or for a whole year or other fixed time, for that must not be done. If, however, during the time of silence, we should from devotion wish to say an *Ave Maris Stella*, or a *Veni Creator Spiritus*, or the like, there is no reason why we should not say it, nor any doubt about its being a good thing to do; but we must take great care that it is done without prejudice to something more important. For instance, being in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, if you felt a devotion to say three *Paters* in honour of the Blessed Trinity, and you were suddenly called away to do something else, you must rise instantly and go to do this action in honour of the Blessed Trinity, instead of saying your three *Paters* (7).

You must not, then, prescribe for yourself the making a certain number of genuflections, ejaculatory prayers, or similar practices every day, or during any particular time, without telling the Superior, although you must be very faithful in your practice of raising your heart to God, and of making ejaculations. And even if you think it is the Holy Ghost Who inspires you to practise these little devotions, He will be pleased that you ask leave to practise them, and even that you omit them if permission

(7) These things are sometimes useful to certain characters; others have no need of them. There are all sorts of herbs in a garden, and although there may be one there more excellent than all the others, it does not mean that we are to put no other into the pot. (*Addition.*)



is denied you, because nothing is so pleasing to Him as religious obedience. Neither can you promise persons to say a certain number of prayers for them. If you are asked to do it, you must reply that you will ask permission; but if they simply recommend themselves to your prayers, you may answer that you will certainly pray for them, and at the very time raise your mind to God in favour of the person. It is the same with regard to Holy Communion, for you cannot receive Communion for any one without permission. This does not mean that, being about to receive Our Lord, if you should suddenly remember the necessities of some relative, or the common wants of the people, you may not recommend them to God, entreating Him to have compassion on them. But if you wish to communicate specially for some particular thing, you must ask leave, unless it be for your own necessities, such as to obtain strength against some temptation, or to ask some virtue of Our Lord. Blessed be His name!

## CONFERENCE XI

### ON THE SAME SUBJECT OF OBEDIENCE.

#### *The Virtue of Obedience (I)*

THERE are three sorts of pious obedience. The first is that which is common to all Christians—the obedience due to God and to Holy Church in the observance of their commandments. The second is religious obedience, which is of a far higher value than the other, because it not only concerns itself with the Commandments of God, but also with the observance of His Counsels. There is a third kind of obedience, which is of what I wish to speak, as being the most perfect. This is called a loving obedience, and it is of this that Our Lord gave us an example throughout the whole course of His life on earth.

The Fathers ascribe to this kind of obedience many properties and qualities, but from among them all I shall only select three. The first is that, as they say, it is blind; the second, that it is prompt; and the third, that it is persevering. Blind obedience has also three properties or qualities. In the first place, it never regards the

(I) Given at the special request of St. Jane F. de Chantal.  
(*Translator's note.*)

countenance of Superiors, but only their authority. Secondly, it never desires to inquire into the reasons or motives of a Superior, in ordering this or that to be done; being quite content to know that he has given the commands. And thirdly, it never inquires how it may carry out what is ordered, feeling certain that God, Who inspired the command, will assuredly afford the power necessary to fulfil it. Therefore, instead of asking how a thing is to be done, blind obedience sets to work to do it.

Religious obedience, then, which ought to be blind, lovingly undertakes to do all that is commanded it with simplicity, and without ever considering whether the command is good or bad, provided that the person who orders has authority to order, and that the command serves to unite our mind to God. For without that the truly obedient soul never does anything. Many have been greatly mistaken as to this condition of obedience, believing that it consisted in doing at random whatever should be commanded, even were it contrary to the Commandments of God and of Holy Church. In this they have been greatly mistaken, imagining a folly to lurk in this quality of blindness which is not there at all. In all that relates to the Commandments of God, just as Superiors have no power whatever to give any contrary command, so in such a case inferiors have no obligation to obey—indeed, if they did so they would sin.

Now, I am well aware that many have done things contrary to the Commandments of God, impelled by this obedience, which is not content

with obeying the command of God and Superiors, but must go farther, and obey even their counsels and inclinations. Many have rushed to death, moved to do so by a special inspiration of God, so strong that it could not be resisted; otherwise they would have sinned grievously. It is related in the Book of Machabees that one named Razias, urged on by an ardent zeal for the glory of God, went and exposed himself to blows by which he knew that he must be wounded and killed. Feeling himself wounded in the chest, he drew all his entrails out through the wound, and threw them into the air in the presence of his enemies. St. Apollonia threw herself into the fire prepared by the impious enemies of God and of the Christians, to burn her to death. St. Ambrose\* also tells us of three maidens who, to save their honour, threw themselves into a river and were drowned. They, however, had also other reasons for doing this, which it would take too much time to detail here. There have been many others who have thus rushed to death, as did he who threw himself into a flaming furnace. But all these examples ought to be admired, not imitated, for you know well enough that we must never be so blind as to think that we can please God by infringing His Commandments. Loving obedience presupposes obedience to the Commandments of God.

This obedience is called blind because it obeys all Superiors equally. The ancient Fathers have universally agreed in blaming those who will not

\* De Virginibus, III. c. vii.

submit themselves to obey any who are their inferiors in rank and position. The Fathers question them as follows: When you obeyed your Superiors, why did you do so? Was it for the love of God? Certainly not. It could not be for that motive, for is not the present Superior in God's place in our regard exactly as the other was? Doubtless, for he is God's vicar, and God commands us by his lips, and makes us understand His will by the orders which he gives us, just as He did by the lips of the other Superior. Then you obey your Superiors because you feel drawn towards them and have respect for their persons. Alas! you do no more than people in the world. They do exactly the same; and not only do they obey the commands of those they love, but they would not consider they had sufficient love if they did not carry out as closely as possible the wishes and inclinations of the person they loved. Just so the truly obedient Religious acts in regard to his Superiors as to God Himself. The pagans, corrupt as they were, have given us an example of this, for the devil spoke to them through various sorts of idols. Some were statues of men, others figures of rats, dogs, lions, serpents, and the like; and these poor creatures put their trust equally in all, obeying the image of a dog as they obeyed that of a man, that of a rat as that of a lion, without any difference. Why was that? Because they saw their gods in all these various images. St. Peter (I) commands us to obey our Superiors,

(I) It was through a printer's error that the text of 1629 bears here the word *Paul* instead of *Peter*.

even if they should be *froward*\* (1). Our Lord, Our Lady, and St. Joseph give us a most excellent lesson of this kind of obedience, in the journey they took from Nazareth to Bethlehem.† For Cæsar having decreed that all his subjects should go to their birthplace to be enrolled, they cheerfully went there to fulfil this obedience, although Cæsar was a pagan and an idolater; Our Lord wishing to show by this that we ought never to regard the person of those who command, provided that they have authority to do so.

Let us pass on now to the second property of blind obedience. After it has reached the point of disregarding the person of those who command, and submitting indifferently to any sort of Superior, it goes beyond that, and arrives at the second point. This is to obey without considering the intention or the end for which the order is given, content to know that it *is* given, without wasting time in discussing whether the order is good or bad, or whether we are right or not in doing what we are

(1) St. Paul commands us to obey our Superiors, saying: "Obey your Superiors;" "even if they should be froward," adds St. Peter. St. Paul gives us an example of this, for being one day led before the High Priest, one of the servants struck him insolently on the cheek, and the great Apostle, seeing himself struck without reason, by his apostolic authority gave him his malediction, saying: *God shall strike thee, thou whited wall.* But afterwards, when he was told that the man who had struck him had been authorised to do so by the High Priest, he repented, and showed his displeasure with himself by saying: *I knew not he was the High Priest,* for all we who are Christians are taught that we must honour those who have any superiority over us.

(Addition.)

\* 1 Peter ii. 18.

† Luke ii. 1, 5.

commanded to do. Abraham is greatly to be admired for the way in which he practised this obedience. God calls him, saying to him: Abraham, *go forth out of thy country and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee.*\* Abraham goes at once, without a word. Ah! might he not have said: "Lord, Thou commandest me to quit the city; tell me, then, I pray Thee, from which quarter I shall go forth"? He said not a word, but went whither the Spirit led him, without considering at all whether he was going in the right or the wrong direction; without seeking to know why and wherefore God had given him this command in words so brief that He had not even indicated to him what road he was to take. Ah! truly obedient persons do not ask such questions; they simply apply themselves to their work, with no desire but to obey. It seems as if Our Lord Himself wished to show, when He appeared to St. Paul to convert him, how pleasing this sort of obedience is. Having called him by his name, he struck him to the ground, blinded. Observe that in order to make him His disciple, He caused him to fall, that He might humble him and bring him into subjection to Himself; then suddenly He blinded him, and commanded him to go into the city to find Ananias and do all that he should command him to do.† But why did not Our Lord Himself tell him what he was to do, without sending him on farther, seeing that He had condescended to speak to him Himself to convert him? St. Paul did all that he was

\* Gen. xii. 1.

† Acts ix. 7.

commanded to do. It would have cost Our Lord nothing to say with His own lips what Ananias was made to say, but He wished us to know from this example how much He loves blind obedience, since it appears that he only blinded St. Paul in order to make him truly obedient.

When Our Lord willed to give sight to the man who was born blind, He *made clay* and *put it on his eyes*, commanding him to go and wash *in the fountain of Siloe*.<sup>\*</sup> This poor blind man might well have been amazed at the means used by Our Lord to cure him, and might have said: "Alas! what dost Thou do to me? If I were not already blind, this would be enough to destroy my sight." But he made no such reflections; he simply obeyed. In this way the truly obedient believe that they can do all that they may be commanded to do, because they hold that all commandments come from God, or are given by His inspiration, and cannot be impossible, by reason of the authority of Him who commands.

Naaman the Syrian † did not behave in this manner, because he thought that such obedience would only bring him harm. Being a leper, he went in search of Eliseus that he might be cured by him, because all the remedies he had hitherto tried had failed to restore his health. Knowing, therefore, that Eliseus had worked great wonders, he journeyed to his house, and sent in a messenger begging the Prophet to heal him. Eliseus, however, did not stir from his chamber, but sent the servant

\* John ix. 6, 7.

† IV. Reg. v. 9-14.



to tell him that if he would go and *wash seven times in the Jordan* he would be healed. Naaman, on hearing this answer, was very angry, and said: "Are not the waters of our own rivers as good as those of the Jordan?" and he would not hear of obeying the command. His servants, however, remonstrated with him, telling him that he ought to do what the Prophet enjoined, seeing that it was so easy. At last, yielding to their persuasions, he did wash seven times in the Jordan, and was cured. Do you see to what danger he exposed himself of never recovering his health, by making so many difficulties about what he was told to do?

The third property of blind obedience is that it neither considers nor inquires by what means it can do what is commanded. It knows that the path it must pursue is the Rule of the Order, and the commands of Superiors; and it takes this path in simplicity of heart, without cavilling or questioning whether it would be better to do this or that. Provided that the Religious obeys, all else is indifferent, for he knows that that is sufficient to make him pleasing to God, for whose love he obeys unconditionally.

The second quality of loving obedience is that it is prompt. Now, promptitude in obedience has always been recommended to Religious, as a necessary part of true obedience and of perfect observance of vows made to God. It was the note fixed upon by Abraham's servant\* for knowing the maiden destined by God to be the bride of his master's son. He said to himself: "The maiden of whom I shall

\* Gen. xxiv. 14-20.

ask a draught of water, and who shall reply, 'I will not only give to you to drink, but I will also draw water for your camels,' will be the one who is worthy to be the bride of my master's son." And while these thoughts were passing through his mind he saw afar off the beautiful Rebecca (2). The servant, seeing her so gracious and lovely as she stood by the well drawing water for her flock, put his question, and the maiden answered as he had expected. "Yes," she said, "and not only for you but also for your camels." Pray observe how prompt and gracious she was; she spared herself no trouble, but was most lavish of it, for no small amount of water must have been needed to give drink to so many camels as the envoy had with him. Certainly, obedience ungraciously rendered is not at all pleasing. There are some who obey, indeed, but so grudgingly and with so ill a grace that the merit of the virtue is greatly diminished. Charity and obedience are so closely united that they cannot possibly be separated. Love makes us obey promptly (3), for, however difficult the thing commanded may be, those who possess loving obedience undertake it lovingly. Obedience being a principal part of humility, which loves submission above all things, it follows that those who obey love the command given, and so as soon as they are aware of it, whether it be to their taste or not, they embrace it, caress it, and cherish it tenderly.

(2) *the beautiful*—maiden Rebecca, who was a shepherdess, and afterwards a princess; but in those days princes and princesses all did some work. (*Addition.*)

(3) *promptly*—and graciously. (*Addition.*)

I must tell you of an example of this prompt obedience to be met with in the Life of St. Pachomius.\* Among the monks of St. Pachomius there was one named Jonas, a man of great virtue and holiness, who had the care of the garden, in which was a fig-tree bearing very fine figs. Now, this fig-tree was a source of temptation to the young monks; every time they passed it, they stopped and looked for a while at the figs. St. Pachomius, having noticed this one day whilst in the garden, raised his eyes to the fig-tree, and saw the devil at the top of it, looking down on the figs, as the monks were looking up to them. This great Saint, who was no less anxious to train his monks in entire mortification of the senses, than in interior mortification of the passions and inclinations, called Jonas and commanded him to cut down the fig-tree without fail the following day. To this command Jonas replied: "Ah! Father, we must surely put up with these young men a little; they need some sort of recreation. It is not for myself that I want to save the tree!" To which the Father replied: "Well, my brother, you are not willing to obey promptly and with simplicity, but what will you say if the tree prove more obedient than you?" And so it turned out; the next day the tree was found withered up, and it never bore fruit again. Certainly poor Jonas spoke the truth when he said that it was not for his own sake that he wished to save the fig-tree, for it had been a matter of remark that, all the seventy-five years during which he had been both monk and gardener, he had never

\* Surius, ad diem 14 Maii.

tasted any of the fruit in his garden, though he was very liberal of it as regarded the brethren. He learned now, however, how excellent promptitude is in obedience. Our Lord throughout His whole life on earth afforded constant examples of this promptitude in obedience. None could ever be so yielding and so prompt in giving way to the will of others as He was. Following His example, we too must learn to be most prompt to obey, for a loving heart is not content with doing what is ordered, or what seems to be desired, but must do it promptly. It cannot too quickly accomplish what is commanded, that it may be free to receive some fresh order. David only expressed a simple wish to drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, and instantly three horsemen galloped off and penetrated through the ranks of the enemy in search of the water.\* They were exceedingly prompt in executing the desire of the king. Many great saints have proved themselves equally prompt in trying to carry out what seemed to them the wishes and desires of the King of Kings, Our Lord Himself. What command, I pray you, did Our Lord ever give which obliged St. Catherine of Siena to suck the poisonous matter from the wound of the poor sick woman whom she was tending? or St. Louis, King of France, to partake of the soup left by the lepers to encourage them to eat? Certainly these saints were not obliged to do what they did; but knowing that Our Lord loved, and gave proofs of His love for self-humiliation, they, thinking to please Him, did these things with the greatest love, although

\* II. Reg. xxiii. 15, 16.

they were most repugnant to their feelings. We are bound to succour our neighbour when he is in extreme necessity; nevertheless, because almsgiving is a Counsel of Our Lord, many willingly give alms as far as their means will permit. Now, upon this obedience to Counsels is grafted loving obedience, which makes us undertake to follow out most minutely and exactly all the desires and intentions of God and of our Superiors.

But here I must warn you of a mistake into which you may fall; for if those who wish to practise this virtue exactly, were always keeping their minds on the strain to find out the desires and inclinations of their Superiors or of God, they would infallibly lose their time. For example, while I am seeking to find out what is God's desire, I am not employed in keeping myself close to Him in peace and in calm repose, which is certainly His present desire, since He has set me nothing else to do. So, those who, wishing to please Our Lord by relieving the poor, would go from city to city in search of them, whilst they are in one city, will certainly neglect the wants of those who are in another. In this matter, in simplicity of heart, we must set to work to give alms when we meet with the occasion, without wasting our time by wandering through the streets from house to house, trying to find out if there is any unknown poor person. In the same way, when I see that the Superior wants me to do something or other, I must be ready to do it at once, without making any minute investigations as to whether he is likely to prefer my doing

something else. That would destroy peace and tranquillity of heart, which is the chief fruit of loving obedience.

The third quality of obedience is perseverance. Now, this especially Our Lord has taught us. St. Paul affirms this in the words: \* *Becoming obedient unto death*; and to raise this obedience even higher, he adds—*even to the death of the cross*. In these words, *even to death*, is included the fact that He had been obedient throughout the whole course of His life (4). During this there are seen nothing but instances of obedience, paid by Him to His parents or to others; yes, even to the wicked and profane. And as He began by practising this virtue, so He finished the course of this mortal life by one supreme act of perfect obedience.

The good monk Jonas provides us with two lessons on the subject of perseverance, for although he did not obey the command which St. Pachomius gave him promptly, yet he was a monk of great perfection. From the time of his entering Religion until his death, he continued his work as gardener without any interruption—that is, during the whole seventy-five years of his life in the monastery. The other exercise in which he persevered all his life, as I have before told you, was making mats

(4) Even from the moment of His Conception, when He went wherever Our Lady carried Him, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It seems that He was even more obedient in His death than at the beginning of His life, for when He was on the lap of His Blessed Mother, He moved His little hands and feet, trying to walk, but in His death He stirred neither hand nor foot, dying motionless through obedience.

\* Phil. ii. 8.

of rushes interwoven with palm-leaves, and he was busy with this work at the very moment of his death. It is a very great virtue to persevere for so long a time in one employment, for to do a thing cheerfully, which we are only commanded to do once, costs nothing; but when our Superior says to us: "You will do that always, and all through your life," there lies the virtue and there also the difficulty. This, then, is what I had to say concerning obedience; but I may also add that it is of such great price that it is the companion of charity. These two virtues give value to all others, so that without them all others are absolutely worthless. If you have not these two virtues, you have none; if you have them, you have all the rest in sufficient abundance.

But passing on and leaving on one side the general obedience to the Commandments of God, and speaking of religious obedience, I say that if Religious do not obey they cannot have any virtue at all, because it is obedience especially which makes them Religious, that being the proper and peculiar virtue of Religion. Even if you are ready and eager to suffer martyrdom, that is nothing if you have not obedience. We read in the Life of St. Pachomius that one of his monks, having persevered all through his novitiate in the most exemplary humility and submission (5), came one day to St. Pachomius and told him in a transport of fervour that he had a longing desire for martyr-

(5) It is well known that novices in the year of their novitiate do wonders! Every one observes how mortified they are, with their eyes almost constantly fixed on the ground. . . .

dom. He said that he could never rest satisfied till the opportunity for embracing it came to him, and he humbly entreated the Saint to pray to God for him that his desire might be fulfilled. The holy Father strove to moderate this transport, but the more he said, the more hotly did the young monk urge his petition. The Saint addressed him, therefore, in these words: "My son, it is far better to live in obedience, and to die daily to self by mortifying our own desires, than to suffer martyrdom in imagination. He who mortifies himself, dies a martyr's death as far as need be; it is a far greater martyrdom to persevere in obedience all through our life, than to die in a moment by a stroke of the sword. Live in peace, my son, calm your mind, and do not dwell on this desire." The monk, who felt assured that this desire was inspired by the Holy Ghost, abated nothing of his first ardour, but continued to urge the Father to pray for the fulfilment of his desire. In a short time news arrived which cheered him greatly. A certain Saracen, captain of a band of robbers, had come to a mountain adjoining the monastery. St. Pachomius, hearing of this, called the monk to him, saying: "Off with you, my son! The hour which you so desired is come. Go out at once to the mountain and cut wood." The monk, almost beside himself with joy, and little imagining what he was really going to do, went forth, singing the praises of God, and thanking Him for having deigned to give him this opportunity of dying for His love. The robbers, seeing him, made straight for him, laid hands on him, and threatened him. For



a short time he was most valiant. "You are a dead man!" they cried. "I desire nothing better than to die for God," was his reply, with other words to that effect. The Saracens then dragged him to the place where their idol was, to make him adore it. When they found that he persisted in refusing to do this, they prepared to kill him. Alas! this poor monk, so valiant in imagination, when he saw the sword at his throat cried out: "I entreat you, do not kill me. I will do all that you desire. Take pity on me! I am still young; it would be a grievous thing to cut short my life so early." Finally, he adored their idol; and then these bad men, heaping scorn and derision upon him, beat him soundly and let him return to his monastery. Arriving there more dead than alive, pale and overwhelmed with grief and shame, he was met by St. Pachomius, who said to him: "Well, my son, what is the matter? why are you so dejected?" Then the poor monk, full of confusion and distress, because he was a proud man, and unable to bear the thought of his terrible sin, threw himself on his knees confessing his fault. The Father, desiring the brothers to pray for him, and making him ask pardon of God, restored him to his former state, and then gave him this good advice: "My son, remember that it is better to limit your desires to living according to the laws of the Community, and to wish for nothing but fidelity in the observance of the Rules, than to undertake, or be anxious to undertake, anything not included in them, and to foster great desires to do imaginary marvels; these only serve to inflate our hearts with pride, and to

make us hold others in little esteem, fancying ourselves far superior to them. Ah, how much better it is for us to live under the shelter of holy obedience, than to withdraw ourselves from that safe shelter, seeking something which seems to us more perfect! If you had only been satisfied, as I told you, with mortifying yourself thoroughly in life, instead of wishing for nothing less than death, you would not have fallen as you have done. But courage! remember henceforward that you must live in submission; and be assured that God has forgiven you." The young monk obeyed the counsel of the Saint, and behaved himself with great humility all through his life.

I even go so far as to say that obedience is not of less merit than charity. For to give *a cup of water* from charity merits heaven, Our Lord Himself says so;\* do as much from obedience, you will gain the same reward. The least little thing done from obedience is very pleasing to God. Eat from obedience, and your eating is more pleasing to God than the fasts of anchorites, supposing that they fast without obedience; rest from obedience, and your repose is more meritorious and more pleasing to God than voluntary labour (6). "But,"

(6) Ah, how many examples there are in the lives of the holy Fathers, of the exact practice of obedience in things indifferent! As, for instance, in the case of that friar whom St. Francis desired to plant the cabbages root upmost; which the good friar did instantly, and behold! the cabbages grew as well as those which were planted in the proper way, so greatly does Our Lord favour obedience. Certainly, in these matters of little consequence, it would be a very great imperfection to resist

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\* Matt. x. ult.; Mark ix. 40.

you say, "what shall I gain by practising so exactly this loving obedience, with all its above-mentioned qualities of blindness, promptitude, and perseverance?" Oh, my dear daughters, they who practise this obedience will enjoy a continual tranquillity of soul, and that most holy peace of Our Lord *which surpasseth all understanding*; they will have no need to give an account of their actions, since all will have been done from obedience, both to the Rules and to Superiors. What greater happiness can we desire? Certainly, I may observe in passing, the truly obedient love their Rules, they honour and esteem them as the only path by which they can arrive at the union of the mind with God. From that path they never turn aside, nor from the observance of those things which are laid down in the form of direction, any more than from those which are commanded. The truly obedient soul will live like a child in the arms of a beloved mother, undisturbed whatever may happen to it; content to be carried on the right arm or on the left. The truly obedient soul cares not what command is given to her; so long as it is a command, and so long as she rests in the arms of obedience—I mean in the practice of obedience—it is enough, and she is satisfied. To such a soul, on

doing them when they are commanded, for their sole use is to keep us in humility. Obedience, as I have already said, being a principal ingredient of humility, loves and ardently desires to be commanded to do the most abject things; although, indeed, nothing is esteemed small or of slight importance by the truly obedient, because they regard everything as a means of uniting themselves to God and to Our Lord, Who so loved obedience that, as St. Bernard says, He chose rather to die than to fail in it. (*Addition.*)

the part of God, I can promise paradise for all eternity; as also during the course of this mortal life, true and certain peace—of this we must not doubt. You ask now if you are bound, under penalty of sin, to do all that Superiors tell you to do—as, for instance, when you give an account of yourself, whether you should take as a command all that the Superior suggests for your improvement (7). Oh no, my daughter, neither Superiors

(7) . . . Oh no, my dear daughter, there would be little or no sin if you forgot sometimes, unless the thing were very important, for in that case you would be obliged to use great attention to keep it in mind; likewise, if it were something necessary for the good order of the house. . . . To fail occasionally from forgetfulness is not wrong; but to do so from carelessness, bad habit, or otherwise, there would be the sin.

The commandments of God and of holy Church are not so rigorous as is thought; they do not condemn souls to hell so much as is believed. The law of God is an absolute law of love and most sweet, as David assures us. Involuntary distractions do not render our prayers or our Office less pleasing to God, and it is just the same with what you say about sleeping. Just as we are not obliged to repeat our Office because we were distracted while saying it, so in the same way there is no obligation whatever to repeat it because we fell asleep for a little while when we were saying it, provided that it was not during a considerable part of the Office, and that we tried our best to keep ourselves awake. Of course, if we were careless about that, there would be matter for confession. "I began to say my Office wide awake, and with the intention of saying it as I ought to do; during the Office a little drowsiness came over me; nevertheless, I said my alternate verse after a fashion, and that through one or two Psalms. What would you do in that case?" Well, you certainly ought not to confess this, because there is no remedy that you could apply, neither can you avoid distractions which will inevitably arise.

You tell me next that you do not submit yourself to the exact observance of that article of the Rule which desires you to admonish your sisters in charity of their faults, under the pretext of its being a matter of little importance, but in reality because you dislike doing it. To that, my dear daughter, I reply that though this Rule may not be binding upon you

nor confessors intend to bind their inferiors by the commands which they give. If they intend to do this, they use the word of command "under pain of disobedience," and then inferiors are bound under pain of sin to obey, however light the command may be, and however small the matter, but not otherwise. For they give advice in three ways—in the form of a command, of a counsel, and of simple direction. In the Constitutions and Rules it is just the same. There are articles which say, the sisters may do such a thing; and others which say, they shall do; or, again, they will beware of doing. Some of these are counsels, some are commands. Those who are unwilling to submit to counsels and to direction offend against loving obedience (8), and

under pain of sin, yet the love which you ought to feel for your Rules obliges you to observe it. Certainly, love of the Rules is most important; a hundred times a day every sister should renew this love in her heart, and whatever point in them is most repugnant to us, that point, I say, we should practise with the greatest fidelity, so as to show our love to Our Lord. I say this also with regard to our antipathies, for if it should happen that one sister has a slight antipathy to another, in order to overcome it she must be especially tender towards her, and try to be often with her, so as to speak to her and render her little services.

Let us return to our subject and say that we must not, by vain scruples, condemn souls. . . . [Return to text, "Neither Superiors," &c.] (Additions.)

(8) *loving*. Undoubtedly, you are not bound to admonish the sisters of their faults, if it is not your business to do so, because the Rules make use of the expression, *they may*; but, my dear daughter, there is a command of God bidding us correct one another, which is of still greater authority than the Rule. It is true that this refers to sin, for it would be too troublesome to be always admonishing one another concerning those slight imperfections to which, through our frailty, we are all of us subject. But, to return to what we were saying, would it not, I ask, show a great want of courage, and very little love for God,

it would be a proof of cowardice of heart, and want of love for God, to be willing to do only just what is commanded and nothing more. And although they who do not submit themselves to direction do not sin against the obedience to which their vows bind them (which only relates to commands and counsels), still they offend against that loving obedience to which all the daughters of the Visitation ought to aspire.

You ask me if, when a new Superior is given to you, you may not think that she is not so capable as her predecessor, or so well informed as to the path along which she should lead you. Of course you may feel this; we cannot help the thought occurring to us, but we must not dwell

if we were only willing to do what was commanded us and nothing more? It is true that he who would keep the commandments of God, but would do nothing else, would assuredly not be damned; but it would show that it was not for God, or for the love of God, that he so obeyed, but simply in order that he might escape condemnation. It is as if a man boasted that he was not a thief. We should reply: "Well, if you are not a thief you will not be hanged; that is your reward." You obey the commandments of God which are made for you; well, you will not be turned out of the monastery; but, at the same time, you will not be looked upon as a faithful servant of God, but as a mercenary, if you do nothing more. The servant who will render no service to his master but that which he was engaged to do, will be considered as a surly, disobliging fellow. "Very well," the master will say, if he does not dismiss him from his household, "you may stop short at the service for which I actually engaged you, but I shall also stop short at the wages which I promised you, and you will have nothing more."

You say that you are willing to do what is advised, and even what is prescribed to you in the way of direction, but that you wish to know whether, if you should fail in this sometimes, you are as much bound to confess it as if you had failed in the keeping of a commandment. Certainly not. When a man in his confession tells me that he gambles, and that when doing so he

upon it—that is the point. For if Balaam was well instructed by an ass,\* we may with greater reason believe that God, Who gave us this Superior, will enable her to teach us according to His will, though it may not be according to our own. Our Lord has promised that the truly obedient shall never be lost; nor those, assuredly, who follow without distinction the will and direction of the Superiors whom God shall establish over them. Even if Superiors should be ignorant, and because of their ignorance should lead their inferiors by rugged and dangerous paths, the inferiors, submitting themselves to all that is not manifestly sin, nor against the Commandments of God and of His holy Church, can never, I assure you, err. The truly *obedient man*, says Holy Scripture,† *shall speak of victory*; that is to say, he will come out the conqueror in all the difficulties into which he

generally swears because he is liable to get into a passion, I at once command him in the name of God to give up gambling, and this command which I give him he is bound to obey. But when I ask him if he always swears when he gambles, and he replies: “No, not generally;” then I say to him: “My son, I advise you not to gamble any more, because it is an idle and useless amusement.” This suggestion he is not bound to follow under pain of sin; nor when I say to him by way of direction: “My child, you ought to abstain from gambling.” Since I am not obliged to forbid his gambling, if it only very rarely makes him fly into a passion or swear, he is not at all obliged to abstain from it. So is it also when Superiors say something to us which they do not command, although the perfection to which we aspire, ought to make us esteem and embrace whatever may serve to unite us more closely to the divine Majesty, which union ought to be the one only aim of our souls, for which we ought to do all that we do. . . . May God keep us from any lack of courage in embracing the practice of loving obedience such as we have just described!

\* Num. xxii. 28–30.

† Prov. xxi. 28.

may be led by obedience, and with honour from all the roads which he has traversed through obedience, however dangerous.

It would indeed be a pretty sort of obedience which was only yielded to those Superiors whom we liked! If to-day you have a Superior who is highly esteemed, as much for her dignity as for her virtues, you will obey her cheerfully; but to-morrow, if you have one who is not so highly thought of, you will not obey her so cheerfully. You will, indeed, render her a similar obedience, but you will not esteem what she says as highly, nor will you do it with as much satisfaction. Alas! who does not see that you obeyed the first from your own inclination, and not purely for God? For if that were so, you would do with as much pleasure, and would esteem as highly, what was commanded by the one as by the other.

I often say—and it cannot be said too often, because it is so important for you to remember—that all our actions ought to be performed according to the dictates of our higher nature (for so must we live in this house), and never according to those of our senses and lower nature. No doubt I shall have more satisfaction, as far as my lower nature is concerned, in doing what a Superior whom I like commands me to do, than in doing the bidding of another whom I do not like at all. But provided that I obey both equally as regards the higher part of my nature, that is enough, and my obedience is worth more when I have less pleasure in yielding it, because then I prove that



I obey for God, and not for my own pleasure. There is nothing more common in the world than this fashion of obeying those whom people love; but as for the other kind of obedience it is extremely rare, and only practised in Religion.

“But,” you may say, “is it not allowable to disapprove of what this present Superior does, or to say or to think that we wonder why she gives orders which the last one never gave?” Certainly not, my dear daughters, under no circumstances whatever (9). You must approve of all that Superiors say or do, permit or forbid, provided that what they order is not manifestly contrary to the Commandments of God; for then, of course, you must neither obey nor approve. Excepting in that case, however, inferiors must always believe, and compel their private judgment to acknowledge, that Superiors do right and are justified in doing what they do. Otherwise we should be constituting ourselves Superiors, and turning the Superiors into inferiors, by sitting in judgment upon their actions. No, we must bend our shoulders beneath the yoke of holy obedience, believing that both these kinds of Superiors have good reasons for their com-

(9) If Superiors could be made of wax or all cast in one mould according to our fancy, we should then probably be pleased, for we could bend them according to our will, and so doing they would only command us to do what we should like to do. “But may we never disapprove if the new Superior is less ready to grant permission than the other, and may we not say, or at least think, that we wonder at her giving us commands which the other never gave?” Oh no, never. . . .

*(Addition.)*

mands (10), however much they may differ from one another.

“But would it not be allowable for a nun who had lived in Religion for a long time, and had rendered great services to her Order, to relax somewhat in obedience, at least as regards little things?” Oh! what would that be but behaving like a master-pilot, who, having brought his vessel into port, after having laboured long and painfully to save it from the perils of winds and waves, should then wish to break up the ship and throw himself into the sea? Would not such a man be considered most foolish? For, if such were his desire, why did he take such pains to bring his vessel into port? The Religious who has begun well, has not done all, unless he perseveres even to the end. You must not say that novices only need to be so exact. Although, indeed, generally speaking, in all Religious Orders the novices are most exact and mortified, it is not that they are more bound to be so than the professed Religious. Oh no, for they are not as yet bound as to this, although they persevere in obedience that they may attain to the grace of profession. The professed, on the other hand, *are* bound to be exact and mortified in virtue of their vows, and to be Religious it would not be enough to have made them if they did not continue to observe

(10) How often it happens that one Pope forbids a thing which his successor commands to be done! Ought we to say: “Why does he do that?” No, never—on the contrary, we must bow our shoulders beneath the yoke of holy obedience, believing that both have good reason for giving the command.

(Addition.)

them (11). The Religious who think that after their profession they may relax in anything whatever, even after having lived a long time in Religion, are greatly mistaken. Our Lord showed Himself in His death more exact in obedience than even in His infancy, as I have before (12) observed. And now enough has been said about obedience to make us love it.

It now only remains for me to say a few words on a question put to me yesterday evening—namely, whether it is permissible for the sisters to tell one another that they have been mortified on any occasion by the Superior or the Mistress of the novices. My reply is that there are three different ways of telling this. The first is when one sister goes to another exclaiming: “Ah, sister, our Mother has just mortified me so thoroughly!” In this case she is quite glad to have been considered worthy of the mortification, and that the Superior should have told her her fault without sparing her, thus helping her to gain something for her soul. Then, happy herself, she makes her sister happy also, by asking her help to thank God for this mortification. The second way of telling it is by way of relief. The sister finds the mortification or reproof very heavy, and she tries to shift

(11) *observe*—They would be like those who appear very mortified at Easter, because they go to confession, and the next day are as worldly as they were before. (*Addition.*)

(12) *observed*—Because when He was lying on the lap of His Blessed Mother, and she wished to wrap the swaddling-clothes more closely round Him, He moved His infant hands and feet a little; but on the Cross He never stirred, but suffered His executioners to drive in the nails just as they pleased.

(*Addition.*)

the burden a little on to the sister to whom she tells her grievance, thinking that her sympathy will lighten its weight. This way is less excusable than the first, because by complaining an imperfection is always committed. The third way is thoroughly bad; it is telling our grievance in the spirit of murmuring and irritation, and in order to make it appear that the Superior was in the wrong. I am certain this will never, by the grace of God, be done in this house.

As regards the first way, even though there may be no harm in telling the mortification to another sister, it would be far better not to do so, but only to think of rejoicing over it in our hearts with God. As to the second way, we must certainly have nothing to do with it, for by complaining we lose the merit of mortification. Do you know what we should do when we are reprovèd and mortified? We should take the mortification as a token of love, hiding it in our heart, embracing and caressing it as tenderly as possible. It is not at all right or fitting to go to one of the sisters saying: "I have just been speaking to our Mother. I am as dry as I was before. I must attach myself only to God; for me there is no consolation in creatures. I am less consoled than I was before I went to her." The sister to whom this is said ought to answer very gently: "My dear sister, why were you not firmly attached to God, as you say we ought to be, before you went to speak to our Mother? Then you would not feel so discontented because she has not consoled you." But when you say that we must attach ourselves very firmly to God, take care

lest, seeking Him in default of creatures, He refuses to be found; for He wills to be sought before all things, and in spite of all things. Because creatures do not content me, I seek the Creator. Ah no! the Creator deserves that I should quit all else for Him, and He will have it so. When, therefore, we leave the presence of the Superior, dejected and comfortless, without having received one single drop of consolation, we must carry our dryness away with us as a precious balm, as we do with the affections bestowed on us in holy prayer—as a balm, I say, taking great care not to spill this precious liquid, sent to us from Heaven as a priceless gift, so that we may perfume our heart with the privation of that consolation which we expected to receive from the words of the Superior.

But on this subject there is one thing to be observed, namely, that sometimes when we go to speak to the Superior we carry with us a heart so hard and dry, that it is incapable of being softened and refreshed by the waters of consolation. It is not easily touched by what the Superior says; and although she may speak very well with regard to what you need, it does not seem so to you. Another time, when your heart is tender and well disposed, she may only say three or four words, much less useful for your perfection than the others were, and yet they will console you. Why? Because your heart was disposed to receive consolation. You fancy that Superiors have words of consolation always on their lips, and that they can pour them easily into the hearts of any whom they are willing to console; but this is not so. They cannot, any

more than other people, be at all times in the same humour. Happy, indeed, and blessed are those who can keep a serene and undisturbed heart amid all these varieties of moods and circumstances! At one moment we shall be consoled; the next our hearts will be dry—so dry that it will cost us much to utter any words of consolation.

You ask me, again, what I have to tell you as to what method is best for destroying our private judgment. I reply that the best method is faithfully to persevere in cutting off every kind of speech on occasions in which it tries to gain the upper hand, making it understand that it is only a servant. It is only by repeated acts, my dear daughters, that we acquire virtues, although there have been souls to whom God has given them all in a moment (13). When, therefore, you are inclined to decide for yourself whether a thing is ordered rightly or wrongly, curb your private judgment in the matter. When presently you are told to do such and such a thing, do not waste your time in discussing or trying to discover whether it could be better done in some other way; but rather compel your judgment to assent to the belief, that the thing could not possibly be done in a better way than as you have been told to do it. If some exercise is prescribed for you, do not allow your judgment to consider whether it will

(13) *in a moment*—Such as St. Catherine of Genoa, who was converted in a moment when kneeling before her confessor, and so absolutely that another servant of God, living at that time in the same city, wondered how she, St. Catherine, had so quickly amended all her imperfections; while St. Catherine on her side wondered that, after having spent so long a time in trying to amend, she had not yet succeeded. (*Addition.*)

be suitable to you or not; and take care lest, even though you may do the thing just as you have been told to do it, your own private judgment does not fail in obedience—I mean, does not submit itself—because it secretly disapproves of the command. This, generally speaking, is the cause of the repugnance we feel in doing what is desired of us; and for this reason, that when the understanding and the judgment represent to the will that a thing ought not to be, or that other means should be employed for doing it than those we were told to use, the will cannot submit itself—the more so because it always esteems more highly the reasons suggested by its own judgment than by any other, for each individual believes that his own judgment is the best. I have never met with more than two persons (I) who did not think highly of their own judgment; but these two confessed to me that they had no judgment at all, and one of them, when he came once to see me, said: “Sir, I entreat you to tell me something about such and such a thing, for I have no judgment at all to enable me to understand it.” This speech astonished me very much.

We have in our own times a most remarkable instance of the mortification of private judgment. It is that of a great and very famous doctor who wrote a book, entitled *On Dispensations and Commandments* (II), which book falling one day into

(I) One of these persons was Mgr. Camus, Bishop of Belley. (See *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, Part I. chap. xxxiv.)

(II) In all probability the “great doctor” here mentioned was Pierre de Villars, Archbishop of Vienne, who is described almost in the same way in the Preface of *The Treatise on the Love of God*. This Prelate had published a book entitled

the hands of the Pope, he decided that it contained some erroneous propositions. He therefore wrote to this doctor, desiring him to erase them from his book. The doctor, receiving this command, submitted his judgment so implicitly that he would not even explain the matter in order to justify himself, but, on the contrary, believed that he had been in the wrong, and had allowed himself to be led astray by his own judgment. Ascending the pulpit, therefore, he read aloud what the Pope had written to him, then took his book, tore it in pieces, and told his audience that what the Pope had decided in the matter was most wisely decided; that with all his heart he approved the censure and accepted the paternal correction which the Holy Father had deigned to bestow on him, as being most just and mild when addressed to one who had deserved severe punishment; and that he was amazed to think that he could have

*Remonstrances, Warnings, and Exhortations on the principal things which need to be reformed, established, and observed in the Canonical Hours,*" &c. (Jaques Boussin, Lyon, 1608). Now, in the "Conclusion" of this book were formulated on the subject of the "*Commendams*" and "*Exemptions*" certain propositions which displeased Pope Clement VIII. As soon as the author was aware of the displeasure of the Pontiff, he wrote him a letter of submission, the original of which is preserved in the archives of the Vatican (Nonc. di Savoia, vol. xxix. p. 170). It is couched in terms identical with those used by St. Francis de Sales.

The difference of the title given to the part of the work which was censured does not weaken our assertion. It can easily be understood how the Nun charged with the duty of reporting the Conference, confused the terms "Dispensations and Commandments" with "Commendams and Exemptions." She was equally mistaken in ascribing the authorship of the treatise to a "Doctor of Louvain." We have, therefore, carefully expunged this error from the text of the *True Conferences*.



been so blind as to allow himself to be deceived by his private judgment in a thing so manifestly wrong. Now, he was in no way bound to do this, seeing that the Pope had laid no such command upon him, but had only desired him to erase from his book certain things which did not seem good to the Pontiff; for, what is very remarkable is that they were not heretical, nor so manifestly erroneous that they could not be defended. On this occasion he showed great virtue, and an admirable mortification of private judgment.

Fairly often we see people whose senses are mortified, because their own will lends itself to the task of mortification. It would be a shameful thing, they say, to rebel against obedience; what would others say of them? But it is a rare thing to find persons in whom private judgment is really mortified. To own that what is ordered is good, to love and esteem it as a thing useful and excellent above all else—Oh! it is here that the judgment becomes restive. There are many who say: "I will certainly do what you order, but I can see very well that it would be better otherwise." Alas! what are you about? If you foster your judgment thus it will undoubtedly intoxicate you, for there is no difference between an intoxicated person and one who is full of his own judgment. We read that David,\* being in the wilderness with his soldiers, who were weary and exhausted with hunger, and finding nothing to eat, sent to the husband of Abigail, asking him to furnish them with provisions. Unhappily, this man was drunk,

\* I. Reg. xxv. 4, 25.

and, speaking like a drunkard, said that David, after having consumed all he had plundered and robbed from others, was now come to ruin him in the same way, and that he would give him nothing. David, hearing this, exclaimed: "As God liveth, the churl shall answer for this, for I have done him nothing but good, saving his flocks and preventing any harm from being done to him." Abigail, knowing David's intention, went the following day to meet him with presents to appease him, speaking these words—or to this effect: "My lord, what would you do to a fool? Yesterday, when my husband was drunk, he spoke insolently, but he spoke like a drunken man and like a fool. My lord, calm your indignation, and do not lay hands on him, for you will only regret having laid hands on a fool." We must make the same excuses for our own private judgment as for a drunkard, for one is no more capable of reason than the other. We must, therefore, be most careful to prevent it from making these considerations, in order that it may not intoxicate us with its reasons, especially in what relates to obedience.

Finally, you wish to know if you ought, with confidence and care, to admonish one another of your faults in charity. Undoubtedly, my daughter, you ought to do this, for how could you possibly see a blemish in your sister without trying to remove it by means of an admonition? You must, however, be discreet in this matter. If you saw a sister indisposed or oppressed with melancholy, that would not be the right time to admonish her, for there

would be danger of her instantly rejecting the admonition given by you at such a time. You must wait a little while and then admonish her in confidence and charity. If a sister should say something which appears like murmuring, and yet her heart seems otherwise full of gentleness, you ought undoubtedly to say to her in confidence: "Sister, that is not right." But if you notice that some passion is stirred in her heart, you must turn the subject as dexterously as you can.

You say that you are afraid to admonish any sister often of her faults, because it deprives her of confidence and makes her more liable to fail out of very timidity. Oh! you must not judge our sisters in this way, for it is only in the world that people lose confidence when told of their faults. Our sisters love their own abjection too much to do thus, and so far are they from being troubled by it, that they only take greater courage and are more careful in trying to amend; not to avoid being admonished, for I imagine that they love with a supreme love all that can render them vile and abject in their own eyes, but only that they may the better do their duty, and render themselves more fitted for their vocation.

## CONFERENCE XII

### ON SIMPLICITY AND RELIGIOUS PRUDENCE (1)

THE virtue we have now to treat is so necessary that, although I have often spoken of it (2), you still desire that I should devote a whole Conference to the subject. Now, in the first place, it is necessary to understand what this virtue of simplicity is. You know that, generally speaking, we call a thing simple when it is not embroidered, lined, or of more than one colour. For instance, we say, That person is dressed very simply, when her dress is only of one material; that is a simple dress—I mean, with no trimming or lining which we can see, and no outside ornamentation. Well, simplicity is nothing else than an act of pure and simple charity, having one only aim and end, which is to acquire the love of God, and our soul is simple when in all that we do or desire we have no other aim.

The well-known story of the two hostesses,

(1) *Conference of our blessed Father on the subject of Simplicity.*

(2) *often spoken*—our Mother desires nevertheless that I should devote a whole Conference to the subject, and although there may be less need to speak about simplicity in this house than elsewhere, still it is in this place that the Conference must be made. I think it probable that I may repeat things which I have said before, but there will be no great harm in so repeating them. Now, before beginning the discourse on simplicity, and giving our sisters an opening for questioning me, we must in the first place say what it is. (*Addition.*)

Martha and Magdalen,\* who entertained Our Lord, is most noteworthy for this very thing. Do you not see that although Martha's desire to show great hospitality to Our Lord was laudable, yet she was reproved by that divine Master, because she added another motive to the good object which made her so eager to serve Him. For, looking upon Our Lord as Man, and believing Him to be like ordinary human beings who cannot be satisfied with a simple meal of one dish, she bustled about, busy in the preparation of many and varied dishes. Thus, to the first pure aim of the love of God, she added many little secondary motives, for which she was reproved by Our Lord: *Martha, Martha, thou art † careful and art troubled about many things: but one thing is necessary: Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

This act of simple charity, then, which allows us to have no other aim in all our actions but the one desire of pleasing God, is *Mary's part*, which is *alone necessary*. This is simplicity, a virtue which is inseparable from charity, inasmuch as it looks straight to God, without ever suffering any admixture of self-interest. It would otherwise no longer be simplicity, for that virtue cannot endure any addition of creatures or any consideration of them. God alone finds place in it (3). This virtue is Christian only. Pagans, even the most eloquent on the subject of the other virtues, knew nothing whatever of this, any more than of humility. They wrote exceedingly

(3) *place in it*.—Creatures or the consideration of them have no place in simplicity. God alone finds His resting-place in it.

(Addition.)

\* Luke x. 38-42.

† Ibid. 41, 42.

well on magnanimity, liberality, and constancy, but of simplicity and humility they have written nothing at all. Our Lord Himself came down from heaven to make known to men both these virtues; without this mankind would have remained ignorant of this so necessary doctrine. *Be ye wise as serpents*, He said to His Apostles; but go still further, *be simple as doves*.

Learn from the dove to love God in simplicity of heart, having but one single aim and object in all that you do. Do not, however, only imitate the simple love of those birds in their having always only one mate, for whom alone they do everything, and whom alone they wish to please, but imitate them also in the simplicity with which they express and show their love. They do not practise little mincing ways, but only coo gently by the side of their mates, happy enough just to rest quietly in their presence.

Simplicity banishes from the soul that solicitous care, which so needlessly urges many to seek out various exercises and means to enable them, as they say, to love God, and which makes it impossible for them to be at peace if they are not doing all that the saints did. Poor souls! they torment themselves about finding out the art of loving God, not knowing that there is none except to love Him. They think that there is a certain art needed to acquire this love, which is really only to be found in simplicity. Now, when we say that there is no art at all, we do not mean to condemn certain books entitled *The Art of loving God*;\* for these books

\* See the Preface of the "Treatise on the Love of God."

themselves teach that there is no other art than to set ourselves to the work of loving Him—that is to say, to apply ourselves to the practice of those things which are pleasing to Him. This is the only means of finding and acquiring that holy love, provided that this practice is undertaken in simplicity, without trouble or solicitude. Simplicity embraces, indeed, all the means which are prescribed to each of us, according to his vocation, for acquiring the love of God, so that it desires no other motive for acquiring or being incited to the quest after this love than itself. It would, otherwise, not be perfectly simple; for it cannot bear to concern itself about anything, however perfect, but the pure love of God, which is its single and only aim. For instance, if we are on our way to Office, and some one asks: “Where are you going?” you will answer: “I am going to Office.” “But why are you going to it?” “I am going that I may praise God in it.” “But why at this hour rather than at any other?” “Because, the bell having rung, it would be remarked if I did not go.” The reason for going to Office—namely, to praise God—is a very good one, but this added motive is not simple. Simplicity requires that we should go attracted by the desire of pleasing God, without any other consideration; and the same in all things.

Now, before proceeding further, I must correct a mistake with regard to this virtue, which lurks in the minds of many. They think that simplicity is contrary to prudence, that the two virtues are opposed to one another. This is not so, for the virtues never clash with each other; on the con-

trary, they are bound together in the closest union. The virtue of simplicity is opposed and contrary to the vice of cunning, a vice which is the fruitful source of all manner of deceit, craftiness, and duplicity. Cunning includes deceits, deceptions, and malice, and it is through cunning that we find out how to deceive the mind of our neighbour, and of those with whom we come in contact, so as to lead them on to the point for which we are scheming. Now, this point is to convince them that we have no other feeling in our heart but what is manifested in our words, nor any other knowledge about the subject in question. This is a thing, absolutely contrary to simplicity, which requires that the interior should be wholly conformable to the exterior.

I do not, however, mean to say that in the case of our emotions, we ought to make an outward demonstration of passions which may be inwardly disturbing us; for it is not, as some think, contrary to simplicity to show a calm exterior at such times. We must always discriminate between what affects our higher and what our lower nature. It is true that sometimes, on meeting with a reproof, or any kind of contradiction, we are inwardly much disturbed; but this disturbance does not proceed from our will. All the trouble goes on in the lower part of our soul; the higher does not consent to it at all, but approves, accepts, and values this reproof or contradiction. We have said that simplicity aims steadily at acquiring the love of God. Now, the love of God requires us to restrain our feelings, to mortify and to subdue them, and this is why it



does *not* require us to make any outward demonstration of them. It is, then, no want of simplicity to keep a calm exterior when we are inwardly moved and agitated. "But," you say, "should we not be deceiving those who see us, and who would believe us to be very virtuous, when we really are most unmortified?" That reflection, my dear sister, as to what will be said or thought of you, is contrary to simplicity. This, as we have said, looks only to contenting God, not creatures at all, except in so far as the love of God requires it. After the simple soul has done any action which she considers that she ought to do, she thinks no more about it; and if it should occur to her to wonder what will be said or thought of her, she checks the thought instantly, because she will suffer nothing to divert her from her one aim, namely, of dwelling on the thought of God alone, that she may love Him more and more. The consideration of creatures has no power to move her, for she refers all to the Creator.

So too it is with regard to another question which may be asked, namely, whether it is allowable to use our discretion about making known to our Superiors what we fancy may trouble them, or ourselves in telling them. Simplicity considers only whether it is expedient to say or do a thing, and then sets to work at once to do it [or not], without wasting time in debating the question, will the Superior, or shall I, be troubled or not if I tell some thought which I have entertained of him? If it is expedient for me to tell it, I shall do so quite simply, leaving the result to God's good

pleasure. When I have done my duty I shall not trouble about anything else (4).

We must not always fear trouble, either for ourselves or for others, so much, for trouble of itself is not sin. If I know that by going into certain society I shall expose myself to the risk of hearing something said to me which will trouble and disturb me, I ought not to avoid going into it; but I ought to go, armed with confidence in the divine protection, certain that it will strengthen me so that I may overcome my own nature, against which I desire to make war. This conflict only goes on in the lower part of our soul. That is why we must not be at all astonished when it has no results. I mean, of course, when we do not consent to what it suggests, for in such a case we must avoid it. But whence, think you, comes this trouble, if not from a want of simplicity, and especially because we waste our time in conjecturing: "What will they say? what will they think?" instead of thinking only of God and of what will render us more pleasing to His Goodness? "But if I say such and such a thing, I shall be in more trouble than before I said it." Well, if you do not wish to say it, and if it is not necessary, seeing that you have no need of instruction upon it, make up your mind quickly and waste no time in considering whether you ought to say it or not. We are not meant to give an hour's consideration to all the small actions of our life. Moreover, it seems to me that it is better and more expedient, to tell the Superior the thoughts which mortify us the most,

(4) *anything else*—for God does not will that I should.

rather than a number of others which are of no use except to prolong our interview with her. And if you are still in trouble, it is only because you are unmortified; for why should I say what will be of no use to me, leaving out what might mortify me? Simplicity, as we have already said, seeks nothing but the pure love of God, which is nowhere to be found so certainly as in self-mortification. In proportion to the growth of that mortification will be our nearer and nearer approach to the abode where we shall find His divine love. Moreover, Superiors ought to be perfect, or at least to do the works of the perfect, and so their ears are open to receive and to hear whatever we wish to tell them, without troubling themselves much about it. Simplicity does not meddle with what others are doing or will do; it thinks of itself. But even as regards itself it only dwells upon really necessary thoughts, and always turns quickly away from any others. This virtue has a close affinity to humility, which does not allow us to have a bad opinion of any one but of ourselves.

You ask how you must observe simplicity (5) in

(5) You wish to know how to observe simplicity, openness, and candour in conversation, the more so, you say, as there are so many different minds that it is impossible for what you say to be approved by all. Well, it would certainly be a good thing, if we could always so suit our words to the feeling and temper of every one that nothing could be found fault with, but that cannot be; therefore we must not worry ourselves about trying to do what is really unnecessary. But ought I to ponder and weigh every word? . . .

But perhaps I am with a sister who is a little disposed to be melancholy, and takes no pleasure in my conversation, I being, on the contrary, in a cheerful mood and disposed to enjoy my recreation. Well, my daughter, there is nothing to trouble

conversation and recreation. I reply: as in all other actions, although in this particular one there should be a holy freedom and frankness in conversing upon such subjects as serve to foster a spirit of joy and recreation. We should be quite unaffected in conversation, but at the same time not inconsiderate, for simplicity always follows the rule of the love of God. But should we happen to say some little thing which seems to us not to be received as we should wish, we must not on that account waste time in weighing and searching into all our words. No; it is indeed self-love, undoubtedly, which makes us inquire so closely whether our words and actions have been well received or not. Holy simplicity does not run after its words and actions, but leaves the result of them to divine Providence, on whom it absolutely depends. It turns neither to the right nor to the left, but simply pursues its path straight and direct. If in that path it meets with any opportunity of practising some particular virtue, it makes careful use of it as a means towards attaining its perfection, which is the love of God; but it is not eager in seeking out those opportunities, though, at the same time, it

about in that, for what would you do? To-day she is serious or melancholy, and another time you will be the same; at present you must make recreation for her and for yourself; another time she will do the same for you. It would, indeed, be a nice thing if, having said some amusing words, we were to look round the room to see whether the sisters were laughing and approving of what we said, and if we saw some one who was not, we should begin to trouble about it, thinking that she did not like it, and was putting a bad interpretation upon it. Oh! certainly we must not act in this way; it is self-love that would urge us to make this investigation, and it would be contrary to simplicity.

does not despise them. It troubles about nothing, but remains modest and tranquil in its certainty that God knows its desire, which is to please Him; that is enough.

“But how is it possible to reconcile two such contrary propositions? We are told, on the one hand, that we are to be most careful about our advancement in perfection, and, on the other, are forbidden to think about it at all!” Please observe here the misery of human nature, which can never stop short at the golden mean, but, generally speaking (6), runs to extremes. This defect

(6) *to extremes*.—A young girl who has been forbidden to go out of doors late in the evening, will not fail to say: “Oh! I have the most terrible mother you can imagine! She will not even allow me to stir from the house.” She was only forbidden to go out at night, and she says the prohibition is for always. Another sings too loud, and is told so. “Well,” she says, “they complain that I sing too loud. I will sing so softly that they shall not hear me at all.” Or another, because she is told that she walks too quickly, creeps along so slowly that you can count each step. Well, what must we do in such cases? We must have patience, provided that we see no wish in the offender to foster these defects, and that they do not arise from obstinacy. We cannot always hold so straight a course as never to bend a little to one side; provided that we set ourselves straight again as quickly as possible, we must be satisfied. We inherit this defect, &c. [Continued in text]. Do you ask, my dear sister, if you are to answer simply when a sister asks you if you have been mortified by something which she has said or done to you? Although she ought not to ask you this question, still, if she is a sister whom you see will not lose confidence by being plainly spoken to, and if it is true that you were mortified, you may tell her so simply; adding, however, that you beg her not on that account to discontinue her frankness, for you like it. If, however, you suspect that she will take umbrage at this, you must answer in such a way that she will still continue to admonish you. Some people fall into the mistake of thinking that to caress those whom we really dislike, and to show them marks of friendship, is deceitful and artful, but it is nothing of the kind. Antipathies are involuntary, and have their seat in

we inherit from our mother Eve, for she did much the same when the evil spirit tempted her to eat of the forbidden fruit; she said that God had forbidden them to touch it,\* instead of saying that He had forbidden them to eat it. You were never told not to think at all about your advancement, but that you were not to think about it anxiously.

We are also wanting in simplicity when, finding that we are committing faults against one another, we waste time in considering whether these are things which ought to be told to the Superior or not. Is not the Superior capable of deciding that, and also of judging whether or no

the inferior part of the soul; the will rejects them, although they do not depart at its bidding. The acts of love which we perform towards those whom we dislike proceed from reason, which tells us that we must mortify and overcome ourselves; and although our feelings may be quite contrary to our words and actions, we are not on that account wanting in simplicity, for we disavow those feelings as foreign to us, which indeed they are. The folly of people in the world is great, for they boast of having simplicity because they do not look pleasantly on their enemies, saying that they are frank and not deceitful.

It is not wrong, either, to pretend not to wish to do something for which you really have a strong inclination, if your motive is to give confidence to a sister such as will enable her to satisfy herself by doing this thing, and to encourage yourself to practise self-mortification by depriving yourself of the opportunity of doing it. And even if you should desire very much to do it, the desire is, after all, only in the lower part of your soul, since in its higher part you certainly prefer your sister's consolation to your own. In fact, we must always and in all things remember that the productions of the lower and sensitive part of our soul do not enter, or ought not to enter, into our consideration any more than if we did not perceive them.

Have we anything more to say about simplicity? for a word must be said about prudence. But that shall be later, for only a little prudence is wanted, but a great deal of simplicity.

\* Gen. iii. 3.

reproof should be administered? "But," you say, "how do I know with what intention this sister did such and such a thing?" Well, it may be that her intention was good, and there is never any need to accuse her on the ground of her intention, but only on that of her outward action, if there was imperfection in that. Do not say, either, that the matter is of little consequence—not worth getting the poor sister into trouble—for all that is contrary to simplicity. The Rule which commands us to bring about the amendment of our sisters by means of admonitions, does not insist upon our being as careful and giving as much thought to the matter as if the honour of the sisters depended on our accusation. We must make sure, and then wait for a suitable time for administering our reproof. To give it on the spot is a little dangerous. Beyond that, we must do in all simplicity whatever God requires us to do, and that without scruple. For although the person you admonish may be very angry and troubled by what you say, it is not you who are to blame for her disturbance, but her own want of mortification. And though she may commit some fault at the moment, the admonition will be the cause of her avoiding many others which she would have fallen into if she had persevered in the line of conduct for which she was reprovèd. The Superior must never refrain from reprovèing the sisters because they dislike a reproof. Probably, as long as we live we shall dislike it, inasmuch as it is wholly contrary to the nature of man to love to be abased and reprimanded. This aversion,

however, ought not to be fostered and encouraged by our will, which ought to love humiliation (7).

You wish me to say a word to you as to the simplicity with which we ought to allow ourselves to be guided in our spiritual life, by God and by our Superiors. There are souls who say that they are unwilling to be guided except by the Spirit of God, and who fancy that all their imaginations are inspirations and movements of the Holy Ghost, Who takes them by the hand and guides them in all that they wish to do like children. In this assuredly they deceive themselves very greatly. For was there ever a more special vocation than that of St. Paul, in which Our Lord Himself spoke to him in order to convert him, and yet He would not instruct him, but sent him to Ananias, saying: *Arise and go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do.\** And although St. Paul might have said: "Lord, why wilt Thou not Thyself tell me what to do?" he said nothing of the kind, but simply went and did as he was commanded. And we think ourselves more favoured

(7) You also wish to know if, seeing that the Superior does not like your telling her of the faults which the sisters have noticed in her, you ought not in simplicity to leave off telling them. The Superior is not bound to show satisfaction, and what need is there to consider whether she does or not? The Superior listens to you, and is willing to hear whatever you have to say; is not that enough? "But she says nothing to show that she approves of what I have said." What does that matter? Having done your duty, why trouble about the rest? "Perhaps she will think that what I said had some other motive than charity." All that, my dear daughters, is useless self-tormenting, and quite contrary to simplicity, which keeps close to Our Lord. But let us pass on.

\* Acts ix. 4-7.



by God than was St. Paul, believing that He desires to guide us Himself without the intervention of any creature! For us, my dearest daughters, God's guidance is nothing but obedience, and all else is mere deception.

It is quite certain that we are not all led along the same road; but, at the same time, it is not given to each of us to know for ourselves by what road God calls us. That knowledge belongs to our Superiors, who have God's light to enable them to see clearly. We must not say that they do not know us well, for we ought to believe that obedience and submission are always the true marks of good inspiration. Even if it happens that we get no consolation from the exercises prescribed for us, and find a great deal in others, we must remember that we cannot judge of the excellence of our actions from the consolation they procure for us. We must not be so much attached to self-satisfaction, for that would be valuing the blossoms and not the fruit. You derive more profit from what you do in accordance with the direction of your Superiors, than from following your own secret instincts. These, generally speaking, come only from self-love, which, under colour of well-doing, seeks for satisfaction in an empty self-esteem.

It is, indeed, absolutely true that your well-being depends on your allowing yourself to be guided and governed by the Spirit of God without reserve. This is the aim of that true simplicity which Our Lord recommends so highly. *Be ye simple as doves*, He says to His Apostles; but He does not stop there, saying also to them: *Unless you become simple*

*as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of My Father.\** A child when very young is in a state of such simplicity that he has no knowledge at all but of his mother. He has one only love, which is for his mother; and in that love one only aim and desire—his mother's breast; when he is upon that beloved breast, he wants nothing more. The soul which has attained perfect simplicity has only one love, which is for God. In this love it has one only aim—to rest upon the bosom of the heavenly Father, and there to abide like a loving child, leaving all care of self to that good Father; anxious about nothing except to maintain this confidence; not even disquieted by any desires for those virtues and graces which seem to it necessary. It is true that such a soul never neglects any good opportunity which it meets with on its way, but it does not hunt about eagerly for means of perfecting itself other than those which are prescribed. Now, what is the use of these disquieting, eager desires for virtues which there is no need for us to practise? Gentleness, love of abjection, humility, sweet charity, cordiality towards our neighbour, and obedience are virtues the practice of which ought to be common to us all, and the more so because we have frequent occasions of practising them. But as for constancy, magnanimity, and similar virtues which we may never be required to practise, we certainly need not trouble ourselves about them; we shall be none the less magnanimous or generous on that account.

You ask me how souls, attracted in prayer to

\* Matt. xviii. 3.

this holy simplicity and absolute surrender of themselves to God, ought to conduct themselves in all their actions? I reply that not only in prayer, but in the conduct of their whole life, they ought to walk invariably in a spirit of simplicity. They should abandon and submit their whole soul, their actions, and their successes to the good pleasure of God, by a love of perfect and entire confidence, relying wholly on the mercy and care of that eternal love which divine Providence has for them. For this end, let them keep their soul steadfastly in this path, without allowing it to waste its powers in continual self-inspection, for the purpose of seeing what they are doing or if they are satisfied. Alas! our own satisfactions and consolations do not satisfy God; they only feed that miserable love and care of ourselves which is quite independent of God and the thought of Him. Certainly children, whom Our Lord has told us should be our model of perfection, are, generally speaking, quite free from care, especially in the presence of their parents. They cling to them, without turning to consider their satisfactions or their consolations. These they presume in good faith, and enjoy in simplicity, without any curiosity whatever as to their causes or effects. Love occupies them sufficiently without anything else. Those whose one desire is to please the divine Lover, have neither inclination nor leisure to turn back upon themselves; their minds tend continually in the direction whither love carries them.

This exercise of continual self-abandonment into the hands of God, comprehends the perfection of

all other exercises in its absolute simplicity and purity; and while God leaves us the use of it, we ought not to change it. Spiritual lovers, spouses of the heavenly King, do indeed from time to time contemplate themselves, as do the *doves* upon *brooks of waters*,\* in order to see if they are adorned so as to please their Beloved. This is done by examinations of conscience, by which they cleanse, purify, and beautify themselves as well as they can, not in order to be perfect, not to satisfy themselves, not from a desire to make progress in virtue, but out of obedience to the Bridegroom—out of the reverence they have for Him, and the fervent desire which they have to please Him. Now, is not that a love pure, simple, and unalloyed, since they do not purify themselves in order to be pure, they do not adorn themselves in order to be beautiful, but only to please their Beloved? So much so, that if ugliness were equally agreeable to Him, they would love it as much as beauty. And, indeed, these simple doves do not give a very lengthy or very anxious study to the work of cleansing and adorning, for the confidence which their love gives them of being greatly loved although unworthy—I mean the confidence that their love gives them in the love and goodness of their Beloved—deprives them of all anxiety and mistrust as to their not being beautiful enough. Besides, the desire to love, rather than to adorn and prepare themselves for love, takes away all anxious solicitude, and makes them contented with a faithful preparation, made with love and heartily.

\* Cant. v. 12.

To conclude this matter: St. Francis, sending his children out on their travels into desolate places, gave them this advice instead of money and provisions: *Cast thy care upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.\** I say the same to you, my dearest daughters: cast your hearts, your aspirations, your anxieties, and your affections upon the paternal bosom of God, and He will guide you. He will carry you whither His love would have you go.

Let us hear and follow the voice of the divine Saviour, who, like the perfect Psalmist, pours forth the last strains of an undying love from the tree of the Cross: *Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit.†* After that has been said, my dearest daughters, what remains but to breathe forth our last breath and die of love, living no longer ourselves, but Jesus Christ living in us.‡ Then all the anxieties of our heart will cease—anxieties proceeding from desires suggested by self-love and by tenderness for ourselves, which makes us secretly so eager in the pursuit of our own satisfaction and perfection. Embarked, then, in the exercises of our vocation, carried along by the wind of this simple and loving confidence, without being aware, we shall make the very greatest progress; without moving, we shall advance; and without stirring from our place, we shall draw nearer and nearer to home, as do those who sail on the high seas with favourable winds. Then, too, every possible event and variety of accident which may happen will be received calmly and peacefully. For what is there that can disturb or move those who are in the hands of God and rest

\* Ps. liv. 23.

† Luke xxiii. 46.

‡ Gal. ii. 19, 20.

upon His bosom—those who have abandoned themselves to His love and have resigned themselves to His good pleasure? Whatever may happen, without wasting time in philosophising upon the causes, reasons, and motives of events, they utter from their heart the holy acquiescence of Our Saviour: *Yea, Father, for so hath it seemed good in Thy sight.\**

Then we shall be all steeped, as it were, in sweetness and gentleness towards our sisters and our neighbours in general, for we shall look upon all these souls as resting in the Heart of our Saviour. Alas! they who regard their neighbour in any other way run the risk of not loving him with purity, constancy, or with impartiality. But beholding him in that divine resting-place, who would not love him, bear with him, and be patient with his imperfections? Who would find him irritating or troublesome? Well, my dear daughters, your neighbour is there, in the Heart of the Saviour, there, as so beloved and so lovable that the divine Lover dies of love for him! Then, again, the natural love of relationship, good manners, courtesy, affinity, sympathy, and kindness will be purified and reduced to the perfect obedience of the all-pure love of the divine good pleasure. And, assuredly, the highest good, and the highest happiness of souls aspiring to perfection, should be to have no desire whatever to be loved by creatures, except with that love of charity which makes us feel an affection for our neighbour, and for every one in his proper order, as Our Lord desires.

\* Matt. xi. 26.

(8) In conclusion, I must say a word to you about the wisdom of the serpent, for I have been thinking that if I spoke of the simplicity of the dove, the wisdom of the serpent would be sure to be thrown in my face. Many have asked what was the serpent from which Our Lord wished us to learn wisdom (9). Putting aside all other answers

(8) You must not forget that I make a distinction, as regards what I have been saying, between persons in the world—those, I mean, who live as Christians in the world—and the Sisters of the Visitation. For the former, it is requisite that they should use prudence in order to increase their means, and that they should strive to support their families honourably, for otherwise they would not fulfil their obligations. And although they ought to depend more on divine Providence than on their own exertions, still they must not neglect the consideration of their worldly affairs. But the Sisters of the Visitation ought to leave all care of themselves in the hands of God; I do not say as regards external things and what belongs to the nourishment of the body only, but much more absolutely in that which concerns their spiritual progress, leaving it to the divine Goodness to give them spiritual blessings, virtues, and graces, just as it shall please Him; their prudence ought to consist in leaving themselves wholly in the arms of divine Providence.

I observe that among animals those which display the most prudence (for there is a natural as well as a Christian prudence) are the most cowardly and timorous. The fox, who is so crafty and who makes use of so much cunning, is timorous; the hare, who is so timid, uses so much prudence in order to escape from the dogs which pursue her, that sometimes they are baffled; the ant possesses admirable prudence and foresight; even deer, though they are not small animals, are still timorous, and also crafty and deceitful. But the lion, which is a generous animal, trusting in his own valour, goes on his way in the simplicity of his heart, and would quite as willingly go to sleep on the high-road as in his own den. Camels also are very simple, although they are so large and powerful that they could easily carry a house on their backs. Among small animals we have the dove and the lamb, whose simplicity makes them so especially lovable.

(9) When the Israelites were led by Moses into the wilderness, they were continually being bitten by small serpents, and many died for want of remedies. Then God, taking pity on

which may be given to this question, we now take the words of Our Lord, *Be ye wise as serpents*, which, when they are attacked, expose their whole bodies in order to preserve their heads. So too ought we to do, exposing ourselves and all that we have to danger when necessary, in order to preserve within us, safe and untouched, Our Lord and His love; for He is our *Head*,\* and we are His *members*; and that is the prudence which ought to be joined to our simplicity.

I tell you again that you must remember that there are two kinds of prudence—the natural and the supernatural. As for the natural, it must be thoroughly mortified as not being at all good, suggesting to us many considerations and much forethought which are quite unnecessary, and which keep our minds far from simplicity.

The true virtue of prudence ought to be really practised, the more so because it is like a spiritual salt which gives taste and savour to all the other virtues. But it ought to be practised in such a

them, commanded a serpent of brass to be raised on a pole, and all who had been bitten by the serpents were instantly cured. Now, the brazen serpent, raised on that pole in the wilderness, represented none other than Our Lord and Master, Who was to be raised on Mount Calvary on the tree of the Cross, thus marvellously displaying the prudence of the serpent. For the serpent shows his prudence in various ways, and first in the fact that when he is growing old he strips himself of his old skin. Now, Our Lord did the same—that is to say, He stripped Himself of His own glory, for He was made, as St. Paul says, *to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Gentiles foolishness*. But for us Christians He was made our edification and our most beloved Saviour, the sweet and only remedy for all our ills; for, looking upon Him nailed and motionless upon the Cross, we cannot die, and there we find healing for all our wounds. . . .

\* Eph. iv. 15; Col. i. 18; 1 Cor. vi. 15.



manner by the Daughters of the Visitation, that the virtue of simple confidence shall surpass all the others. For they ought to have a perfectly simple confidence, which will make them repose in the arms of their heavenly Father, and of their dearest Mother, Our Lady, assured of the continual protection of that most loving care, since they are gathered together for the glory of God and the honour of the most Blessed Virgin. Blessed be God !

## CONFERENCE XIII

### ON THE RULES AND THE SPIRIT OF THE VISITATION

YOU propose a most difficult question to me when you ask what is the spirit of your Rules, and how you ought to understand it. In the first place, before speaking of this spirit, you must know what is meant by having the spirit of a Rule; for we constantly hear it said that such and such a Religious has the true spirit of his Rule. .

We will take from the holy Gospels two examples which are very well calculated to make you understand this. It is said that St. John the Baptist had come *in the spirit and power of Elias*,\* and therefore he rebuked sinners boldly and severely, calling them *a generation of vipers*,† and by other similar titles of opprobrium. What, then, was this power of Elias? It was the strength which went forth from his spirit to punish and destroy sinners, drawing down fire from heaven to confound and sweep away all who would resist the majesty of his Master:‡ the spirit of Elias was, therefore, one of severity. The other example which we find in the Gospels,§ and which serves our purpose, is that of Our Lord Himself when He wished to go up to Jerusalem.

\* Luke i. 17.  
‡ IV. Reg. i.

† Matt. iii. 7; Luke iii. 7.  
§ Luke ix. 51-56.

His disciples, we read, tried to dissuade Him from doing so, because some of them desired to go to Capharnaum, others to Bethany, and thus they endeavoured to lead Our Lord whither they wanted to go; for it is not only in the present day that inferiors wish to lead their masters according to their will. But Our Lord, gentle and condescending though He was, still steadfastly set His face (for the Evangelist makes use of these very words) *to go up to Jerusalem*, in order that the Apostles might no longer urge Him not to go. Now, on His way to Jerusalem He wished to pass through a village of Samaria, but the Samaritans would not permit Him to do so. St. James and St. John then, being filled with anger (1) and indignation at the inhospitality shown by those Samaritans to their Master, said to Him: Master, *wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from Heaven to consume them, and so chastise them for the insult which they have offered to Thee?* Our Lord, however, answered them saying: *You know not what spirit you are of*—meaning: Do you not know that we are no longer in the time of Elias, who had a spirit of severity? For although he was a great servant of God, and did well in doing what you want to do, nevertheless, you would not do right in imitating him, inasmuch as *I am not come to punish and confound sinners, but to draw them gently to penance and to follow Me.\** Now, let us see what

(1) *filled with*—zeal, or, it may be, anger (zeal is often mistaken for anger, as well as anger for zeal); and we must not be surprised at this, seeing that they were not yet confirmed in grace. (MS. and Coll.)

\* Luke v. 32.

is the peculiar spirit of a Rule. To understand it better, we must take examples which are outside ourselves, and afterwards we will return to ourselves. Religious Orders and devout societies have a spirit which is common to all, and each also has one which is peculiar to it. The spirit which they have in common is that which aspires to the perfection of charity; (2) but what is peculiar to each is the special means of attaining that perfection—that is to say, the union of the soul with God, and with our neighbour for the love of God. This is effected as regards God by the union of our will with His, and with our neighbour by a virtue immediately dependent on charity—namely, gentleness.

Let us consider this special or particular spirit. It is certainly very different in various Orders. Some unite themselves to God and to their neighbour (3) by contemplation, and therefore live in the greatest solitude. They converse as little as possible with the world, and not even with one another except at certain times; uniting themselves with their neighbour by praying to God for him. On the other hand, the special spirit of some other Orders is to unite themselves with God and their neighbour indeed, but by action, although of a spiritual kind. They unite themselves to God, but they do so by uniting their neighbour to Him, by teaching, sermons, confessions, conferences, and

(2) And this has been determined and held as certain by Councils. (MS. and Coll.)

(3) Certainly the general and the particular spirit are very different from one another. For example, the Carthusians have quite a different spirit from that of the Jesuits, and that of the Capuchins is different again. . . . (MS. and Coll.)

other pious acts; and in order the better to bring about this union with their neighbour, they mix with the world. They, indeed, unite themselves to God by prayer, but still their chief aim, as we have said, is to try and convert souls and to unite them to God (4). Other Orders foster a severe and rigorous spirit. They have a perfect contempt of the world and all its vanities and sensualities, wishing by their example to induce men to hold the things of earth in contempt, and employing their ascetic manner of life for this end. Others, again, have quite a different spirit, and it is very necessary to know what is the particular spirit of each Religious Order and pious Society. In order to find what it is, we must consider the end for which the Order was instituted, and the various means by which this

(4) *and to unite them to God.*—Now, the Capuchins have a severe and rigorous spirit, and to define it exactly, we may say that it is a perfect contempt as regards the exterior of the world and all its vanities and sensualities. I say, as regards the exterior, for all Religious Orders have it, or ought to have it, as regards the interior. They wish by their example to induce men to hold the things of earth in contempt, and the poverty of their garments serves for this end. By this means they convert souls to God, uniting themselves thus to His divine Majesty, and also with their neighbour for the love of God. This spirit of severity as regards the exterior is so inseparable from them, that if one of their Order is seen to have any kind of affectation, or shows it in his dress, or wishes to be treated more delicately than the others, in however slight a degree, it is said at once that he no longer possesses the spirit of St. Francis. Again, if a Carthusian is observed to take the smallest pleasure in conversing with his neighbour, however perfect may be his intention, were it even to convert him, he loses instantly the spirit of his Order. As would also a Jesuit if he wished to retire into solitude and to devote himself to contemplation like the Carthusians, supposing that it were not the time marked out for this in their exercises, or a special need for an individual, which is provided for by the prudence of Superiors. . . . (MS. and Coll.)

end is reached. There is, as we have said, the general end and aim of all Religious Orders, but there is also the special end of which I am speaking, and for which we must entertain so great a love, that there can be nothing likely to help towards that end that we would not embrace with all our heart.

Now, do you know what it is to have a true love for the aim and end of our Order? It is to be exact in observing the means for arriving at this end—namely, our Rules and Constitutions. It is to be most diligent in doing whatever depends on this, and will help us to keep the Rule more perfectly. This is what is meant by having the spirit of our Religious Order. But, then, this exact and punctual observance must be undertaken in simplicity of heart—I mean that we must not wish to exceed, by aspiring to do more than our Rule prescribes for us. It is not by the multiplicity of things we do that we acquire perfection, but by the perfection and purity of intention with which we do them. You must, then, consider what is the special aim of your Order, and the intention of your Founder, and stop short at the means marked out to bring you to it. You must not seek for the aim and object of your Order in the intention of the three sisters who began it, any more than the Jesuits should seek theirs in the original plan and design of St. Ignatius—for he little thought at first of doing all that he afterwards did; and the same may be said of St. Francis, St. Dominic, and others who founded Religious Orders. But God, to Whom alone it belongs to form these pious congregations, gave

them success and led them where we now see them. We must never for a moment think or believe that men, by their own invention, began so perfect a manner of life as that of Religion. It was by God's inspiration that were framed those Rules, which are the proper means of arriving at that general end and aim of all Religious—union with God, and with our neighbour for the love of God.

But as each Order has its special end, as well as its special means for attaining that end, so also they have means of attaining it common to them all—namely, the three essential vows of Religion. We all know that riches and the good things of earth are powerful allurements to entice the soul, partly through the too great affection with which it clings to them, partly through its solicitous care to preserve, or indeed to increase them, since the desires of man are never satisfied. The Religious cuts off all that by the vow of poverty. He does the same to the flesh and to all its sensualities and pleasures, both lawful and unlawful, by the vow of chastity, which is a very great and special means of uniting ourselves to God. Sensual pleasures weaken and diminish the strength of the mind, relax the heart, and chill the love we owe to God, and which we give Him entirely by this means. For the vow of chastity does not allow us to be satisfied with merely shaking off and rising above the clay of this world. We go beyond that, and rise from the clay of our own poor selves—that is to say, renounce the earthly pleasures of our flesh. Much more perfectly, however, do we unite ourselves to God by the vow of obedience. In that we re-

nounce our whole soul, all its powers, desires, and affections, in order to submit and subject ourselves not to the will of God only, but to that also of our Superiors, which we ought always to regard as being that of God Himself. This is a great renunciation, on account of the innumerable small desires which are the continual product of our self-love. Being thus shut away and apart from all things, we withdraw into the inmost recesses of our hearts, to unite ourselves more perfectly to His divine Majesty.

And now to come to the particular end for which our Congregation of the Visitation was founded, and to understand more easily what the peculiar spirit of the Visitation is. I have always considered that it is a spirit of profound humility towards God, and of great gentleness with our neighbour; the more so because, treating the body with less severity, it must all the more foster kindness of heart. All the ancient Fathers agree that where rigour of corporal mortification is wanting, there ought to be more perfection of mind; therefore humility towards God, and gentleness towards your neighbour, must in your houses take the place (5) of the austerity of others. And even although austerities are good in themselves, and are means of attaining perfection, they would not be good (6) among you, since they would be contrary to your Rules. The spirit of gentleness is so absolutely the spirit of the

(5) *take the place—i.e.* in this house, of the austerity of the Carmelite Sisters, the Poor Clares, the Carthusians, &c. (MS. and Coll.)

(6) *they would not be*—good in this house (MS.)—good in the Houses of the Visitation (Coll.)—because they would be contrary to the end and object of the Rules (MS. and Coll.).



Visitation, that any one who should wish to introduce into it any more austerities than there are at present, would instantly destroy the Visitation. This would the more certainly be the case, since it would be done in opposition to the very end and object for which the Order was instituted—namely, to be able to receive delicate women, maidens and widows, whose physical powers are not great enough, and who are not inspired and drawn to serve God and to unite themselves to Him, by means of such austerities as are practised by other Religious Orders. You will perhaps say: “But if a sister happens to be of a robust constitution, may she not, with the Superior’s permission, practise more austerities than the other sisters, though in such a manner that they do not notice it?” To that I reply that there is no secret which does not pass on secretly to another; and thus Religions are made within Religions, and little leagues are formed, and then all is confusion. Blessed Mother Teresa tells us most admirably\* what evil is brought about by these little wishes and attempts to do more than the Rule orders and than the Community does. This, she says, is especially to be guarded against in the case of a Superior. The evil is then much greater, and for this reason, directly the sisters perceive it, they want to do the same, and easily persuade themselves that they are doing well. Some are urged on by zeal, others wish to please the Superior, and all this is a source of temptation to those who either cannot or do not wish to do the same.

We must never introduce, permit, or suffer these

\* Liber Foundationum, c. xviii.

peculiarities in Religion, except in certain special cases of necessity. For instance, if a sister were oppressed by some great trouble or temptation, it would be nothing extraordinary for her to ask the Superior's permission to practise some penances more than the others do. We use the same simplicity in such a case as the sick, who ought to ask for remedies which they think will relieve them. If, however, there should be a sister so generous and courageous as to wish to arrive at perfection in a quarter of an hour by doing more than the rest of the Community, I would advise her to humble herself and to submit to a restraint upon her zeal, so far as to extend the space of time to three days, taking the same course as her sisters. And if there should be sisters who have strong and healthy constitutions, well and good; but still, they must not want to go faster than the weak.

We have an example of this in Jacob,\* an example which is most admirable, and well adapted to teach us how we ought to accommodate ourselves to the weak, and so restrain our vigour as to suit our pace to theirs. This is especially so when it is a matter of obligation, as in the case of Religious who are bound to follow the observances of their Community strictly and closely. Jacob, then, going forth from the house of Laban, his father-in-law, with his wives, his children, his servants, and his flocks, to return to his own home, was greatly afraid of meeting his brother Esau, believing that he was still angry with him, although this was not so. As he journeyed on his way, he suddenly beheld Esau

\* Gen. xxxiii. 1-14.

coming to meet him, accompanied by a great troop of soldiers, and the sight filled him with terror. The brothers met, but Jacob, having courteously saluted Esau, found him, to his great surprise, most kindly disposed towards him; for he addressed him in these words: "My brother, let us join company and finish our journey together." To which, however, the good Jacob replied: "*My Lord* and my brother, it must not be so, because I have my children, and their little steps would try your patience. As for me, I measure my pace by theirs; which, of course, it is my duty to do. Then, too, I have my ewes and new-born lambs; the lambs are still so tender and feeble that they cannot go quickly, and all this would delay you too much on the road." Observe, I pray you, the gentle kindness of this holy Patriarch: (7) he accommodates his pace cheerfully not only to that of his little children, but also to that of his lambs. He was on foot, and this journey was indeed a happy one to him, as we see by the blessings which he received from God during the whole of it. Several times he saw and spoke with Angels, and at last even with the Lord of Angels and men, so that he was really far more fortunate than his brother, in spite of his splendid escort.

If we desire that our journeys should be blessed by the divine Goodness, let us cheerfully submit ourselves to the exact and punctual observance of our Rules, and that in simplicity of heart, not wanting to increase our exercises, which would be going

(7) *of the holy Patriarch.*—I loved him well already, but I shall love him henceforth still more for this act of loving kindness. (MS. and Coll.)

against the intention of the Founder, and the end for which the Order was established. Let us, then, cheerfully accommodate ourselves to the weak who may be received into it, and I assure you that we shall not on that account be any slower in arriving at perfection.

On the contrary, that will be just the means of leading us to it all the quicker, because, not having much to do, we shall endeavour to do that little with the greatest possible perfection. And it is just this which makes our works more pleasing to God, for He does not regard the multiplicity of things which we do for the love of Him, as we have already said, but only the fervour of the charity with which we do them. I think, if I am not mistaken, that if we make up our minds to wish to observe our Rules perfectly, we shall have quite enough to do, without burdening ourselves with anything more, especially as all that concerns the perfection of our state is comprised in them.

The blessed Mother St. Teresa tells us that her daughters were so absolutely exact in their obedience, that their Superiors had to be very careful not to bid them do anything that would not be a good thing to do, because, without any further exhortation, they would instantly set to work to do it. Furthermore, in order to observe their Rules more perfectly, they were most punctilious in carrying out the smallest details. She tells us\* that on one occasion one of her daughters, not having understood distinctly what a Superior had desired her to do, said so; whereupon the Superior replied somewhat

\* Lib. Fundat. c. xvi

abruptly and inconsiderately: "Go and put your head into a well and then you will understand." The Nun was so ready and eager to obey that, if they had not stopped her, she would actually have thrown herself in (I). There is certainly less difficulty in observing the Rules exactly than in being willing to observe them only in part (8).

I cannot sufficiently impress upon you the importance of this point—namely, punctual attention to the smallest matters tending to the more perfect observance of the Rule, and at the same time an unwillingness to undertake anything more. That is the way to preserve a Religious Order undivided and in its first fervour, and to do otherwise is to do what destroys it and causes it to fall away from its original perfection (9). You ask whether there

(8) *in part.*—For instance, the Rule prescribes that at certain times there should be no talking at all. Now, it is much easier to abstain from talking altogether than to attend to the exceptions, because in the latter case we must not only be careful to keep silence, but also to speak on those occasions which are excepted. Charity, however, shows us clearly enough when we can do this without infringing the command not to speak at all. (MS. and Coll.)

(9) *perfection.*—Let me tell you that what maintains the Jesuit fathers in the perfection of their Order, is nothing but the firmness with which they obey every command, without reply. (MS. and Coll.)

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(I) St. Teresa tells this story in rather a different way. "One day," she writes, "when the Community were going to Confession, a Nun who was waiting approached the Superior to speak to her. 'What, sister!' said the Superior, 'do you speak to me at such a moment? Is this a good way of recollecting yourself? Better far put your head into that well which is just outside, and there think over your sins.'" The Nun took these words as a command to throw herself into the well, and rushed off so promptly to obey it, that if they had not hurried after her, and held her back, she would have flung herself in."

would be more perfection in conforming yourselves so absolutely to the Community, as not even to ask permission to go to Communion on an unusual occasion, or oftener than the others. Who can doubt it, my dear daughters?—unless, indeed, in special cases, such as the feasts of our Patron, or of some saint for whom we have had a great devotion all our lives, or in some pressing necessity. But as regards certain little outbursts of fervour which we may sometimes feel—transitory emotions which, generally speaking, have something to do with our temperament, but which make us desire Communion—we must pay no more regard to them than do mariners to the breeze which springs up at daybreak, produced by the mists which at that time are rising from the earth, a breeze which does not last, and dies away as soon as these mists have risen and dispersed. The captain of the vessel, who knows well the nature of this breeze, pays no heed to it, and not expecting to be carried on by it, does not unfurl his sails. Just so it is with us; we must not look upon our ever-changing wishes, now to ask for more frequent Communion, now to beg to be allowed to say more prayers, now for something else, as a favourable breeze—that is to say, as an inspiration. Our self-love, which is always seeking its own satisfaction, would rest quite contented with that, and more particularly with such little inventions, and would be continually furnishing us with new ones. To-day, when the Community goes to Communion, it will suggest to you that you had better, out of humility, ask to be allowed to

abstain from it (10); and when the time for humbling yourself arrives, it will persuade you to rejoice and to ask for Communion to increase your humility; and so the whole thing will be endless. We must not regard as an inspiration a suggestion of anything beyond the Rule, unless in cases so extraordinary that perseverance shows us it is the will of God; as it has been with two or three great saints with regard to Communion, their directors having wished that they should communicate every day. I consider it to be a very great act of perfection to conform in all things to the ways of the Community, and never to depart from them of our own choice; for besides this being an excellent means of uniting ourselves with our neighbour, it also hides from us our own perfection.

There is a certain simplicity of heart in which consists the perfection of all perfections. It is this simplicity which makes our soul look only to God, and remain shut up and recollected in herself, so that she may apply herself with all possible fidelity to the observance of her Rules, without allowing herself to desire, or wish to undertake more. She does not want to do such excellent and extraordinary things as may cause her to be esteemed by creatures; and thus she keeps herself lowly and retired, without any great satisfaction, for she does nothing of her own will and nothing more than

(10) *to abstain from it*—because it is the feast of some particular saint who used such careful preparation before receiving the Blessed Sacrament, and you, who are so poorly prepared, it is not reasonable that you should receive it so often; and so on. (MS. and Coll.)

others. By this means all her sanctity is hidden from her own eyes: God alone sees it, and delights Himself in her simplicity, by which she ravishes His heart and unites herself to Him. She makes short work of all the suggestions of her self-love—that self-love which takes such supreme delight in attempting the great and splendid things, which will make us esteemed far above others. Such souls as these enjoy at all times, and in all places, great peace and tranquillity of mind.

We must never believe or think that by doing nothing more than others, and following the ways of the Community, we acquire less merit. Oh no! for (11) perfection does not consist in austerities. Although they are excellent means to attain it, and are good in themselves, for us they are not so, because they are not in conformity with our Rules or with their spirit; it being of far greater perfection to keep to the simple observance of those Rules, and to follow the ways of the Community, than to wish to exceed that limit. I assure you she who keeps within these bounds will in a short time make great progress, and will by her example do much for her sisters (12).

(11) *for*—we do not become perfect, neither are we more pleasing to God, by the multiplication of exercises, penances, and austerities (MS. and Coll.), but rather by the purity of love with which we do them (MS.).

(12) *sisters*—profit her sisters by her good example. I have seen examples of this in two Generals of the Carthusians (I),

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(I) The first named of these generals was probably Dom Jérôme Marchand (1588–94), celebrated for his rigorous austerities, detailed at length in the Annals of the Carthusian Order. The second is Dom Bruno d’Affringues (1600–31).



Finally, when we are rowing we must do so in time; those who are out at sea in a rowing-boat, are not beaten so readily on account of sluggish rowing, as they are when they do not all row together in time. We must try to train up the novices to do, all of them, the same things, so that they may keep time together; and although all may not do this with equal perfection, that cannot be helped—it is the same in all communities.

But you may say, that it is as a mortification that you remain in the Chapel on Feast-days a little longer than the others, on account of your having felt impatient and weary during the two or three consecutive hours, when you were all there together. To that I reply that there is no general rule that we must do everything that is repugnant to ourselves, any more than abstain from everything for which we feel an inclination. If a sister greatly loves saying the Divine Office, she must not stay away from it under the pretext of wishing to mortify herself. With regard to the time on Feast-days when you are at liberty to do what you please, it may be spent by each of you as her devotion suggests. It is,

one of whom is still living; the other is now dead, but I saw him in Paris when I was there. He was exceedingly austere, and seldom took anything to eat or drink but bread and water. The other, who, as I said, is still living, is not singular in anything, but does exactly what the Community does. Both are great servants of God; but I have been assured that the latter is much more loved and esteemed by his brethren than was the other, and that his gentleness and conformity of life edifies them far more than did the severity which the other practised towards himself. (MS. and Coll.)

however, true that after having been for three hours, or perhaps more, in the Chapel with the Community, there is great fear that the extra quarter of an hour you impose upon yourself may be a morsel thrown to your self-love (13).

Lastly, my dear daughters, we must love our Rules very much, since they are the means by which we attain their end, which is to lead us easily to the perfection of charity—that is, the union of our souls with God and with our neighbour. And not only that, but the union of our neighbour with God, which we effect by means of these Rules; means which are most sweet and gentle, for no sister is rejected for want of physical strength, provided that she is willing to live according to the spirit of the Visitation. As I have told you, this spirit is one of humility towards God and gentleness and sweetness towards our neighbour, and it is this spirit which unites us equally with God and with that neighbour. By humility we unite ourselves to God, submitting ourselves to the exact observance of His will as signified to us in our Rules. We ought piously to believe that these Rules were drawn up by His inspiration. They have been received by holy Church and approved by His Holiness, and these are evident signs of their inspiration. For this reason we ought to love them all the more tenderly, and many times a day press them to our hearts in gratitude to God Who gave them to us. By gentleness of heart we unite ourselves to our neighbour through an exact

(13) *self-love*.—It is true that, not being able to put it to death, it seems as if we must occasionally give it some little thing. (MS. and Coll.)

and punctual conformity of life, manners, and exercises; neither doing more nor less than those with whom we live, nor than is marked out for us in the path in which God has placed us all together; making use of all the powers of our soul to do this with the greatest possible perfection. Remember, however, that what I have told you often about the necessity of exactness in the observance of the Rules, even in their smallest detail, must not be understood to mean that you must admit scruples into your exactitude! Oh no! I never meant that. What I wish for you is the punctiliousness of chaste spouses, who, not content with avoiding all that might displease their Heavenly Bridegroom, wish to do everything they can to please Him even in the smallest matters.

It will be very fitting that I should give you some remarkable example to make you understand how pleasing we are to God when we conform in all things to community life. Listen, then, to what I am going to tell you. Why do you think that Our Lord and His Blessed Mother submitted to the law of the Presentation and Purification, if not on account of the love which they bore to the common life? Assuredly, this example alone ought to be sufficient to incite Religious to follow most exactly their community life, and never to depart from it. For neither the Son nor the Mother were in any way bound by this law: not the Child, since He was God; not the Mother, since she was a Virgin all-pure. They might easily have exempted themselves from conforming to it, without any one's being aware of the fact; for could not she have gone to Nazareth

instead of to Jerusalem? She did not, however, do that, but simply followed the common custom. She might have said: "The law is not made for my beloved Son nor for me; it is not in any way binding on us; but since all others are bound by it, and observe it, we very willingly submit ourselves to it, so that we may be in conformity with them, and not singular in anything." St. Paul the Apostle has well said \* that it *behoved Him* (Our Lord) in all things *to be made like unto His brethren, without sin*. But tell me, was it the fear of prevarication which made this Mother and her divine Son so exact in the observance of the law? No, assuredly it was not that, for there could be no prevarication for them. They were drawn by the love which they bore to their Eternal Father.

We cannot love the command if we do not love the giver of the command. In proportion to our affection and esteem for the maker of the law, is the exactness of our observance of it. Some are attached to the law by chains of iron, and others by chains of gold; I mean that seculars who keep the Commandments of God because they fear to lose their souls, do so from constraint, and not from love. But Religious, and those who care about attaining perfection, are attached to the law by chains of gold—that is to say, by love. They love the Commandments, and lovingly keep them, and in order to keep them better, they embrace the observance of the Counsels. David says † that God has commanded His Commandments to be kept most diligently. Do you see how exact He wishes

\* Heb. ii. 17; iv. 15.

† Ps. cxviii. 4.

us to be in the observance of them? Certainly all true lovers are exact, for they not only avoid all infidelity to the law, but they avoid even the shadow of unfaithfulness. That is why the Bridegroom says \* that His Spouse is like a dove resting by the side of the gently flowing streams, whose waters are clear as crystal. You know that the dove rests in security by those waters, because she can see reflected in them the shadows of the birds of prey which she dreads so much; and thus she cannot be taken by surprise, for as soon as she sees these reflections, she wings her flight to some safe shelter. "So too it is with my beloved," the Heavenly Bridegroom would say; "for while she flies before the very shadow of faithlessness to my Commandments, she has no fear of falling into the hands of disobedience." Assuredly, she who by the vow of obedience, voluntarily deprives herself of the power of doing her own will in things indifferent, shows with sufficient plainness that she loves to submit in things which are necessary and of obligation (14).

We must, then, be most exact in the observance of the laws and Rules given to us by Our Lord, but especially in this point of following the Community in all things. We must beware of saying that we are not bound to observe this Rule, or that

(14) *of obligation*.—They who deprive themselves voluntarily of lawful possessions, show that they do not desire unlawful attachments. The Apostles, in order to observe better the commandment given them by Our Lord to renounce all the riches of earth, deprived themselves voluntarily of what was not only lawful but even necessary for them.

\* *Cf. Cant. v. 12.*

special command of the Superior, because it is made for the weak, and we are strong and healthy; or, contrariwise, that some particular commandment is made for the strong, and that we are weak and infirm. In the name of God! let there be anything rather than this in a community. If you are strong, I entreat you so to comport yourselves as to appear weak with the weak; and if you are really weak, then to strive to be strong with the strong. The great Apostle St. Paul says that he *became all things to all men, that he might save all.*\* *Who is weak and I am not weak?* † With the sick, I too am as one sick; with the strong, I too am strong. Do you see how St. Paul, when he is with the weak, becomes weak himself, and willingly takes all the remedies necessary for their infirmities, to give them confidence to do the same? When, however, he is with the strong, he becomes a perfect giant, that he may inspire them with courage.‡ And if he observes that his neighbour is likely to be scandalised by anything he may do—although it is perfectly permissible for him to do it—yet, so great is his desire for peace and tranquillity of heart, that he willingly abstains from doing it § (15).

(15) *I am strong.*—Which of my brethren is scandalised and I am not scandalised with him? When I am with the weak, I gladly make use of all the remedies necessary for their infirmities, that I may inspire them with confidence to do the same. When I am with the sick, I behave like the tender and loving nurse of a sick child, who softly strokes its head to lull it to sleep. But when I am with the strong, &c. (see above). . . . It was, then, the love which he bore to God which made him thus conform himself to *all*, that he might *gain all*.

\* 1 Cor. ix. 22.

‡ Gal. ii. 11.

† 2 Cor. xi. 29.

§ 1 Cor. viii. 13.

“But,” you will say to me, “now that the time for recreation has come, I have a most fervent desire to go to my prayers, that I may enter into a still closer union with the source of all goodness (16). May I not consider that the law which commands recreation is not binding upon me, seeing that my spirits are gay and joyous enough of themselves without any need of recreation?” Oh no! you must neither think nor say such a thing. If you have no need of recreation for yourself, you must help to make recreation for those who *do* need it. Are there, then, no exceptions in Religion? Are the Rules all equally binding? Without doubt they are. But there are some laws which are justly unjust. For example: the fast of Lent is commanded for all; does it not seem to you that this law must be unjust, since this unjust justice is moderated by giving dispensations to those who cannot observe it? It is the same in Religion; the command is for all alike. No individual may dispense him or herself from its observance, but Superiors may moderate the rigour of the law, according to the necessity of each individual.

We must beware of thinking that the weak are less useful in Religion than the strong; that they do less, and acquire less merit. It is not so at all, since all are equally doing the will of God. Bees afford an example of this, for some are employed in guarding the hive (17), whilst others are always busy gathering in honey; and yet those who remain

(16) *goodness*—“O my God, I long to say my rosary in honour of our Lady!”

(17) *the hive*—and in keeping it neat and clean.

in the hive do not eat less honey than those which have all the trouble of despoiling the flowers of it (18). Do you think that\* David made an unjust law, when he gave orders that the soldiers who guarded the baggage should have an equal share in the booty with those who went forth to the battle and came back covered with wounds?

Not at all; the command was in no respect unjust, seeing that they who guarded the baggage guarded it for those who were fighting, and that they who were in the thick of the battle fought for those who guarded the baggage. Thus they all deserved the same recompense, since they had all equally obeyed (19) the King. God be praised!

(18) *the flowers*—and this with great reason, seeing that those who remain inside the hive, doing scarcely anything, prevent spiders from interfering with the comb of the bees who are abroad gathering honey.

(19) *obeyed*—according to the King's good pleasure; for it is not the work which we do which makes us acquire merit, but the love and the charity with which we do it.

Let us say a word in connection with this subject on the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple, and the Purification of His most holy Mother. See how the divine Child suffers Himself to be carried so simply and yet so lovingly in the arms of the blessed St. Simeon, neither weeping nor making the slightest resistance when taken from the tender arms of His most pure Mother. Contemplating this scene, let no one excuse himself from Holy Communion on the plea of unworthiness, Saying: "O my God, how dare I, vile as I am, receive Thee as often as others do? How dare I approach Thee even in prayer?" Ah! this is nothing but a miserable self-deception! Do you not see that our divine Lord passes simply into the arms of St. Simeon, leaving those of His beloved Mother Mary, all-pure and immaculate?

\* 1 Kings xxx. 23-25.



## CONFERENCE XIV

### ON PRIVATE JUDGMENT

*Against Private Judgment and the tenderness which  
we show to ourselves*

THE first question (1) to be asked is, whether to be governed by one's own private opinion is absolutely contrary to perfection or not. To that I reply that to have one's own private opinions, or not to have them, is in itself neither good nor bad, since either state of things is perfectly natural. Every one indeed has, speaking generally, his own opinions; but provided that he does not love too fondly and cling too closely to them, that is no hindrance to perfection. It is the too close attachment to them which is the obstacle to our attainment to perfection, and, as I have often said,\* the love of our own private judgment, and the high esteem in which we hold it, is really the cause of there being so few perfect souls among us. There are many persons who renounce their own will, some on one ground, some on another; I do not say only in Religion, but among seculars, and even in the courts of princes: If a Prince commands a courtier to do anything, he

(1) First of all let us make the sign of the Cross, and then say a few words on these two questions, but very few, so as to leave the sisters time to ask me what they like. The first is, if to be governed, &c.

\* *Vide* pp. 179, 209, &c.

will never refuse to obey; but to admit the wisdom of the command is a very rare occurrence. "I will do what you command me to do, and in the manner in which you tell me to do it," he will reply; "*but*"—and on this "*but*" they dwell with a long, significant stress, which implies that they know very well the thing would be better if done differently, or not at all. No one can doubt, my dear daughters, that this kind of thing is quite contrary to perfection, for it produces, generally speaking, anxiety of mind, disputes, murmurings—and to sum up all, it nourishes self-esteem; whereas our own opinions and our private judgment must be neither loved nor over esteemed.

I must, however, tell you that there are persons who are bound to form their own opinions, such as Bishops, Superiors who have the care of others, and all those whose duty it is to rule and govern. With the exception, however, of these persons, none should do so—unless, of course, obedience commands it—otherwise they are simply wasting the time they should employ in calm, restful union with God. And just as these latter persons would be considered very inattentive to the work of their own perfection, and as employing themselves in quite a useless manner, if they stopped to consider their own private opinions, so, on the other hand, Superiors must be considered wholly unfit for their duties if they do not form (2) their own opinions, and are not ready

(2) *form*—some resolution with regard to questions proposed to them, and make use of considerations in support of their opinion. Indeed, it would be a very unsuitable thing to see them always irresolute in giving their opinion, though at the same time they must not love it nor cling too closely to it, &c.

to act upon them with firmness and resolution, though without self-complacency or too close attachment to them, which would, of course, be contrary to their perfection.

The great St. Thomas, who had one of the loftiest minds possible, when he formed any opinion, supported it with the most weighty arguments that he could bring forward. Nevertheless, if he came in contact with any one who did not approve of what he had decided to be right, or had contradicted it, he neither disputed with him nor was offended by his action, but took all in good part. He thereby showed that he had no love for his own opinion, though he could not abandon it; he left the matter alone, to be approved or disapproved by others as they pleased. Having done his duty, he troubled himself no more about the subject. The Apostles were not attached to their own opinions—not even in things which concerned so important a matter as the government of the Holy Church. If, after they had determined a matter by the resolution which they had taken upon it, any one differed from them regarding it, they were by no means offended. If any refused to accept their opinion, however well founded it might be, they never sought to force it upon them by disputes and contests.\*

If, then, Superiors were willing to change their opinion at every turn, we should consider them feeble and imprudent in their mode of governing. But, at the same time, if those who are not in authority should cling with great pertinacity to

\* Acts xv. 7, 12, 13; 1 Cor. xi. 16.

their own opinions, determined not only to maintain them, but also to compel others to receive them, they would be considered obstinate.

It is, indeed, most certain that the love of one's own opinion does degenerate into obstinacy, if it is not steadily mortified and restrained. We have an example of this even among the Apostles. It is a matter worthy of our deepest wonder that Our Lord should have permitted many great and noble things done by the holy Apostles to remain unrecorded, and indeed to be buried in the most profound obscurity, while the imperfection of both the great St. Paul and St. Barnabas in their conduct towards each other is written down. Doubtless this is a special providence of Our Lord, Who has so willed it *for our learning*.\*

The two Apostles were setting forth together to preach the holy Gospel, and were taking with them a young man named John Mark, who was related to St. Barnabas. On the way these two great Apostles disputed as to whether they should take him with them or not; and finding that they were of contrary opinion on the matter, and not being able to agree, they separated from one another.† Ought we, then, to be disturbed and surprised at seeing such a fault as this among ourselves, when even the Apostles committed it?

There are some great minds—good, too, as well as great—who are nevertheless so absolutely slaves to their own opinions, and who hold them in such high esteem, that nothing will induce them to change. We must, indeed, be very careful not

\* Rom. xv. 4.

† Acts xv. 37-40.

to ask their opinion, for afterwards it is almost impossible to get them to see and own that they were in the wrong. This is all the more so, because they will have already involved themselves so deeply in endeavours to find reasons calculated to support what they have once declared to be right, that, unless they are striving after a most absolute perfection, it is almost impossible to make them retract what they have said. On the other hand, there are those who, although of lofty intellect and possessed of great mental and physical powers, are in no degree subject to this imperfection, but willingly yield their own opinion, excellent though it may be. They are not up in arms directly they are opposed or contradicted, though they may be entirely in the right, as we have seen in the case of the great St. Thomas. It is, then, natural to have an opinion of one's own.

Persons of a melancholy temperament are generally more firmly attached to their own opinion than those of a gay and lively one, for the latter are easily guided, and ready to believe whatever they are told. The great St. Paula was obstinate in the opinion she had formed of the necessity of practising great austerities, and would not submit to the advice of those who desired her to abstain from them.\* And the same is true of many other saints, who believed that the body must be severely macerated in order to please God, refusing, therefore, to obey the physician and to do what was necessary for the preservation of this frail and mortal body. Now, although this was an imperfection, yet it did

\* See p. 164.

not prevent them from being great saints and very pleasing to God—a fact which teaches us not to be disquieted when we perceive in ourselves imperfections, or inclinations contrary to true virtue, provided that we do not allow ourselves to persevere obstinately in them. St. Paula and those other saints who were obstinate, even though it might be in matters of small account, were in that respect blamable. As for us, we must never so form our opinions as not to be ready, if necessary, willingly to give them up, whether we were forced to form them or not. It is, then, perfectly natural that we should hold our own judgment in esteem, and carefully seek reasons to support what we have once understood and judged to be right. But to be wholly swayed by and to cling pertinaciously to it, is a great imperfection. Tell me, is it not a useless waste of time, especially for those who are not in authority, to trifle in this way?

You ask me: “What, then, must I do to mortify this tendency?” You must cut off its supply of food. If it occurs to you that some one was wrong in ordering a thing to be done in a particular way, and that you yourself could have planned and arranged it much better, reject the thought instantly, saying to yourself: “Ah! what have I to do with the matter, seeing that it was never entrusted to my care?” It is always much better to reject these thoughts at once quite simply, than to hunt about in our own mind for reasons to make us believe that we are in the wrong. For instead of doing this, our understanding, being preoccupied with its own private judgment, will mislead us, so that instead

of dealing the death-blow to our own opinion, it will give us reasons for persisting in it and asserting it to be good. It is always better to despise it without looking at it, and to drive it away promptly, directly it becomes visible, before we have time to hear what it would say to us.

It is quite clear that we cannot prevent the first thrill of complacency which stirs us when our opinion is approved and followed, for that is inevitable. But we must not dwell on nor take pleasure in this complacency; we must thank God and then pass on with no more thought about it; just as, on the other hand, when our opinion is neither approved nor followed, we must not encourage the slight emotion of pain which is certain to stir within us. When we are compelled either by charity or obedience to offer our opinion on any subject, we must do so simply and with a calm indifference as to whether it will be taken or not. We must even sometimes say what we think about the opinions of others, and demonstrate the reasons on which we support our own; but this must always be done modestly and humbly, without despising the opinion of others, or contending for the adoption of our own.

You will ask, perhaps, if (when it is no longer a question of forming any resolution, what is thought right to be done having been already determined upon) you are not feeding this imperfection by talking about it afterwards with those who have shown themselves to be of your opinion? Most certainly. And you would commit an imperfection; for it is the surest sign that we do not yield to the

opinion of others, and always prefer our own. Therefore, when the thing proposed has been determined on, there must be no more talking about it—no more thinking, even, about it—unless, indeed, it is a matter involving much evil; then, if by dwelling further on the matter we can prevent its being carried into execution, or apply some remedy to it, we may do so. But then it must be done with the greatest possible charity and delicacy, so as to disquiet no one, or cast any contempt upon what has seemed good in their eyes.

The one only remedy which can cure the evil of private judgment is, the firm rejection of its first suggestion, and the turning of our thoughts at once to something better. For if we were to allow ourselves to pay attention to all the various opinions brought before our minds, to all the difficulties and possibilities which might arise, what could possibly result but continual distractions and hindrances in those things which are most necessary for our perfection, which would render us weak and wholly incapable of devout and recollected prayer? For, having thus given our mind liberty to amuse itself with such deceits, it will become more and more deeply involved in them. It will produce thought after thought, opinion after opinion, and reason after reason, all of which will grievously disturb and hinder us in our devotions: for prayer is nothing else but the lifting of our whole mind, with all its faculties, to God. Now, when it is wearied and worn out by the pursuit of useless things, it becomes less and less fitted for the consideration of those mysteries on which we meditate in our prayer.



This, then, is what I had to say to you with regard to the first question. I would teach you that to have opinions is not contrary to perfection at all, but to love them and hold them in high esteem is. For if we do not esteem them we shall not be so much in love with them, and if we do not love them we shall not trouble ourselves at all as to whether they are approved or not, and shall not be so ready to say: "Others may believe what they please, but as for me," &c. Do you know what that "as for me" means? Simply this: "I will never submit, but will abide fixedly in my own opinion, resolved to hold to it." Yes, as I have told you many times, this is the last thing which we give up; and yet, to abandon and to renounce it is one of the most necessary steps towards the attainment of true perfection, for by no other means can we acquire holy humility, which forbids us to esteem ourselves or anything connected with ourselves in any degree. Moreover, if we do not practise this virtue very assiduously, we shall always be fancying ourselves something better than we are, and believing that others owe us much consideration. Now, we have said enough on this subject.

If you do not ask me anything more, we will pass on to the second question, which is, whether the tenderness which we bear to ourselves is a great hindrance to us on the road to perfection. In order to understand this subject better, I must remind you of what you know very well, namely, that we have within us two loves—*affective love* and *effective love*; and this, both as regards our love for God, and our love for our neighbour and

ourselves. At present, however, we will only speak of that which we bear to our neighbour, and will return later on to ourselves.

Theologians are in the habit of explaining the difference between these two kinds of loves by making use of the comparison of a father who has two sons—the one still a dear, lovable little child, with all the graces of childhood; the other a grown man, brave and generous, perhaps a soldier, or practising some other noble profession. The father loves both these sons intensely, but with a very different kind of love for each. The child he regards with a tender and affective love, which he displays in every kind of fond caress, allowing the little darling in return to take all sorts of childish liberties with him. If the little one is stung by a bee, the father breathes softly and continuously upon the sore spot till the pain has abated; whereas, if his elder son were stung by a hundred bees, he would pay no heed, though at the same time he loves him with a most deep and enduring love. Now, I beg you to consider the difference between these two loves. You have seen the father's tenderness towards the little child, yet he intends as the years roll on to send him forth into the world, away from the paternal home, and to make him a Knight of Malta, because he will make his eldest son his heir and the inheritor of all his possessions. The love he bears to his eldest son is, therefore, an effective love; that which he bears to the little one is affective: both are loved, but differently. The love we have for ourselves is also of two kinds—affective and effective. Effective

love is that which governs the great men of the world, those who aspire to honours and riches, who obtain for themselves as much property and as many possessions as they can, and are yet never satisfied, but always crave for more. Such people love themselves with an effective love. But there are others who rather love themselves with an affective love. They are the people who are very tender with themselves, and do nothing but complain, pamper, coddle, and take care of themselves. They are pitiably afraid of doing something which might injure their precious health. If they are at all ill, be it only the merest finger-ache, no one, according to their own account, suffers so much as they do; they are so miserable! No evil, however great, is to be compared with what they are suffering, and they cannot find remedies enough; they fly from one cure to another, and in this way ruin the health they are so anxious to preserve. If other people are ill it matters not. No one, they think, is to be pitied but themselves. They shed tears of tender sympathy over their own sufferings, trying by that means to move those around them to compassion; they care not about being considered patient, if only they are believed to be sick and afflicted. This is an imperfection, certainly, peculiar to children, or (if I may venture to say so) to women, or to effeminate men deficient in courage; for among noble minds this fault is not met with. Well-balanced and generous souls are not impeded by these follies and this silly softness, which can only hinder our progress along the road of perfection. And then, again, not to be able to endure

being considered *tender* is surely to be so in the highest degree!

I recollect a circumstance which was brought before my own observation—a true history—which bears upon the subject in question most forcibly, and which gave me more consolation at the time of its occurrence than all the virtues and excellencies of the many pious souls with whom I was then in contact. I had returned from Paris to a certain religious house in which there was at that time a young postulant, of a wonderfully sweet, tractable, submissive, and obedient disposition—in fact, she possessed all the qualities necessary for a true Religious of the Visitation. Unhappily, however, as time went on the sisters observed in her a physical infirmity, which made them doubtful whether they ought not to dismiss her. The Mother Superior loved her dearly, and grieved at the thought of doing so, but as the sisters were still troubled about the matter, it was referred to my decision. The poor girl, who was of good birth, being brought before me, threw herself on her knees, saying with the greatest humility: “Father, it is quite true that I have such an infirmity, and that it is a most humiliating one” (specifying it aloud with great simplicity). “I admit that our sisters have good reason to be unwilling to receive me, for indeed my company must be intolerable to them; but I entreat you to judge the matter in my favour, assuring you that if they will receive me, thus exercising their charity with regard to me, I will take the greatest care not to inconvenience them, cheerfully working in the garden, or employing myself in any offices

whatever which will keep me at the greatest distance from them" (I).

This young girl really touched me deeply. Not one atom of tenderness had she shown towards herself! I could not help saying that I would willingly have the same natural infirmity, if I could have, like her, the courage to own it before everybody with the same simplicity as she had owned it to me.

In her there was not that fear of being thought badly of, which so many have; she was not so tender over herself. She did not ask herself all sorts of idle, useless questions, such as: "What will the Superior say if I tell her this or that? If I ask her for any remedy, she will say or think that I am so tender." Well, if it is true, why should you not wish her to think it? "But when I tell her what I need, she looks at me so coldly that it seems as if she disapproved." Well, my dear daughter, it may be that the Superior's mind is so full of other things that she is not always able to smile and speak graciously when you are telling her of your ailments, and this, it appears, vexes you and makes you feel unable to speak to her with confidence about them.

My dear daughters! all this is mere childishness; you must act more simply. If the Superior or the Mistress of the Novices happened on one occasion

(I) This event took place in the Visitation Convent of Bourges. The postulant, whose family name was Tillier or Tellier, or perhaps Le Tellier, received in religion the name of Anne-Marie. A short time after the death of St. Francis de Sales, she was miraculously cured by his intercession of the infirmity which so nearly shut her out from the Cloister. (Unpublished History of the Foundation of the Convent of Bourges; cf. *Life of St. F. de Sales*, by P. de la Rivière, Book IV. chap. lxxv.)

not to have received you quite as pleasantly as you would like—if this has even been the case more than once—that is no reason why you should be annoyed and expect that they will always behave in the same way. Oh no! Our Lord will perhaps touch their hearts, and infuse into them His own spirit of sweetness, so that when you next approach them they may treat you much more kindly.

Then, again, we must not be so tender with ourselves as to be always wanting to talk about our trifling ailments, such as a slight headache or toothache, which may probably soon pass off, if only we will bear it for the love of God, instead of telling it to those about us in order to excite sympathy. Perhaps, however, you will not mention it to the Superior or to the Infirmarian, but only to the sisters, giving as your reason that you wish to suffer this for God. Oh, my dear daughter, if you were really willing to suffer this for the love of God, as you think, you would not mention the matter to others, who, as you know, will certainly feel bound to inform the Superior of it. By this means you will get in a roundabout and shifty way, the remedy or relief which it were better to have asked for simply and straightforwardly, from the person who could give you leave to take it. You know perfectly well that the sister to whom you complain of having a distracting headache, has no power to tell you that you may go to bed. The truth is, whatever you may think, that you have mentioned it in order to get a little pity from this sister, and that is good food for your self-love. Of course, it may be that the matter is accidentally

mentioned. If, for instance, the sisters ask you how you are at that very moment, there is nothing wrong then in saying that you have a headache, provided that you speak simply, without exaggeration or foolish lamentations. But, excepting in such a case as this, you must only mention it to the Superior or to the Mistress of Novices (3). This, too, you must do without being frightened, even though they may be somewhat severe in their correction of such a fault. As they have confidence enough in you to correct you, go and tell them your trouble with simplicity. I can easily believe that you would rather tell your ailment to the sister whose business it is not to make you take remedies, than to one whose business it is to do so; for while you are addressing yourself to the former, all are pitying you and racking their brains to suggest and provide remedies, whereas if you were to tell the sister who is in charge of you, you would be bound to submit to her prescriptions; and it is this very submission against which we so passionately rebel—self-love striving to gain entire dominion over us and to master our will.

“But,” you reply, “if I tell the Superior that I am suffering from a headache she will tell me to go to bed.” Well, what does that matter? If you are not really ill enough, it will cost you nothing to

(3) *or to the Mistress of Novices.*—You reply that you are afraid of showing emotion if you tell the Superior about it. Well then, do not speak of the ailment at all—I mean, if it is not one of any importance. I highly approve of the custom of the Carmelite Sisters not to complain of their ailments or to mention them except to the Superior, and the Novices to their Mistress. (MS. and Coll.)

say: "Mother (or sister), it seems to me that I am not ill enough for that." If, however, in spite of your saying this she still insists, you will go quite simply, for always and in all things great simplicity must be observed. To walk with simplicity is the true path of the daughters of the Visitation; in this path they will be pleasing to God, and most secure from stumbling.

Should you, however, see some sister oppressed by trouble of mind, or by some physical infirmity, yet lacking the courage and confidence to come and tell you about it, and should you notice that this reticence is producing melancholy and dejection, ought you to try to draw her to you, or to leave her to come of herself? That depends upon circumstances; for sometimes you must condescend to her weakness by calling her to you and inquiring what is the matter; and sometimes you must mortify these little caprices by leaving her alone, as if you would say: "You will not condescend to ask for the proper remedy for your malady, endure it, then, as well as you can; you deserve it."

This softness and self-pity is far more intolerable when it has to do with mental troubles than when it relates to physical ones. Unfortunately, it is more practised and nourished by spiritual persons, who desire to be saints without its costing them anything—not even the sufferings caused by their lower nature, which resents all opposition. Still, willing or not, we must have the courage to suffer, and consequently to resist the efforts of this rebellious nature, which will occasionally assert itself, unless we wish to be made bankrupts as



regards that perfection which we are striving to attain. I have a great desire that you should always distinguish clearly between the workings of the higher part of your soul and those of the lower, and that you should never be surprised at the manifestations of the lower part, bad as they may be. They are wholly incapable of stopping us on our way, if only we hold firm to the higher part, always pressing on along the road to perfection, without indulging ourselves and wasting time in complaining that we are imperfect and much to be pitied, as if our whole duty consisted in bewailing our misery and misfortune in being so slow and stumbling so often before reaching our goal.

The young girl of whom I spoke just now, showed no emotion when telling me of her defect; on the contrary, she spoke with a courage and calmness which pleased me greatly. Many of us, on the contrary, delight in shedding tears over our deficiencies; that satisfies our self-love so thoroughly. My dear daughters, we must be more generous, and not in the least astonished at discovering ourselves to be liable to a thousand different kinds of imperfections. We must set ourselves to the task of overcoming our various inclinations, tempers, eccentricities, and emotions courageously; we must mortify each one of them as it starts up in its turn. If, in spite of our efforts, we fall from time to time into some fault, do not let us dwell upon it, but, plucking up courage, let us be more faithful on the next occasion, and press on along the path which leads to God and to self-renunciation.

You ask me next how you ought to act if the

Superior, seeing you sadder than usual, should ask you what is the matter; and you, having your mind full of vexations and thoughts that trouble you, feel quite unable to disentangle them, and to tell her what she asks. Well, in that case you must say perfectly simply how the matter stands, in words such as these: "My mind is full of things, but I know not what they are." But you say that you are afraid the Superior will think you have not enough confidence in her to tell her about them. Now, what ought you to care whether she thinks so or not? Why should you trouble yourself, provided that you are doing your duty? What will they say if I do this or that? Or what will the Superior think? These are considerations which cannot be dwelt upon without great detriment to your perfection. You must always remember, when I say this, that I am not talking of the doings of our lower nature, which I make no account of, but I am addressing myself to the higher nature, when I say that you must despise these thoughts of what others will say or think.

This thought suggests itself to you when you have given an account of yourself to your Superior, fearing that you have not sufficiently specified your faults, and imagining to yourself that she will say or think that you were unwilling to tell her everything. Well, remember that it is the same with this as with your confessions, both must be done with equal simplicity. Now tell me, would it be right to say: "If I confess such and such a thing, what will my confessor say or think of me?" By no means; he may think and say what he likes;

provided he has given me absolution, and that I have done my duty, that is enough. After confession, is not the right time for examining ourselves as to whether we have told all that we have done amiss, but is rather a time when we should remain calm and recollected, close to Our Lord, to Whom we have just been reconciled, praising and thanking Him for His benefits, without any necessity to try and recall what we may have forgotten in our confession. In the same way with your manifestation of conscience, say simply what occurs to you, then think no more about the matter. At the same time, as we should not go to Confession well prepared if we were unwilling to examine ourselves, for fear of finding faults which must be confessed, so, also, we must not neglect self-introspection before making our manifestation, for fear of finding something which it would give us pain to tell.

Again, you must not be so soft and weak as to want to tell everything, hurrying off to your Superiors with an outcry at the slightest pain, which really may be gone in a quarter of an hour. You must learn to be courageous in your endurance of these little evils, for which no remedy is to be found. They are, generally speaking, the effects of our imperfect nature; such, for instance, as fickle tempers, varying moods, wishes, and even longings which sometimes sadden us, sometimes impel us to speak, at other times make us hate the idea of doing so. To evils such as these all of us are, and shall continue to be, subject as long as we remain in this transitory and perishable life. As regards, however, the trouble which you say disturbs you, and makes

you unable to keep yourself calm and recollected in the presence of God, unless you hasten to tell the Superior about it, I would bid you observe that this trouble does not perhaps prevent your being recollected in the presence of God, though it may deprive you of all sweetness in this recollection. Now, if this is all, if, as you say, you have the courage and the will to endure it, without seeking any relief, I tell you that you do well in so enduring, even though the effort may cause you some disquietude, unless indeed you are so overwhelmed by it that you can no longer keep your soul near to God. In this case you must go and tell the Superior, not for your own relief, but to get back once again into the presence of God, although it would not be very wrong to do it for relief.

Again, our sisters must not so depend upon the outward tokens of the Superior's affection, that if she does not speak to them exactly as they like, they at once decide that it is because she does not love them.

No; our sisters must esteem humility and mortification too highly, to be made melancholy by a slight suspicion, probably entirely unfounded, that they are not regarded with as much affection as their self-love desires! "But," some one will say, "I have committed a fault against the Superior herself, and I am very much afraid that she will be displeased with me for it, and will think less well of me than she did." My dear sisters, all this trouble is stirred up within you at the command of a certain spiritual father called "self-love," who says: "What! to have failed thus! What will our Mother

think or say of me? Oh, there is no good to be expected of me! I am a poor, miserable creature; I can never do anything to please our Mother;" and such like lamentations. You do not say: Alas! I have offended God, I must have recourse to His goodness, and hope He will strengthen me. No, you say: Oh, I know that God is good, He will pardon my faithlessness. He knows too well how frail I am; but our Mother. . . . We always go back to that same point and begin our lamentations over again.

Of course we must endeavour to please our Superiors, for the great Apostle St. Paul tells us so. Speaking to servants—and the exhortation may be well applied also to children—he says: *Servants, obey in all things your masters*; (1) meaning, take great care to please them. But he also says later: *not serving your masters to the eye*,\* meaning that servants are to beware of doing more in their masters' sight than they would do if they were absent; because the eye of God beholds them always. It is God Whom we should be most careful not to displease in any way, not tormenting ourselves with vain endeavours to please men, a thing which is not always in our power. Let us indeed do our best not to vex or pain any one; but having done that, if through infirmity we should happen to cause some annoyance to our neighbours, let us always fall back upon

(1) These words are not to be found verbatim in the writings of St. Paul. Perhaps St. Francis de Sales is alluding to a passage in the Epistle to the Romans (chap. xii. 17), in which the Greek word *ἐνώπιον* may be construed *in the sight*—"doing good in the sight of men."

\* Eph. vi. 5, 6; Col. iii. 22.

the doctrine I have so often preached to you, and which I desire to imprint so deeply on your hearts. Humble yourselves instantly before God, acknowledging your frailty and feebleness, then repair your fault, if it is a sufficiently grave one, by some act of humility with regard to the person whom you have vexed. Having done that, trouble no more about it, for our spiritual father, (2) the love of God, forbids us to do so, teaching us, that after having made our act of humility, we should retire into ourselves, as it were, hugging to our breast the blessed humiliation of our sense of failure, and the thought of the welcome correction the Superior will give us.

We have two loves, two judgments, and two wills; therefore we must pay no heed whatever to anything that self-love, private judgment, or our own will may suggest. Our one aim must be to make the love of God reign supreme over self-love, and the judgment of Superiors, and even of equals and inferiors, over our own, trampling it under foot. We must not rest content with subjecting our will by doing all that is desired of us, but subject even our judgment, so as to believe that the thing we are commanded to do could not possibly be done in a better way, more fittingly, nor more reasonably. We shall thus be giving the lie absolutely to those reasons brought forward by our own judgment to support the contrary opinion. We may indeed just once simply state our reasons if they seem good to us; but, having done this, we must silently acquiesce in what we are told, and by that means deal the death-blow to our

(2) *for*—another of our spiritual fathers.

own judgment, which we esteem more wise and prudent than that of others.

Ah! Mother, our sisters are so resolved to love mortification, that it will soon be a delight to see them; consolations will be as nothing to them in comparison with sorrows, dryness, and repugnance, so desirous are they to grow in likeness to their Spouse. Help them then in their endeavours; mortify them thoroughly and boldly without sparing them in any way, for this is truly what they ask. They will no longer desire your caresses, since that is contrary to the generosity of their devotion. This will henceforward oblige them to cling only to the one desire of pleasing God, considering nothing else unless it may help them to the fulfilment of that desire. To be disturbed and shaken by every little contradiction that we meet with, is the sign of a want of courage, and a feeble devotion. Never fear that these foolish melancholy tempers and peevish frettings will prevail among us; we have too firm a courage, thanks to God! Henceforth we will endeavour to do so much, that it will be a pleasure to see us. Only remember, my dear daughters, that we must strive for great purity of intention, so that doing all for God, for His honour and glory, we may look to Him only for our reward; His Love will be our guerdon in this life, and He Himself will be our reward in Eternity.

## CONFERENCE XV

### THE WILL OF GOD

*In which it is asked, in what consists the perfect determination to study and to follow the will of God in all things; and whether we can find it in following the will of Superiors, equals or inferiors, which we see proceed from their own natural or habitual inclinations. Also on some notable points concerning Confessors and Preachers (1)*

I WOULD have you know that the determination to follow the will of God in all things, without exception, is contained in the Lord's Prayer. It is in those words we repeat every day: *Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.\** In Heaven there is no resistance to the will of God; all there are subject and obedient to Him, and we ask Our Lord to grant that it may be thus with us, that we may never oppose the slightest resistance to that divine will, but be always, on all occasions, absolutely submissive and obedient to it. Souls, however, having come to this determination need enlightenment as to how they may recognise God's will. On this subject I have spoken very plainly in my book on *The Love of*

(1) *On the subject of condescension. (MS.) On condescension (Coll.)*

\* Matt. vi. 10.



*God* ; \* but still, in order to satisfy the demand made upon me, I will say something more about it. The will of God may be understood in two senses : there is God's will made known to us (His declared will), and there is the will of His good pleasure. The divine will made known to us is divided into four parts : namely, the Commandments of God and of the Church, the Evangelical Counsels, inspirations, and the Rules and Constitutions. Every one must of necessity obey the Commandments of God and of the Church, because this is the absolute will of God, Who has made such obedience the condition of our salvation. His Counsels He indeed wishes us to observe, but not with an absolute will, only with a certain desire. For this reason we do not lose charity or separate ourselves from God, if we lack courage to undertake obedience to His Counsels. Indeed we ought not to attempt the practice of them all, but only of those which are suitable to our vocation ; for some are so absolutely opposed to others, that it would be impossible to undertake to keep them without depriving ourselves of the means of practising others. For instance, it is a Counsel to leave all to follow Our Lord, making ourselves like Him, Who stripped Himself of all things ; it is also a Counsel to lend, and to give alms : tell me, how can he who has left all that he had, give alms out of nothing ? We must then follow those Counsels which God wishes us to follow, and not imagine that He wants us to embrace them all. Now, the Counsels which we in particular are bound to practise are those contained in our Rules.

\* Books viii. and ix.

We have also said that God reveals His will to us by His inspirations. This is true; but yet He does not wish us to decide for ourselves whether our inspirations are really His will or not, and still less to follow them blindly at whatever cost. He does not wish us to expect that He Himself will manifest His will to us, nor that He will send His Angels to teach us what it is; but He desires that in all matters of importance in which we cannot clearly see what we ought to do, we should have recourse to those whom He has set over us to guide us, and that we should submit wholly and absolutely to their counsel and opinion in all that concerns the perfection of our souls. This, then, is the way in which God manifests His will to us; His known will.

There is also, as I have said, the will of God's good pleasure, which we must regard in all events and circumstances that may befall us. In sickness and death, in affliction and consolation, in things adverse and in things prosperous; in short, in all the unforeseen occurrences of life. And to this will of God we must always be ready to submit, whether the thing pleases us or not, in death as well as in life, always providing that it is nothing manifestly opposed to the known will of God, for that must always come first, and this is how I answer the second part of the question. To make this clearer to you, I will tell you something that I have read lately in the Life of the great St. Anselm.\* We are told that all the time that he was Prior and Abbot of his Monastery, he was greatly loved by all because he was so condescending, and so yielding to

\* In Eadmer, I. lib. I, c. vi.

the will of those about him, whether they were his monks, or only strangers. If any one said to him: "Father, your Reverence ought to take a little broth," he took it at once. If another person the next moment said: "Father, that will be bad for you," he left it instantly. Thus in all things in which there was no question of offending God, he submitted to the will of his brethren, who doubtless followed their own inclinations, as did still more seculars who turned him round their fingers as they pleased. Now this extraordinary pliancy and condescension of the Saint was not approved of by all, much as all loved him. One day, therefore, some of his brethren came to remonstrate with him, saying that in their opinion this was not as it should be. They declared that he ought not thus to yield to every one's will, but should make those over whom he was set in authority bend to his.

"My children," said the Saint, "perhaps you do not know why I do this. Remembering that Our Lord has commanded us \* to do to others as we would have them do to us, I cannot act otherwise; for I desire that God should do my will, and therefore I gladly do that of my brethren and my neighbours, hoping that it may please God sometimes to do mine. Moreover, I have another motive, namely, that next to recognising God's will as made known to us, I cannot discover His good pleasure more certainly, than through the voice of my neighbour. For God does not speak to me Himself in words, still less does He send His Angels to make known to me His pleasure. Stones,

\* Matt. vii. 12; Luke vi. 31.

plants, animals do not speak; it is only man then who can declare to me the will of my God, and therefore I attach myself to that as closely as I can. God commands me to show charity to my neighbour; now it is great charity to live in harmony with one another, and I find no better means of effecting this, than by being gentle and considerate. Gentle and humble condescension ought to appear in all our actions. My chief reason, however, is that I believe God manifests His will to me through that of my brethren, and therefore that every time I comply with their wish in anything, I am obeying Him. Moreover, has not Our Lord said that unless we become as *little children* we shall not *enter into the Kingdom of Heaven*?\* Do not wonder then if I am gentle and yielding as a child, since in being so I am only doing as my Saviour has commanded. It is of little consequence whether I go to bed or stay up, whether I go there or remain here, but it would be a great imperfection not to submit in such matters to my neighbour."

So, my dear sisters, you see that the great St. Anselm submitted in everything not contrary to the Commandments of God, or of Holy Church, or of the Rules; for of course to them obedience must take precedence. I feel sure that if they had tried to induce him to do anything in opposition to these, he would not have done it. But apart from this, in matters indifferent, it was his general rule to comply in all things and with the wish of all people. The glorious St. Paul, after having declared † that nothing should *separate him from the*

\* Matt. xviii. 3.

† Rom. viii. 38, 39.

love of God, neither death nor life, nor Angels nor Principalities, and that hell itself, though all its forces were banded together against him, would have no powers to do so, adds: I know nothing better than to make myself *all things to all men,\** to rejoice with them that rejoice, to weep with them that weep,† and to make myself one with all. St. Pachomius being one day busy making mats, a child who was watching the Saint (he took children at that time to instruct them in religion) said to him: "My Father, you are not doing that right; it ought to be done quite differently." The Saint, although he made these mats exceedingly well, got up directly and seated himself close to the child, who showed him how it ought to be done. One of the monks present addressed him in these words: "Father, in yielding to the will of this child you commit two errors, for you expose him to the danger of vanity, and you spoil your mats, which were much better as you were making them before." To this the Saint replied: "My brother, if God permits the child to be vain, perhaps He may give me humility as a reward, and when He has given it me, I shall be able to impart some also to this child. There is no great danger to be apprehended from twisting the rushes one way or another in making mats, but there would be great danger in not laying to heart those celebrated words of Our Saviour, *unless you become as little children,* (2) *you shall not enter into the Kingdom of My Father.*" Oh! my sisters, it is a great blessing

(2) *As little children*—in simplicity, humility, and compliance.

\* Cf. I Cor. ix. 22.

† Rom. xii. 15.

to be so docile and pliable that any one can turn you round his fingers!

Now it is not the saints only who have taught us this practice of the submission of our will, but Our Lord Himself has done so, as much by example as by precept. How by precept? Well, what is the counsel of self-denial, but the absolute renunciation on all possible occasions of doing our own will and exercising our own private judgment, in order to follow the will of another, and to submit ourselves to all, excepting always in that which would offend God. "But," you may say, "I see very clearly that what they wish me to do proceeds from a human will and a natural inclination: and therefore that it is not from an inspiration of God that my Mother or my sister insists upon my doing this or that." No, perhaps God had not inspired this desire, but He has inspired you to obey it, and if you fail to comply, you are going against the determination to do in all things God's will, and consequently neglecting the care you ought to take of your perfection. You must always then submit to what is asked of you in order to do the will of God, provided it be not contrary to that will, as signified to you in the manner above mentioned.

Now, one word respecting the will of creatures. This may be divided under three heads: the will which afflicts us; that which indulges us; and that which is unseasonable and ill-judged. The first, we must make up our minds firmly to accept, without hesitation. Generally speaking, we suffer acutely in thus following the wills of others, as they are for the most part opposed to our own, which

does not like being thwarted. We must therefore accept as a suffering this task of carrying out another's will, and make use of such daily contradictions to mortify ourselves, accepting them calmly and lovingly. As regards the will of indulgence, there is no need of any exhortation to induce us to follow it. We willingly obey in agreeable things, and meet this kind of desire more than half-way, and tender our submission to it. The question here is not as to how we should behave when we come in contact with this sort of order. There is no doubt at all in the matter; but it is very different as regards those wishes which are unseasonable and, as far as we can see, unreasonable. Here is a difficulty indeed! Why should I do the will of one of my sisters, rather than my own? Is not mine quite as much in conformity with the will of God as hers in this trifling matter? Why must I believe that what she tells me to do is an inspiration of God, rather than something quite different which my own will urges me to do?

It is just in such cases as these, my dear sisters, that Almighty God desires us to gain the reward of submission. For if we could always see a reason why we should be ordered or begged to do this or that, there would be no great merit on our part in our doing it, nor should we have any repugnance, because our mind would doubtless acquiesce readily. But when the reasons are hidden from us, then it is that our will rebels, that our judgment resists, and that we are roused to opposition. Now, these are the very occasions when we must overcome ourselves, and with all the simplicity of a child set to the

work, neither discussing the matter nor reasoning about it, only saying: "I know that the will of God is, that I do my neighbour's will rather than my own, and therefore I set myself to do it; without troubling myself to consider whether it is God's will that I should do what I am ordered by the passion or inclination of another, or by an inspiration, or by a reasonable suggestion." In all these small matters simplicity must guide our steps. What would be the sense, I ask you, of spending an hour in meditation to find out whether it is the will of God that I should drink when I am asked to do so, or abstain either as a penance, or from sobriety, and the same in other trifling matters not worth consideration; especially if I see that I can please my neighbour ever so little by doing them?

Neither must we, even in matters of consequence, lose time in thinking what should be our course of action. In such cases we must at once apply to our Superiors to learn what to do. After that, we must think no more about the matter, abiding absolutely by their opinion, since God has given them to us to guide our souls into the perfection of His love. For certainly if we ought to condescend thus to do the will of any chance individual, far more ought we to do this in the case of our Superiors, whom we ought to regard as God's visible representatives, for they are indeed His lieutenants. This is why, even though we may know that they have natural inclinations, and that perhaps passion and sudden impulses move them to command their inferiors, or reprove their faults unreasonably and



harshly, we must not be at all astonished. They are men like others, and consequently liable to have inclinations and passions; but it is not lawful for us to judge that what they command us to do proceeds from passion and inclination, and we must beware of doing so. Even if we know this for a fact, we must still obey quietly and lovingly, or submit to the reproof with humility.

It is true that it is a hard matter for self-love to be exposed to all these things. But remember we should not try to please self-love, or listen to it; but to the divine Lover of our souls, Jesus. He asks of His beloved spouses a holy imitation of that perfect obedience which He rendered, not only to His Father and to His most just and good will, but also to His earthly parents, and even to His enemies, who were assuredly following their own passions when they laid on Him such heavy burdens, and yet Jesus submitted to them, quietly, humbly, lovingly. We shall indeed see clearly that those words of Our Lord which command us to *take up our cross*, must be understood to enjoin taking in good part the contradictions to which holy obedience subjects us at every turn, although they may be slight and unimportant.

I will give you another admirable example to make you understand the value of these little crosses; I mean the value of obedience, self-effacement, and pliability of will in following the desire of any one, but especially that of our Superiors. St. Gertrude became a nun in a convent in which there was a Superior who was aware that the blessed Saint was of a most frail and delicate constitution.

The Superior on this account had her treated more tenderly than the other nuns, not permitting her to practise the austerities customary in that Order. What, then, do you think the poor Religious did in order to become a Saint? Nothing but submit with all simplicity to the Superior's will. And although her fervour would have made her long to do what the others were doing, yet she gave no sign of this. When told to go to bed, she went at once, without a word of reply, being certain that through obedience she would enjoy the presence of her divine Spouse there, as perfectly as if she had been in the choir with her sisters and companions. And to declare the great peace and tranquillity of mind which she acquired by this practice, Our Lord revealed to St. Mechtilde, her companion, that if in this life they desired to find Him, they should seek for Him, first, in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, and after that, in the heart of St. Gertrude.\* We need not be surprised at this, since the Bridegroom in the Cantic of Canticles says † that He reposes *in the midday*. He does not say that He rests in the morning or in the evening, but *at midday*, because at noon there is no shade; and the heart of this great Saint was a true noontide, in which there was no shadow of scruples or of self-will. Her soul could thus fully enjoy the presence of her Beloved, Whose delight was to be with her. In a word, obedience is the salt which gives savour and relish to all our actions, and makes them worthy of eternal life.

\* Liber de Gratia speciali, Pars. VI. c. ii.

† Cap. i. 6.

And now I wish to say a word or two about confession. In the first place, I desire that you should hold your confessors in great honour, for, besides our obligation to reverence the Priesthood, it is incumbent upon us to look upon them as Angels whom God has sent to reconcile us with His divine Majesty.\* And not that only, but we must regard them as the lieutenants of God upon earth, even though they may sometimes show themselves to be but human, liable to imperfections. For instance, should they, prompted by curiosity, ask some question not actually concerning confession, such as: what your name is; whether you do penance; what virtues you practise; whether you are troubled by temptations, and so on—I should answer them, although you are not obliged to do so; for you must never say that you are not allowed to tell them anything except the faults of which you are accusing yourself. No, you must never make use of this device, for it is not true. You can say anything you like in confession, provided that you only speak of what concerns yourself individually, and not of anything that relates to your sisters (3). If you should be afraid of answering some question they ask you, thinking that you might get into difficulties by so doing, as, for instance, any matter as to temptations, which you shrink from speaking about, lest they should want to know them

(3) *in confession*.—What regards yourself individually; but as for your sisters' concerns, you must reply that you know nothing about what penances they may perform, or what virtues they may practise. (MS. and Coll.)

\* Cf. The Spiritual Directory for the Sisters of the Visitation, Art. xi. (Book of Customs, Art. xxi.).

in detail, you can answer: "Father, I have some temptations, but, by the grace of God, I do not think that I have offended His goodness as regards them"; but never say that you have been forbidden to confess this or that. Tell your confessor in good faith all that troubles you, if you wish to do so; but again I warn you, beware of speaking of a third or of a fourth party.

In the second place, we must remember that on our part we have a duty towards our confessors, that, namely, of being silent as to what they say to us, unless indeed it is something which would greatly edify our neighbours; more than that we must not say. If it should happen that they give you some piece of advice which is contrary to your Rules and your manner of living, listen to them with humility and reverence, and then do what your Rules permit, and nothing else. Confessors do not always mean that you must do what they tell you under pain of sin; their advice must be taken as simple direction. At the same time you must esteem and value highly all that is said to you in confession, for you little know how great profit there is in this Sacrament for souls who approach it with the requisite humility. If any confessor should wish to give you for your penance something which would be contrary to your Rule, ask him quietly to change it into another, as being contrary to the Rule you fear to scandalise your sisters by performing it.\* Again, you must never complain of the confessor. If through any fault of his something

\* Cf. The Directory, Art. xi.

occurs in confession to disturb you, you can tell the Superior simply, that you would very much like to go to confession to some one else, without saying any more. By behaving thus you will not disclose the imperfection of the confessor, and yet you will have the comfort of confessing as you please. But this, however, must not be done lightly, or for unimportant reasons. You must avoid extremes, for though it is not well to put up with serious defects in confession, we must not be so sensitive as to be unable to endure some small ones.

In the third place, I wish the sisters of this house to be most careful to specify their sins in confession. I mean, that those who have found nothing requiring absolution, must confess some special sin; for instance, to say that we accuse ourselves of having felt some stirrings of anger, sadness, and so on, is not to the purpose. Anger and sadness being passions, their stirrings within us are not sins, seeing that it is not in our power to prevent them (4). Anger must be unbridled, or it must lead to unbridled actions to be a sin. We must specify something which *is* sin (5).

(4) *anger*.—You might as well say that you had several times been stirred by emotions of joy, for anger is a passion as much as is joy or sadness, and we must not believe that all the emotions of anger are sinful, especially as it is not in our power to prevent these assaults. We shall always be subject to passions, whether we will or no; those monks who pretended to say the contrary were condemned by the Church, and by all Doctors and Councils. (MS. and Coll.)

(5) *which is sin*.—For example: I accuse myself that when I was in the world, I once did such a thing; not saying: I was disobedient; but explaining in what I disobeyed, whether in a slight or grave matter. I wish you to remember this, because it must be put in practice. (MS. and Coll.)

I wish you, moreover, to take great care to be quite truthful, simple, and charitable in confession (truthful and simple are really the same thing), telling your faults clearly, without disguise or artifice. You should remember that you are speaking to God, from Whom nothing can be hidden. You should be also charitable, not bringing your neighbour in any way into your confession. For example, having to confess that you have murmured to yourself, or even to the sisters because the Superior has spoken coldly to you, do not go and say that you murmured at the too harsh correction she gave you; but simply say that you murmured against the Superior (6).

Tell only the evil you have done, and not the cause which urged you to commit it; and never, directly or indirectly, disclose the sins of others in confessing your own, nor give your confessor grounds for suspecting who contributed to your sin. Do not make any useless accusations in confession. You have had imperfect thoughts about your neighbour, thoughts of vanity, or even worse (7); you have

(6) *against the Superior.*—Or quite simply: “I murmured,” and nothing else, unless you are obliged to say whether to yourself or to some one else, for you do not know the danger and the evil there is in this. (MS. and Coll.)

(7) *or even worse.*—If you have deliberately dwelt on such thoughts, say so, in good faith, and the same with wilful distractions; or if, for want of proper preparation at the beginning of office, you have said it with distraction. But if that is not so, do not trouble yourself to say that you were careless about recollection during the time of your prayers, for what will the confessor understand from such an accusation? Besides, you yourself may be mistaken about that, since it is not always our own fault that we are not attentive at our prayers. We must simply do what we can to keep our attention, and when we fail, humble ourselves gently, without scruples as to sin where there

had distractions in your prayers; well, if you have deliberately dwelt upon them, say so in good faith, and do not content yourself with saying that you have not been careful enough in keeping yourself recollected during the time of prayer.

If you have been negligent in rejecting a distraction say so, for these general accusations are of no use in confession.

I also wish, my dear daughters, that in this house great honour should be shown towards those who preach the Word of God. Certainly we are bound to do this, for they are celestial messengers sent to us by God, to show us the road to salvation. We must regard them as such, and not as mere men. For although they do not speak as well as the Angels, yet we must not on that account abate one iota of the humility and reverence with which the Word of God ought to be received, seeing that it is always the same, as pure and as holy as if it were uttered and delivered to us by the Angels. I notice that when I write to people on bad paper, and consequently in bad hand-writing, they thank me for my letters with quite as much affection as when I write to them on the best paper, and in my best hand-writing. And why? because they pay little heed to the inferiority of the paper or of the writing, and think only of me, the writer. So should it be also with the Word of God; we should

is none. If you have been negligent in rejecting a distraction: that is quite another thing; confess it simply without any preamble about your continual want of recollection of the presence of God when at your prayers; for that is of no use at all in confession. (MS. and Coll.)

not regard the person who brings it, or declares it to us. It ought to be sufficient for us that God makes use of this preacher to teach us. And seeing that God honours him so much as to speak by his mouth, how is it that we can possibly fail to respect and honour his person?



## CONFERENCE XVI

### ON ANTIPATHIES

*In what spirit we should receive our reading books, and on the fact that we must not be astonished at seeing imperfections in Religious, even in Superiors.*

MY dear daughters, I sometimes play the part of the barber, sometimes that of the surgeon (1).

(1) I am always ready at a moment's notice, needing no preparation, except that of making the sign of the Cross. Before entering, however, upon the questions put to me, I will mention an idea that often occurs to me, namely, that when, in my sermons, I am reproving vices, I always, though without intending it, touch some special individual. In saying this I anticipate the opinion which our sisters may form as to my speaking at some one in particular concerning any fault which she may have committed; for although such may not be my intention, I should be very glad to do it, and I will explain why. Philosophers, and especially the great Epictetus, draw a great distinction between a barber and a surgeon. They begin by calling attention to the difference to be observed in approaching their shops. As for the barber's, they say it is perfectly delicious, inasmuch as he always has a little child who plays the flute; and his shop is so full of sweet perfumes, that it is all perfume. On the contrary, all the surroundings of the surgery are unpleasant; nothing is to be seen but plasters and ointments, nothing to be heard but the piteous cries and expostulations of the poor patients, exclaiming, Oh! what are you doing to me? Ah! what suffering. The surgeon cuts, cauterises, causes them intense pain; for we all know that bones cannot be set without causing the patient to cry out! Now the barber gives no pain in cutting the beard, because it has no sensation. (MS. and Coll.)

Do you not observe that when I am preaching in the choir, before seculars, I give no pain (2). I only throw perfumes about, I only speak of virtues and of matters likely to console our hearts; I play a little on the flute, and dwell on the praises which we ought to render to God. But in our familiar conferences I come to you in the capacity of surgeon, bringing nothing but plasters and blisters to apply to my dear daughters' wounds, and though they may cry out a little, I shall but press my hand the firmer to make the plaster stick closer, and so to cure them. If I make an incision, it will not be done without giving my daughters some pain; but I do not care, that is why I am here. Those who live in the world might be scandalised, on account of their mistaken notion that Religious, and persons vowed to perfection, ought to have no imperfections. As for us, my dear daughters, we know perfectly well that this is impossible, and therefore we have no fear of scandalising each other by frankly avowing our little infirmities.

The first question then is: What is antipathy? Antipathies are certain inclinations which are sometimes natural, and which excite in us a certain repugnance towards those for whom we entertain these feelings; a repugnance which prevents us from liking their conversation, or at least from taking that pleasure in it which we feel with regard to others, for whom we have a certain attraction, because

(2) *no pain*—for I do not, generally speaking, touch on special faults with the same familiarity as in our private conferences, on account of the seculars who are listening to me. (MS. and Coll.)

there is between their mind and ours a reciprocity and union of tastes and feelings, which makes us feel for them a natural affection.

Here is a proof that it is perfectly natural that we should love some people and not others by a kind of instinct. Is it not often the case (so say the philosophers who advance this proposition) that two men enter a tennis-court where two others are playing tennis, and at once make up their minds which of the two players they wish should win? They have never seen either of them before, they have never heard them spoken of, and not knowing which is the superior in skill, they have no reason to like one better than the other. Why is this? Well, we must confess that this instinctive attraction to love some more than others is natural; and is to be seen in the brute creation, which is unreasoning, and has nevertheless attractions and antipathies. To prove this, take the instance of a lamb only a few hours old. You show it the skin of a wolf; the creature is dead, but nevertheless the lamb will run away, bleat and tremble, and hide itself at its mother's side. Show it a horse, which is a far larger animal, and it will not evince the slightest sign of fear, but will be ready to play with it. The only explanation of this is that a natural instinct attracts it to the one, and makes it shrink from the other.

Now, we must not dwell too much upon these instinctive antipathies or attractions, provided all are kept in reasonable subjection. If I feel a repugnance to conversing with a person whom yet I know to be most excellent, and from whom I

might learn much that would do me good, I must not give way to the antipathy which prompts me to avoid his society. On the contrary, I must force myself to listen to the voice of reason telling me rather to seek his company, or at least, if I am already in it, to remain there with a quiet, peaceful mind. There are, however, people who are so much afraid of getting to dislike those whom they instinctively loved at one time, that they avoid intercourse with them, for fear of finding some defect in their character which might deprive this friendship of its sweetness (3).

What remedy is there for these antipathies, since no one, however perfect, can be exempt from them? People who are of a harsh, severe disposition will dislike those who are gentle and mild. They will regard such gentleness as extreme weakness, though indeed it is the quality most universally beloved. The only remedy for this evil, as indeed for all other kinds of temptation, is simply to turn away from it, and think no more about it. But the misfortune is that we are always too anxious to find

(3) *this friendship*.—These friendships are commonly called "walet-friendships," because they rest on one side.

I once knew a man who was of this humour. We were college friends; he loved me very much, and yet the more he loved me, the more he avoided my society. This astonished me much, as I had never done anything to displease him. At last we *did* meet, and he told me plainly that he shrank from coming in contact with me, fearing that he might not be able to love me as much as he had formerly done. In further explanation he added, that as soon as he met with the slightest imperfection or defect in those he loved, he ceased at once to feel any pleasure in his affection for them, and this, if they only made use of an ill-chosen word, or failed in perfect propriety of behaviour. (MS. and Coll.)

out whether or not we really have any reason for our antipathy to some person. Oh, we must never amuse ourselves with trying to discover this; for our self-love, which never slumbers, will gild the pill for us so well, as to make us believe it good. I mean, that it will make us see that we have certain reasons which seem good to us, and these being approved by our private judgment and our self-love, there is no longer anything to prevent us from regarding them as just and reasonable. We must indeed beware of this, and it is so important a matter that I must speak a little more about it. There is never any reason for our feeling an antipathy, and still less for our wishing to nourish it. If you have simply a natural instinctive dislike to any one, I beseech you to pay no attention to it, to turn away your thoughts from it and so trick your own mind. When, however, you find that it is going too far, beyond the bounds of reason, you must fight against it and overcome it, for reason will never permit us to foster antipathies and evil inclinations, for fear of offending God. Now when, as regards our antipathies, we do nothing worse than speak a little less pleasantly to a person than we should do to any one for whom we felt a strong affection, it is no great matter; indeed it is scarcely in our power to do otherwise, when under the influence of this emotion, and it would be wrong to require it of us.

The second question is: How ought we to behave with regard to the books which are given to us to read? The Superior will give to one of the sisters a book treating well of the virtues, but because she

does not like it, she will derive no profit from her reading. She will read it carelessly and inattentively; the reason is that she has its contents at her fingers' ends, and she would very much prefer to read another. Now I tell you plainly that it is an imperfection to wish to choose any book but the one given to you, and it is also a proof that we read rather to satisfy our curiosity of mind than to profit by our reading (4). If we read for profit, and not for self-gratification, we should be as well satisfied with one book as another, or at least we should cheerfully accept what our Superior gave us to read. More than this, I assure you we ought to take pleasure in reading the same book, and no other, over and over again, provided it were good and spoke of God; since if it contained no word but that name of God we should be content, for we should always find enough to practise after having read and re-read it several times. To wish to read only what satisfies our curiosity, is a proof that we are still somewhat light-minded, and that we do not yet take sufficient delight in practising the virtues we read about in those little books on the virtues; for they treat of humility and mortification, which we certainly do not practise when we do not accept them cheerfully.

To say: "Because I do not like a book, I shall gain no profit from it," is illogical. And to say, "I know it already by heart, so I cannot possibly find pleasure in reading it," is childishness. If a book you already know almost or entirely by heart

(4) *reading*.—The mind has a curiosity of its own, just as much as the body, and the eyes. (MS. and Coll.)

is given to you, thank God for it, since you will all the more easily understand its teaching. If you are given one that you have already read several times, humble yourself, and be assured that it is the will of God that you should be occupied rather in practising virtues, than in learning about them. In His loving-kindness, He gives the volume to you for the second or third time because you did not sufficiently profit by your first reading (5). But the root of all this evil is, that we continually seek after our own satisfaction, and not after the highest possible perfection. If it should happen that the Superior, out of regard to our infirmity, should allow us to choose the book which we wish to read, we can do it with all simplicity; but otherwise, we must submit humbly to all that the Superior orders, whether we like it or not, without ever showing any repugnance to such submission.

The third question is: Whether or not you ought to be surprised at seeing imperfections in each other, or even in Superiors. As regards the first point, most certainly you ought not to be in the least astonished at seeing imperfections here just as in other religious houses, however perfect they may be. You will never be so perfect as not to be liable, from time to time, to be betrayed into some imperfections, according to the temptations which may beset you. It is nothing very extraordinary for a person who has nothing to vex or try her to lead a very peaceful and faultless life. When I am told: "There is

(5) *reading*.—I have told you before that a Religious having asked St. Thomas Aquinas what means he should take to become more learned, the Saint replied that he should only read one book.

some one who is never seen to commit an imperfection," I immediately ask: "Has she any post of duty in the Community?" If they answer "no," I do not think much of her perfection, for there is a great difference between the virtue of such a one, and that of another who is much tried, either inwardly by temptations, or outwardly by contradictions (6). Those who are placid and gentle as long as they meet with no contradiction, and who have not gained this virtue at the sword's point, are apparently most exemplary and edifying; but let them be put to the proof, let them be suddenly tried, and you will see them stirred up, showing that their gentleness was not a strong and solid virtue, but imaginary rather than real.

There is a great difference between getting rid of a vice, and acquiring its contrary virtue. Many people seem to be most virtuous, who yet in reality have no virtue at all, because they have never striven to acquire it. It often happens that our passions slumber and become torpid, and if, while they are in this state, we do not lay in a supply of strength to enable us to fight and resist them when they wake up again, we shall be worsted in the battle. We must always remain humble, and not believe that we possess virtues, even though we may not, as far as we know, commit the contrary faults. There are certainly many people who are so mistaken as to think, that those who profess perfection ought never to lapse into imperfections, and especially

(6) It is one of God's great mercies to us when He permits us to be severely tried either outwardly by contradictions, or business, or inwardly by temptations. (Coll.)



Religious. It seems to them that it is only necessary to enter Religion to become at once perfect; but this is not so. Religious Orders are not formed for the purpose of gathering together perfect people, but of those who have the courage to aim at perfection (7).

“But what is to be done, if we see imperfections in Superiors as well as in others? Are we not to be astonished at that, since those who are imperfect are surely not raised to the position of Superiors?” Alas! my dear daughters, if we wait to find a perfect Superior to set over a Community, we must ask God to send some Saint or Angel to fill the post, for neither men nor women will be found suitable for it. Of course, we try to find such as are not likely to set a bad example; but as to their being absolutely free from imperfections, we do not trouble about that, provided they have the necessary

(7) *perfection*.—And perfection is not simply charity, for all those who are in a state of grace have charity, but it must be a fervent charity which will make us undertake not only to extirpate our vices, but also strive faithfully to acquire their contrary virtues. I will tell you what has happened to me tolerably often. On one occasion I asked some women living in the world, but happening to be staying in this house, if they would truthfully answer a question which I was going to put to them; and as they replied that they would, I inquired what impression the daughters of the Visitation produced upon them. Some answered directly that they had found a great deal more good among them than they had ever expected to find. I thanked God for that. Others, however, to whom I addressed the same question, replied that there was a great deal of difference between reading the Rule and seeing it practised, because the Rule was like sugar and honey, sweetness and perfection itself, whereas among the sisters you could not help noticing some imperfections; on hearing which, I smiled to myself, seeing that they thought because the Rules were so perfect, there ought to be no imperfections in the Community. (MS. and Coll.)

qualities of mind, especially as many who are really more perfect, are yet less capable of being Superiors. Let me ask you, has not Our Lord Himself shown us this in the choice which He made of St. Peter to be the head of all the Apostles? We all know of his grievous sin at the time of his Divine Master's Passion and death, idly conversing with a waiting-maid, and miserably denying his dearest Lord, Who had done so much for him; boasting and professing such devotion, and then taking to flight. Yes, and even after he had been confirmed in grace by the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, we find him committing a fault of such gravity that St. Paul, writing to the Galatians,\* tells them that he had *withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed*. And not only St. Peter, but St. Paul and St. Barnabas also, when they were going forth to preach the Gospel, disputed together. St. Barnabas wished to take with them John Mark, his cousin; St. Paul, being of contrary opinion, was unwilling that he should accompany them. St. Barnabas refused to give way to St. Paul, and they separated; St. Paul going to preach in one country, and St. Barnabas, with his cousin John Mark, in another.† It is, however, true that Our Lord brought good out of this dispute; for, instead of their preaching in only one part of the earth, they scattered the seed of the Gospel in various places.

Never let us for a moment think that while we are in this life we can be free from imperfections. This is impossible, whether we be Superiors or sub-

\* Chap. ii. 11.

† Acts xv. 37-42.

ordinates, since we are all human; consequently we must firmly believe this truth, in order that we may never be astonished at finding ourselves subject to imperfections. Our Lord has commanded us to say every day those words in the *Pater*: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us*; and there is no exception to this command, since we all need to obey it. It is, then, unreasonable to say such a one is a Superior, and must therefore be free from anger and other imperfections. You are perhaps astonished, on coming to speak to the Superior, that she should say something to you less gently than usual, probably because her head is full of business and cares (8). Your self-love goes away much disturbed, instead of thinking that God has permitted this little coldness on the part of the Superior in order to mortify this self-love, which was seeking for caresses. But, indeed, we are always much disturbed at meeting with mortifications where we did not seek them. Alas! you ought to have gone away, praying to God for the Superior, and thanking Him for this salutary contradiction. In a word, my dear daughters, let us remember the words of the great Apostle St. Paul: \* *Charity thinketh no evil*; (9) meaning to say that, directly she sees it, she turns

(8) *full of*—hammers, stones, mortar, owing to her great anxiety to push on the work of building. (MS. and Coll.)

(9) *Charity*—seeketh *no evil*. It does not say that she sees no evil, but that she seeks it not—that is to say, that though she may be doubtful whether what she sees is not evil, she will not search further into it; she simply believes that it is not there. (MS. and Coll.) But when she sees it (for it is impossible that we should not see it on many occasions) the Apostle says that *Charity thinketh no evil*. (Coll.)

\* 1 Cor. xiii. 5.

away from it, without thinking about it, or amusing herself with dwelling on it.

Touching this point, you go on to ask me whether the Superior or Novice Mistress ought to manifest the dislike they have to sisters seeing their faults, and what they ought to say when one of them comes openly accusing herself of having in thought or word judged her Superior's actions, attributing to her some imperfection—as, for instance, thinking that a correction had been given with temper. Well, I reply that in such a case the Superior ought to humble herself, and have recourse to the love of abjection. If, however, the sister, in making the self-accusation, seems distressed, the Superior should treat the matter lightly, turning the conversation, but none the less treasuring the humiliation in her heart, for we must be careful not to lose through self-love the opportunity of seeing that we are imperfect, and of humbling ourselves. Therefore, though we restrain the outward act of humility, for fear of grieving the poor sister, who is already sufficiently troubled at having nourished such a thought, we must not fail to make the act. If, however, the sister, on the contrary, is not the least disturbed when so accusing herself, I think it well that the Superior should frankly own herself in the wrong, if she be so; but if the judgment is false, she ought humbly to say that it is, cherishing, nevertheless, the humiliation brought on her by being thought to be in the wrong.

I want you to see that this virtue—namely, the love of self-abjection—must never be one step away from our hearts; because we need it at every moment,

however far advanced we may be in perfection. We need it continually, I repeat, because our passions are always liable to wake up again; sometimes even after we have lived a long time in Religion, and after having made great progress in perfection. I will give you an instance of this. One of the monks of St. Pachomius, named Sylvanus, who in the world had been an actor and juggler by profession, having been converted, entered upon the Religious life. He passed the year of his probation and several succeeding years in the practice of the most exemplary mortification, never betraying the slightest remembrance of his former occupation. At the end, however, of twenty years, under pretext of amusing the brothers, and believing that his passions were so completely mortified that they would never outstep the bounds of simple recreation, he thought he might again practise some of his old tricks. Alas! the poor man had deceived himself, for the passion of jesting woke up again within him so violently, that folly degenerated into licence, and this to such an extent that it was determined to dismiss him from the monastery. This, indeed, would have been done if one of his brother monks had not pledged himself for Sylvanus, promising his amendment—a promise most fully redeemed, for Sylvanus in due course became a great saint. You see, then, my dear sisters, that we must never forget what we once were, lest we should become even worse, and never think that we are perfect because we do not commit many imperfections.

We must also beware of astonishment if we find

that we have passions, for we shall never be exempt (10) from them. Those hermits who asserted the contrary were censured by the sacred Council,\* and their opinion was condemned and pronounced to be erroneous. We shall always, then, commit some faults; but we must try to make them so rare that there may not be more than two in fifty years, that being the number committed by the Apostles, during the time they lived after they had received the Holy Ghost. If, however, three or four, or even seven or eight, should occur in that period, we must not grieve or lose courage, but take heart and strengthen ourselves to do better. One word more for the Superior. The sisters ought not to be surprised that the Superior commits imperfections, since St. Peter, Chief Pastor as he was of Holy Church, and universal Superior of all Christians, fell into a fault, and that so grave a one that he deserved correction for it, as says St. Paul. Neither must the Superior show any astonishment if her faults are noticed; but she should observe the humility and gentleness with which St. Peter received the correction of St. Paul, whose Superior, nevertheless, he was. It is hard to say which is the most to be admired, the strength of St. Paul's courage in reproofing St. Peter, or the humility with which St. Peter submitted to the correction given to him; and this for a matter, remember, in which he had thought to do well, and had a most excellent intention. Now let us pass on.

You ask, in the fourth place, if it should ever

(10) *exempt*—while we are in this life. (MS. and Coll.)

\* Conc. Ephes., Pars. II. Act vii.

happen that a Superior was so much inclined to please secular persons, under the pretext of doing them good, that she neglected her duties towards the sisters placed under her care; or, again, if she spent so much time in the parlour, that she had not enough to give to the affairs of the household; you ask, I say, whether she should not be obliged to curb this inclination, even though her intention might be good. To that I reply that Superiors ought to be exceedingly affable to seculars (11), so as to help them, and should cheerfully give up part of their time to these persons. But, then, how large, think you, should be that portion of time? It should be a twelfth, the remaining eleven parts being employed in the house, in the care of the family.

Bees, indeed, from time to time quit their hive, but only from necessity or for purposes of utility, returning to it as quickly as possible. \ The queen-bee very rarely comes out—only, indeed, when the bees are swarming; and then she is quite surrounded by her little subjects. A Religious Community is a mystic hive occupied by celestial bees, gathered together there to store up the honey of heavenly virtues. \ For this reason the Superior, who is among them as their queen, should be most careful to keep them close to her, so as to teach them how to acquire and to preserve these virtues. She must not, however, on that account neglect conversing with lay people when necessity or charity

(11) To that I reply that Superiors are individuals who are meant to do good not only to persons inside the convent, but also to those who are outside.

demands it; (12) but beyond that the Superior must be brief with them. I say, beyond the demands of necessity and charity, because there are some persons of high consideration who must not be offended. [Religious must never waste time with seculars, under pretext of acquiring friends for their Order.] Most certainly there is no need for that, for if they stay quietly within, doing their various duties, they need not doubt but that Our Lord will provide their Order with the friends they need. But supposing that when the bell rings for Office, the Superior is unwilling to obey its call, for fear of vexing those with whom she is conversing at the moment? Well, we must not be so weak, for unless these persons are of great distinction, or come very seldom, or from a great distance, we must not absent ourselves from the Office or prayer, except when charity absolutely demands it. As for the ordinary visits of people to whom an excuse can easily be made, the Portress ought to say that our Mother or the sisters being at prayer, or Office, the visitors will perhaps kindly wait, or come another time. But if it should happen that some pressing necessity calls them to the parlour at that particular hour, then time must be made later, as far as possible, for the omitted meditation; for as regards the Office, there is no doubt about our being obliged to say that.

Now, with regard to the last question, which is,

(12) *demands it.*—For instance, with some very worldly lady who may desire to be converted, quitting the vanities of life to follow truth and piety, and who may therefore greatly need the Superior's assistance to give her necessary advice and counsel; but, &c. (MS. and Coll.)



whether there ought to be some little distinction between the Superior and the sisters in the matter of food and clothing? Well, that is soon answered. I say, certainly not—there must be no sort of difference, unless it happens to be on account of a need which might occur in the case of any one of the sisters. She must not even have a special chair, except in the choir and at chapter; and in that chair the Assistant must never seat herself, although in all other things the same respect must be shown to her as to the Superior (of course, in the absence of the latter); but in the refectory there must be no distinction either as regards her seat or anything else. Although she must be treated with great respect as a person in authority, yet she must not affect any kind of singularity, or, at least, as little as possible. Of course, exception is always to be made in cases of necessity; for instance, if she were very old or infirm, a special chair might be given to her for her comfort and relief. We must carefully avoid everything which makes us appear somewhat above others; I mean, pre-eminent and remarkable. The Superior ought to be recognised and distinguished by her virtues, and not by any unnecessary distinctions, especially among us of the Order of the Visitation, who desire to make a special profession of great simplicity and humility. Such honours are all very well for those Religious houses in which the Superior is called “my lady,” but for us there must be nothing of the kind.

Is there anything more to be said? What must we do to preserve the spirit of the Visitation, and to prevent it from deteriorating? Well, the only

way is to keep it firmly enclosed in the observance of the Rules. "But," you say, "there are some who are so jealous of this spirit, that they do not wish to communicate it to any one beyond the house." In this kind of jealousy there is an excess which must be cut off; for, pray, how could it be fitting to hide from your neighbour what might profit him? For my own part, I wish that all the good in the Visitation could be known and acknowledged by every one; and for that reason I have always been of opinion that it would be well to have the Rules and Constitutions printed, so that, seeing them, many might derive benefit from them. Would to God, my dear sisters, that numbers of people might be found willing to practise them! We should very soon see great changes in those who do so, resulting in glory to God, and the salvation of their own souls. Be very careful to preserve the spirit of the Visitation, but not in such a way as would prevent you from communicating it to your neighbour, charitably and with simplicity, to each according to his capacity; and do not fear that it will suffer by this communication, for charity never injures anything, but perfects everything. Blessed be God!

*Omitted from the Conference on Antipathies*

I am asked if you may complain to the Spiritual Father, or Confessor, when you are dissatisfied with the Superior. Complain! Oh, my daughter! Have I not told Philothea that, "generally speaking,

those who complain, sin"?\* Now, to complain to the Superior when a sister has mortified us, is just to be tolerated in an imperfect Religious; but to complain to a sister that the Superior has done so! Well, I have really nothing to say about that, except that, without mincing matters, if any one is inclined to such a fault, she must amend at once. But, above all, to complain of the Superior to any outside person! Truly, that must never be done under any circumstances; it is too grave a fault. If the Superior should give any occasion for complaint, I should tell her so quite trustfully, or inform her of it through her Coadjutrix as the Constitution directs.†

You ask if it is allowable to name to the Superior, the sister who repeated to us something which she may have said to our disadvantage. I reply: Certainly not, my dear daughters, and the Superior ought not to ask you to do so. To go to a sister and tell her that the Superior has said this or that of her, is a more serious fault than you may think, and the Superior ought to correct it most severely; to show her Community the grievousness of the offence, and the beauty of its contrary virtue; but this must always be done without naming the delinquent. For remember, my dear daughters, we may declare our venial sins, clearly and openly before the whole world, in order to humble ourselves, but not our mortal sins, because we are not masters of our reputation. With still stronger reason are we bound to cover those of our neighbour, at the same time bestowing on her that

\* Part III. chap. iii.

† Constit. xxxv.

fraternal correction which the Constitution prescribes.\* A sister has perhaps spoken passionately in the presence of others, or murmured a little, or been cold and stiff in manner. Well, you can tell all that to the Superior, even admonishing her of it in chapter or in the refectory.

We ought certainly to be so sincerely anxious for the peace and tranquillity of our dear sisters, as never to do or say anything which might vex them. Now, nothing can afflict a poor sister more than to believe that the Superior is displeased with her. Shall I not, then, commit a great sin, reporting to her some slight remark the Superior may have made thoughtlessly, and which in the repetition will appear much more important than it really is, and so will keep this poor heart in pain and grief? She who does this is guilty of two wrongs; she violates charity, and speaks of a private matter. In God's name, my dear daughters, never do that. Generally speaking, I would not even have you tell the Superior the names of the sisters who may have spoken against her. You might tell her that such and such a thing which she has done has been disapproved of, but I should not say who expressed this disapproval; for, my dear daughters, if we have not the fervour and purity of charity, we shall never arrive at perfection (13).

(13) We owe more respect and honour to our Superiors than to our good Angels, because our good Angels are only the ambassadors of God, and our Superiors hold the place of God Himself; since our Lord has said: *He that heareth you, heareth Me* (speaking of Superiors), *and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me.* (MS.)

\* Constit. xxv.

You say, if a sister is too timid to express the secrets of her heart to the Superior, or, in her absence, to the Assistant, in matters in which she needs enlightenment, what must she do? My dearest daughters, the Superior, or, in her absence, the Assistant, ought readily and cheerfully to give her permission to speak to any one of the sisters whom she pleases, and in giving this permission, to show no dislike or coldness. At the same time, it is true, that if the sister were to go on doing this she would be imperfect; for she is bound to see God in her Superiors, and in what they say to her; private individuals can never be of equal service to her.

Again, you wish to know whether you ought to obey, if the Superior orders you to do something contrary to the Commandments of God and of His Church. Certainly not, my dear daughters; but then, I must tell you that Superiors approved by the Pope may, in a case of necessity, dispense from certain Commandments of the Church. For instance, on a special fasting day, such as a vigil, the Superior sees a sister languid and fatigued, and may then, as a matter of duty, indeed, say to her: "Do not fast." If, however, it were for the whole of Lent, or for eating forbidden food, the dispensation must be obtained from the Confessor. But suppose the thought occurs to her: "This sister has not enough the matter with her to prevent her fasting?" Still, we must not be too scrupulous; in this regard the Church always wishes us to incline to charity, rather than to austerity. Yes, my dear daughters, if after having represented that you really do not

think you are ill enough to be dispensed from fasting, the Superior still insists that you are, obey her without scruple. If, however, she says that you are to act according to your own judgment and your own feelings, then do so with a holy liberty.

I must tell you again, my daughters, that Holy Church is not so rigorous by any means as you think. Supposing one of the sisters is sick, though only of tertian fever, and that on a Holiday of obligation her attack of fever is sure to come on exactly at the time of Mass, you may and should lose Mass to stay with her, even though no harm would come to her if she were left alone; for remember, charity and the holy, sweet love of our dear Mother the Church are above all things.

## CONFERENCE XVII

### ON VOTING IN A COMMUNITY

*In which it is asked how and for what motive we should give our vote, either to those who are to be admitted to Profession, or to those who are to be received into the Novitiate.*

Two things are requisite to make the giving of our vote to such persons right and fitting; the first, that it should be given to those who are truly called by God; the second, that they should possess the qualities necessary for our mode of life. As regards the first point—namely, that a subject should be really called by God to enter Religion—it must be understood that when I speak of such a calling and vocation, I am not alluding to that general vocation by which our Lord calls all men to Christianity, or to that of which it is said in the Gospel \* that *many are called but few are chosen*. For God, Who *desires* to give to *all* eternal life,† gives to all the means of attaining it, and therefore calls them to Christianity and has *chosen* them. Those who respond to this call, follow the attraction of God; the number of those who arrive at the end, however, is very small in comparison with those who *are called*.

\* Matt. xx. 16; xxii. 14.

† 1 Tim. ii. 4.

But, speaking more particularly of the religious vocation, I say that *many are, indeed, called by God into Religion*; but there are few among them who maintain and persevere in their vocation. Many begin well, but are not faithful in corresponding to grace, nor persevering in the practice of that which is able to preserve their *vocation* and to render it true and secure.\* Again, there are others who are not actually called; but nevertheless, having come, their vocation has been made good and ratified by God. So it is often with those who enter Religion from a feeling of wretchedness and weariness of all things; for although such vocations do not seem good, yet some have been known to come in this way, and to have served God faithfully. Others, again, have been impelled to enter Religion by some disaster or misfortune which befell them in the world, or by some failure in health, or loss of personal beauty; and although these motives are not in themselves good, yet God makes use of them to call such persons. In truth, the ways of God *are unsearchable and His judgments incomprehensible*.† He is admirable in the very variety of vocations and in the means He makes use of to call His creatures to His service, all which means should be honoured and revered.

Now, in this great variety of vocations, it is naturally a very difficult thing to recognise those which are true. Nevertheless, in giving our vote, the first requisite is to know whether the person proposed is truly called. How, then, with this diversity of vocations and the many different motives

\* 2 Peter i. 10.

† Rom. xi. 33.



for entering Religion, can we distinguish the good from the bad? This is certainly a matter of great importance, and of extreme difficulty. We are not, however, entirely without means of testing the reality of a vocation. I will mention one amongst many, because I consider it to be the best of all. If a person shows a firm and persevering determination to serve God in the manner and place to which His divine Majesty calls her, she gives the best proof we can have that she has a true vocation.

Observe, however, that when I say a firm and persevering will to serve God, I do not say that from the very beginning she will behave in her vocation with such firmness and constancy that she will feel no repugnance, difficulty, or disgust in the discharge of the duties required by this vocation. No, I do not say that; still less that this firmness and constancy will be such as to exempt her from committing faults. Nor do I say that these virtues will make her so strong and firm that she will never falter or vary in what she has undertaken, which is to use all the means which can lead her on to perfection. That is most certainly not what I mean, for all mortals are subject to passions, changes, and vicissitudes; we love one thing (1) to-day, and another

(1) *one thing*.—To-day we love humility, and exclaim, therefore: "Ah! what a lovable virtue is humility! It is surely the most admirable and the most necessary of all!" And so that day we are bent upon trying with all our strength to acquire it. But on the morrow we shall be disgusted with it; or, at least, not prize or esteem it as we did yesterday. We shall say that it is certainly a very great virtue, but not the most lovable of all; and then it is really quite piteous to think of all the trouble that must be taken to acquire it, with such small results, or even none at all. See how changeable and inconstant we are! It is not, &c.

to-morrow, and one day is never like another. It is not by these different emotions and feelings, then, that we must judge of the firmness and constancy of that good purpose which has been once formed. We must consider whether, amid all these varied emotions, the will remains firm and unchangeably resolved to cling to its good purpose; and whether, in spite of all coldness and disgust, it is still determined to persevere in the means prescribed for acquiring virtue. Thus you see that, in order to have signs of a good vocation, it is not necessary to possess visible constancy, but it must reign effectively in the higher will.

If, then, we desire to know whether God wishes us to enter Religion or not, we must not wait until He speaks to our senses, or until He sends an Angel from heaven to signify His will to us; still less is it necessary to have revelations on the subject. Neither are ten or twelve learned doctors of the Sorbonne wanted to examine us and find out whether the inspiration is good or bad, whether it must be followed or not; but we must correspond to the first impulse and cultivate it, not troubling ourselves at all if, afterwards, any disgust or tepidity should come upon us; for if we always try to keep our will firm in desiring the good which has been shown to us, God will not fail to make all succeed and redound to His glory. Now, when I say this, I speak not only for you, but also for the aspirants who are in the world, for whom we certainly ought to care, helping them in their good intentions. When these good desires awaken in them in all the strength of their first fervour, nothing seems difficult to them—

or, at least, every difficulty appears easy to surmount. But when they are shaken by vicissitudes, and when their good feelings no longer make themselves sensible to their lower nature, then at once they imagine that all is lost, and that all they had aimed at must be abandoned; they desire, and yet they do not desire; what they feel then is not sufficient to make them quit the world. "I desire," says one of these young girls, "to enter Religion, but I do not know whether it is the will of God that I should do so, and I am the more uncertain because the inspiration which I feel at this moment does not seem to me strong enough. It has been much stronger than it is at present, but as that strength did not last, I must believe that it was not a good inspiration."

Certainly, one meets with such souls, and I am not in the least surprised at their fits of disgust and tepidity; still less do I believe that, because of them, their vocation is not a true one. The only thing to be done is to be most careful to help them and teach them not to be astonished at these changes, encouraging them to remain firm amid all their varying moods. "Pay no attention to all that," I say to them. "Tell me, did you not feel in your heart an inspiration, or longing, after so great a good?" "Oh yes," they reply, "we certainly did; but it very soon passed away." "Yes," I rejoin, "the strength of the feeling, perhaps, but not in such a way that no affection of the kind was left within you." "Oh no," they answer, "for we always feel some indescribable attraction drawing us in that direction; but what troubles us is, that it does not seem strong enough for such a resolution." I tell

them, in reply, that they must not trouble themselves so much about those sensible affections, nor examine them so closely and minutely; that they are to be contented with that constancy of will which, amid all disturbances, never loses the love of its first intention; that they need only be careful to cultivate this sedulously, and to correspond well to this first stirring of the soul. "Do not trouble yourselves," I say, "as to the quarter from which this intention comes, for God has many ways of calling His servants into His service."

Sometimes He makes use of sermons, at other times of the reading of good books. There are those who have been called by hearing the holy words of the Gospels, like St. Francis and St. Anthony, whose vocations came to them when listening to these words: (2) *Go, sell all that thou hast and give it to the poor, and follow Me;\** and, *Whosoever will come*

(2) Preaching, like a divine seed, is scattered over the soil of our hearts by the lips of the preacher; but God also makes use of other means. It is true that use is made of this particular means more than of any other for the conversion of heretics and infidels. And by the means of preachers, many have been so much touched as not only to become Christians, but even to obey the Voice of God, calling them to special vocations, such as that of the Religious life. This was the case with St. Nicholas of Tolentius, who, listening to the sermon of a good Father on the Martyrdom of St. Stephen, and hearing it said that the saint saw the heavens open, and the Son of God sitting at the right hand of His Father, was so deeply touched that he at once resolved to quit the world, and never rested till he became a Religious, and so good a one that he lived and died in the odour of sanctity. The instances of those who, like him, have been called to God by preaching, are almost innumerable. Others have been touched by the reading of good books, others by the holy words of the Gospel, like St. Francis and St. Anthony, whose, &c.

\* Matt. xix. 21.

after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me\* (3). Others have been called by weariness, disasters, and sorrows which came upon them in the world, and which led them to loathe and abandon it. Our Lord has often made use of such

(3) *and follow Me.*—And many others quitted all, and in the most admirable manner did that which Our Lord commands us in these words to do. How many, too, have been called to God by the reading of good books? Truly, a countless multitude! Certain gentlemen, reading the Life of St. Anthony, were so much touched that they quitted at once the service of their earthly sovereign, to serve the King of Heaven. Among other books, Grenada's famous *Sinner's Guide* has been of service to many, inspiring them with a strong determination to quit the world and to enter Religion. It is, indeed, a most excellent book, full of admirable and inspiring thoughts. Several Religious have told me that they have known many persons who, while reading this book of Grenada's, were called by God to quit the world, and I myself have spoken to numbers who have assured me that they received their vocation through the perusal of this book.

You have no doubt read the Life of the Blessed Father Ignatius of Loyola, Founder and first Father of the Jesuits. It was the reading of good books that first inspired him. He was a gentleman of good family, a brave soldier, and stood high in the world's estimation. The beginning of his conversion was this. Being severely wounded in the thigh by an arquebuse, he was carried to his house that the wound might be dressed; and having to remain there for a long time until it should be properly healed, he grew very weary, and asked for some books on military subjects to amuse him. Instead of such, however, they brought him *The Flowers of the Saints*, not the one written by Father Rebadeneira, who was not born at that time, but other *Flowers* then existing; and, reading them, he was so much touched that he left all and resolved to become a soldier of Jesus Christ. This resolution was so efficacious that he never rested until he had put it into execution, and he became a great servant of God.

There are many others who have been so heavily oppressed by misfortunes, reverses, distresses, that they have grown to hate a world which has perhaps mocked, betrayed, deceived, and wearied them, and they have therefore quitted it in disgust.

\* Matt. xvi. 24; Luke ix. 23.

means to call many to His service, who otherwise would certainly never have entered it. For although God is Almighty, and can do whatever He wills, yet He does not will to deprive us of the liberty which He has once given us; and when He calls us to His service, He desires that we should come of our own free-will, and not through force or constraint. For although some may seem to come to God as if out of disgust with the world, which has ill-used them, or on account of some labour and affliction which has tormented them, yet that does not prevent them from giving themselves to Him with free-will. Very often such persons succeed in serving God well, and become great saints; sometimes greater even than those who entered Religion on account of a more evident vocation.

You may have read the story told by Platus\* (I) of a gentleman, brave according to the world's estimate, who one day being gaily dressed, powdered and curled, and mounted on a richly caparisoned and high-mettled steed, was trying to show off before some ladies whom he wished to please. Suddenly his horse threw him into a mud-heap, from which he had to extricate himself all covered with dirt. The poor gentleman was so overwhelmed with shame and confusion at this accident, that, in a passion of anger, he instantly resolved to become a Religious, crying out: "O traitor world! thou hast mocked me, but I will also make a mock

(I) Platus, a Milanese Jesuit (1547-91). Three Books on the Excellence of the Religious State, in Latin by Hur. Platus, and translated into French by Philippe le Bel (Paris: M. Sonnius, MDCVII., 2nd edition).

\* *De Bono Status Religiosi*, lib. III. c. xxxviii.

of thee ; thou hast played me this trick, but I will play thee another ; for from henceforth I will have neither part nor lot with thee, and from this hour I resolve to become a Religious." He was, in fact, received into Religion, and lived a most holy life, although, as we see, his vocation had come through disgust.

There are many others whose motives have been even worse than this. I have learnt from a reliable source that a gentleman of our own times, brave both physically and morally, and of good birth, seeing some Capuchin Fathers pass by, said to his companions: "I should very much like to know how these barefooted fellows live, and to pay them a visit of three or four weeks ; not with the least idea of staying with them always, but just that I may find out what they do, so as to be able afterwards all the better, with the rest of you, to turn them into ridicule." He made his plan accordingly, pursued it steadily, and at last succeeded in gaining admittance. But divine Providence, having made use of this means to withdraw him from the world, changed his bad aim and intention into a good one. He who had thought to entrap others was himself entrapped, for he had not stayed many days with these good friars before he was entirely converted. He persevered faithfully in his vocation, and became a great servant of God (4).

(4) *of God*.—Here is another example of the present day. The Reverend Father-General of the Feuillans (I), who was certainly a great servant of God (I knew him and have heard his sermons), entered the service of God through a motive which was certainly

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(I) The venerable Jean de la Barrière, born at Saint-Céré, in le Quercy, in 1544, died at Rome in 1600.

There are others, again, whose vocation is no better than this; such as those who enter Religion on account of some natural defect—lameness, imperfect sight, extreme ugliness, and so on; and the worst of this is that such people are often urged to take this step by their parents, who, when they have lame, one-eyed, or otherwise afflicted children, are disposed to leave them in some chimney corner, saying to each other: “This child will be of no use in the world; we must send him into Religion; we must get some benefice for him, that will relieve us of the burden of supporting him.” The children, on their part, are willing to be taken where the parents please, hoping to live on the emoluments of the Church. Others, again, have a large family. “Well,” they say, “the house must be cleared of some of these encumbrances; let us send the younger ones into Religion, so that the elder may have all we can give them and make a show in the world.” But in cases like these also God often displays His great love and mercy, making use of such intentions which in themselves are so far from good, to form out of these poor creatures great servants of His divine Majesty. In this, as in all things, He is wonderful in His ways. Thus the divine Artificer delights in building beautiful edifices out of crooked and bent wood, which seems as if it were good for nothing. So it is with a

not very good, since he seemed rather to seek his own honour and comfort than to obey the call of God; he bought his abbey—or, rather, his father bought it for him. And yet his vocation was so rectified and blessed by God, and he so reformed his life, that he became a mirror of virtue, reformed the Feuillans, and restored them to their pristine perfection.



person who knows very little, if anything, about carpentering; seeing some crooked wood in a carpenter's shop, he would be amazed to be told that it was intended for the making of some beautiful masterpiece. "If that is as you say," he would exclaim, "think how many times the plane must pass over it before it can be fit for such a work!" Well, generally speaking, divine Providence in the same way makes beautiful masterpieces out of these twisted and perverted intentions. Thus He calls and brings in to His Banquet *the lame and the blind*,\* to show us that it avails little to have two eyes or two feet with which to journey to Paradise, that it would be far better to enter there having only one eye or leg or arm, than to have two and be lost.† Indeed, such people having come into Religion, they are often seen bringing forth abundant and good fruit, and persevering in their vocation.

There are others who have been well called, and yet have not persevered; who, having remained for a time in Religion, have then abandoned it. We have an example of this in Judas, whom we can never doubt was properly called, since Our Lord Himself chose him, and called him with His own divine lips (5) to the apostleship. How was it, then,

(5) *divine lips*—when He said: *I have chosen you, it is not you who have chosen Me, for no one can come to God unless he is called by Him. Draw me, says the spouse, and I will run after the odour of Thy perfumes, by which words she shows that she must be drawn in order to run. And certainly when Our Lord told His Apostles that He had chosen them, He was speaking of Judas as well as of the others. He was then clearly called, and Our Lord could not be mistaken in choosing him, for He had the discerning of spirits.*

\* Luke xiv. 21.

† Matt. xviii. 8, 9; Luke ix. 24.

that, being so clearly called, he did not persevere in his vocation? Because he abused his liberty, and would not make use of the means provided by God to ensure his perseverance. Because, instead of embracing these means and using them to his profit, he abused and then rejected them, and so was lost. For it is quite certain that when God calls any one to a state of life, He binds Himself, in consequence, by His divine Providence, to furnish that person with all the aids required to become perfect in his vocation (6).

Now, when I say that Our Lord binds Himself, you must not think that in following our vocation it is we who oblige Almighty God to bind Himself, so to speak, for that is impossible; we cannot bind His infinite Majesty as we bind and force one another. No; it is God who binds Himself of His own will, urged and incited to do this *by the bowels* of His endless and boundless kindness and *mercy*.\* This is so absolutely true that, when I enter Religion, Our Lord obliges Himself to furnish me with all that is necessary to make me a good Religious. He does this not from any obligation, but out of His mercy and infinite goodness; just as a great king, levying troops for war, is bound out of prudence and foresight to arm them with weapons.

(6) *in his vocation*.—When God calls any one to Christianity, He binds Himself to provide him with all that is necessary to make a good Christian. In the same way, when He calls a man to be a Priest or a Bishop, He binds Himself to give him all the graces required for that office. So too when He calls any one to be a Religious, He binds Himself to bestow on that person all that is needed for perfection in his vocation.

\* Luke i. 78.

For what would be thought if he sent them out to fight unarmed? If he did so, he would justly be taxed with great imprudence (7). Now, the divine Majesty never fails in care or foresight. To make us believe this the more firmly, He has bound and pledged Himself so absolutely that we must never for a moment think there could be any failure on His part, when we do not do well (8). Indeed, His

(7) *imprudence*—all the more because they went to him expecting him to furnish them with all the weapons proper for their calling. But, finding that the prince had never given a thought to the arms and ammunition requisite for such an enterprise, he is at once judged worthy of derision.

(8) *when we do not do well*.—But observe, when I say that God is obliged to furnish all the aids requisite for those whom He calls into any vocation, I do not mean that He only gives them to those to whom He has promised them. Oh no, that would be a great mistake, for He has often given them, and still gives them, to those to whom He has not promised them and to whom He is not in the least degree bound. For example, here is a man whom God has not called to be either Priest or Bishop, and who, nevertheless, knowing that there is a benefice or a bishopric vacant, instantly hurries to Court, sets all who have credit with the King to work on his behalf, finally, through their intervention, obtains the post and is made Bishop. Now, God had not called him to be one, and is not therefore obliged to give him the qualifications necessary for a good Bishop, therefore He does not always give them. Yet, so great is the liberality of God that, even in such a case, He sometimes gives as though He were bound to give; while to those whom He has chosen, He never fails in His bounty. And what I say as to a Bishop, applies to all sorts of vocations whatever they may be. I would not have you imagine, however, that God obliges Himself to give all these qualifications in a moment. If it were so, Religious Orders would not be called as they are, and have been in all times, *Hospitals*. The Religious, too, are called by a Greek word which means *healers*, because they are in the hospital to heal one another, like the lepers of St. Bridget. You must not think that directly people enter Religion they become perfect, for, as I have often told you, we do not come into that state perfect, but that we may aim at perfection. And this Congregation is not, any more than any other, an assemblage of perfect persons, but of such as are aiming at and tending to

liberality is so great that He gives these means of perfection even to those to whom He has not promised them, and to whom He has not pledged Himself, not having called them. Observe also that when I say that God pledges Himself to give to those whom He calls all the qualifications necessary to make them perfect in their vocation, I do not say that He gives them all at once, and the instant they enter Religion.

No, we must not think that on entering Religion we become perfect all at once; it is enough that we come to aim at perfection and to embrace the means of perfecting ourselves. To do this, it is necessary to have that firm and constant will of which we have spoken, and to embrace all the means likely to make us perfect *in the vocation unto*

perfection. It is a school to which people come to learn to be perfect, and in order to do this it is necessary to have a firm and constant purpose to embrace all those means of perfection which are offered by our vocation and the Order into which we are called. It is not the tearful, sighing, sad-faced people who are the best called; nor those who will not stir from the churches, who haunt the hospitals, or who begin with great fervour. We must not look to the tears of the weeping ones, or listen to their sighs, or pay any attention to gestures and deportment, with a view to knowing who are rightly called; but rather consider who have good-will and a firm and constant desire to be healed, and who labour therefore faithfully to recover their spiritual health. Neither must we regard as a mark of a good vocation those fervours which make people discontented with the duties of that vocation, and full of restless desires, vain and profitless for the most part, although apparently aiming at greater holiness of life; vain and profitless, I say, because while they are pleasing themselves by searching after what is often not at all perfect, they neglect what might have made them so in their own vocation. We have an example of this in a young Priest of the Oratory, who was so fervent that the manner of life of the Oratorian Fathers did not seem

*which we are called.\** See, then, how secret and mysterious are the judgments of God! See how some who have entered Religion out of disgust, and almost in mockery, have nevertheless persevered in it; while others, again, though truly and rightly called, and beginning with great fervour, end badly and forsake all. It is, therefore, a very difficult thing to know whether a person is rightly called by God, so that you may give her your vote; for although she may appear fervent, yet perhaps she will not persevere; but that will be so much the worse for her. Do not refrain from giving her your vote if you see that she has a constant will to serve God and to perfect herself. If she is willing to receive the aids Our Lord will infallibly give her, she will persevere. And even if, after some years, she should cease to persevere, and so lose her soul, that is not your fault; it is her own.

perfect enough to satisfy him, and he therefore thought that he must quit that life for a regular Religious Order. The good Father Philip Neri, who was his Superior, seeing this, conducted him there himself; but when he beheld him entering with so much fervour the place in which he knew by divine inspiration that he was not intended to be, the Saint began to weep most bitterly. These good Religious, imagining that he wept out of joy and thankfulness of heart, said: "Father, the consolation which you feel must indeed be great, but you would do better to moderate your tears; it would be more fitting to restrain them than to let them flow so abundantly." The blessed Philip Neri, however, illuminated by a light that was all-divine, replied: "Ah! it is not a feeling of consolation which makes me weep; I am shedding tears of compassion over this young man, who is abandoning one mode of life to take up another, in which he will never persevere, though he enters it with so much fervour." And it happened afterwards as the Saint had predicted.

\* 1 Cor. vii. 20; Eph. iv. 1.

So much for the first part of my remarks on the subject of recognising true vocations.

Take now the second, which deals with the conditions necessary for subjects to be received either as postulants, or later on as novices, or farther on still as professed nuns. I have hardly anything to say about the first reception. It is impossible to know much really about these persons, who come with so fair a show of virtue. Speak to them: they will do all you ask. They are like St. James and St. John, to whom Our Lord said: *Can you drink the chalice of My Passion?* They replied boldly and frankly that they could,\* and the night of the Passion they forsook Him. So it is with these persons: they say so many prayers, are so reverent in manner, show so much goodwill, that it is difficult to refuse them. In fact, it appears to me one need not give too much weight to this. Of course, this applies to their interior dispositions, for it is certainly very difficult to know what they are at that time, especially in the case of those who come from a distance. All you can do is to inform yourself as to who they are, and as to their temporal and external affairs, then open the door to them and put them through their first probation. If they are persons of the neighbourhood, you may observe their ways, and by conversation with them, may find out something about their hidden selves; but this, even, is very difficult, because they always come making the best show possible.

Now, with regard to physical health or infirmity,

\* Matt. xx. 22.

not much attention need be paid to that, because our Houses may receive the weak and delicate as well as the strong and robust. They are, indeed, partly intended for such people; provided always that these infirmities are not so heavy as to make them quite incapable of observing the Rule and doing what their vocation requires. With that exception, I should never refuse them my vote, not even if they should be blind, or with one hand or arm, or even having only one leg, if only they had the other conditions requisite for this vocation. And let not human prudence here inquire: "Do you mean that if such afflicted people presented themselves, they must always be received? Supposing they were blind or sick, who would wait upon them?" Do not trouble yourselves at all about that; there will be no difficulty of that sort; leave it to divine Providence. It will furnish all that is necessary, calling in the strong to wait on the feeble. When infirm persons present themselves, say: "God be praised!" When the robust come: well, so much the better! In fact, bodily infirmities which do not hinder the observance of Rule ought not to be considered in your Houses. And this is what I wished to say concerning this first reception.

As regards the second point—namely, the reception of a subject as a novice—I do not think there are any great difficulties. Still, more consideration ought to be given to this than to the first reception, for there are more opportunities of observing their dispositions, actions, and habits, and the passions which produce them. All that, however, ought not to prevent their admission as novices, provided

they have a good will to amend, to submit to authority, and to make use of the remedies proper for their cure. And although they have great repugnance to these remedies, and may make a difficulty about taking them, that is unimportant as long as they do not give up the use of them. Medicines, we know, are always bitter to the taste, and it is impossible that they should be received as smilingly as if they were very appetising. Nevertheless, they do their work, and they do it best when taking them has cost an effort and a struggle. Just so it is with a subject of strong passions. Her temper is violent, and her failures in that respect are many; but still, if in spite of that she desires to be cured, to be corrected, mortified, and to have the proper remedies administered, however much she may loathe taking them, we must not refuse her our vote, since she not only has the will to be cured, but also takes the remedies prescribed for that purpose, however much it may cost her to do so.

Then, again, there are persons who have been badly brought up and trained, who have a rough and coarse nature. There is certainly no doubt that they will have more trouble and difficulty, than those who are of a sweeter and more tractable disposition. They will be more liable to commit faults than those who have been better brought up. Still, if in spite of these falls they want to be cured, and show a firm will and purpose to take remedies, however impalatable, I would give them my vote. For these persons, after much labour, will bring forth abundant fruits in Religion, become great servants of God, and acquire a strong and solid virtue. Of



this we are sure, knowing that the grace of God supplies what is lacking in nature, so that often where there is less help from nature, there is more from grace. We must not, therefore, refuse to receive into the Novitiate subjects who may have many bad habits, a rough and uncouth mind, and evidently strong passions (9), provided always that they wish to be cured. In fact, in order to receive a novice, nothing need be known excepting that she has a good will, and that she is resolved to accept the treatment imposed upon her for her cure, and to live in great submission. If this is so, I should give her my vote. That is all that I think need be said touching the second reception.

As for the third, the profession of a subject; this is a matter of great importance, and there are, I think, three things to be observed in regard to it. The first is, that subjects who are to be professed must be healthy—not physically, as I have already said, but in heart and mind—that is to say, they should have a heart well disposed to live in absolute submission and compliance. The second is, that they should have good intelligence, by which I do not mean those self-important intellects whose possessors are, generally speaking, vain, full of arrogance and self-sufficiency. Such minds, when in the world, were perfect storehouses of vanity, and they enter Religion not to humble themselves, but as if they wished to give lessons in philosophy and theology,

(9) *passions*. Showing in their faces signs of strong passions; turning pale when they are frightened, flushing scarlet when anything is said to vex them, tears even starting to their eyes when they are annoyed. This should not prevent the giving our vote.

desiring to guide and govern every one. When I speak of a good intelligence or mind, I mean a well-balanced, sensible one, neither too lofty nor too mean, for such minds, unconsciously to themselves, always do a great deal. They set themselves steadily to work to acquire and to practise solid virtues; they are tractable, and there is little difficulty in guiding them, because they are easily made to understand how good a thing it is to let ourselves be governed.

The third thing that must be observed is, whether the subject has laboured well during her year's Novitiate, whether she has suffered patiently and profited by the remedies which were given to her, whether she has carried out the resolutions she made on entering upon it to reform her bad temper and inclinations; for the year of her Novitiate was given to her for that purpose. If you see that she perseveres faithfully in her resolution, and that her will to do so is firm, constant, and abiding; if she sets herself steadily to reform and form herself according to the Rules and Constitutions; and that she desires, not by fits and starts, but continually, to do better, then that is a good sign, and a good reason for giving her your vote. And though, in spite of this perseverance, she still commits faults, and even great ones, that will not justify you in withholding your vote; for though it is true that during the year of her Novitiate she ought to have striven to reform her manners and habits, this does not mean that she must never fall again into any fault, or that at the end of that period she ought to be perfect. Look at the Sacred College of our Lord,

the glorious Apostles; worthily as they had been called, and much as they had striven to reform their lives, how many faults they committed, not only in the first but also in the second and third year! All of them promised wonders, even to follow our Lord *into prison and to death*;\* but the night of the Passion, when the soldiers laid hands upon their good Master, *all forsook Him* † (10). I wish you to understand from this that we ought not to reject a subject on account of her failures, if, in spite of them, she is firmly determined to improve and to make use of every means offered her for that purpose. Now I have said what I had to say touching the conditions necessary for those whom we desire to receive to Profession, and also as to what should guide the sisters in giving their votes. And here I should finish my discourse if I had not been asked some further questions.

(10) *all forsook Him*.—And even the three most beloved by Our Lord, as it seems to me, and to whom He revealed His deepest secrets, taking them with Him to Mount Tabor and to the Garden of Olives—even those three, I say, who appeared to be the strongest and the most able to resist the assaults of their passions—were the very ones who committed the greatest faults. The glorious St. Peter, who was so fervent, how many did not he commit! Certainly his falls were grievous, yet Our Lord did not reject him on that account, because He knew that his purpose of amendment was firm and constant. He committed great faults in the first year of his Novitiate, but still greater in the second, and the greatest of all in the third, for then he denied his good Master and Saviour. His temperament was partly the cause of his committing greater and more frequent faults than the others. St. John, being of a gentler nature, was not so subject to these outbreaks; yet he too forsook his Master and fled with the others, though only, it is true, for a little time, and then returned never to quit Him again. St. James not only abandoned Him when death threatened Him, but did worse than the others, for he never came back to seek Him.

\* Luke xxii. 33.

† Matt. xxvi. 56.

In the first place, you inquire what should be done in the case of a person who is always disturbing herself about little matters, whose mind is often full of worry and anxiety, and who, when these fretting moods are upon her, shows no love at all for her vocation, although when they are past she promises to do wonders. It is perfectly certain that so changeable a character is not fit for Religion. But does she, in spite of all this, desire to be cured? If not, she must be dismissed. "One does not know," you say, "whether this proceeds from a want of will to cure herself, or whether she really does not understand what true virtue is. Well, if, after having thoroughly instilled into her mind what she must do to amend, she does not do it, but remains incorrigible, you must reject her; especially since her faults, as you say, do not then proceed from want of judgment, or from not being able to understand what true virtue is, still less from not knowing what she ought to do for her amendment. No; they proceed from a defect of will, from want of perseverance and constancy in making use of the means which she knows are required to cure her. Because of this, and of her failing to do better, though she may say sometimes that she will, I would not give her my vote.

You tell me, further, that there are some so tender-hearted and weak-spirited that they cannot take correction without being so upset as to make themselves ill. Well, if that is the case they must be rejected; for if they are sick, and yet refuse to be properly treated for their malady, it is clear that they are incorrigible, and give no hope of

being cured. Indeed, as regards softness, either of mind or of body, it is one of the greatest possible hindrances to the religious life; and the greatest care must be taken not to receive those who are very deeply tainted with it, since they do not wish to be cured, and refuse to avail themselves of that which would heal them (11).

I am asked, in the second place, what is to be thought of a novice who shows by her words that she repents of having entered Religion? How is she to be judged? Without doubt, if she persists in this evident disgust for her vocation, and in regretting that she ever followed it, and if this distaste makes her careless and indifferent as to conforming herself to the spirit of Religion, she must be dismissed. Still, you must always remember that this state of mind may have come upon her simply as a temptation or trial. You may discover whether this is so or not by the profit which she does or does not derive from owning these thoughts of distaste and regret, and also from the way in which she receives the remedies offered her, whether she makes faithful use of them or not. For God never permits anything to come upon us as a trial or test of our virtue without desiring that we should profit by it; and this we always do when we are faithful in owning our faults, and are, as I have said, ready to believe and

(11) *deeply tainted*.—Softness of the mind is infinitely more dangerous than that of the body, inasmuch as the mind, being the nobler part, the disease is more difficult to cure. If, then, she who is so tainted refuses to allow plasters to be applied to her wound, I should not give her my vote.

do with simplicity what we are told to do. This is the proof that the trial comes from God. If, however, you see that this person uses her private judgment, and that her will is perverted, and that her disgust towards her vocation is persistent, then the case is indeed a bad one, and almost past remedy, and she must be dismissed (12).

You ask me, in the third place, if it is not a matter of consideration whether you should give your vote to one who is not cordial in her manner,

(12) As regards one who, as you tell me, laughs at everything that is said to her. You must ask her what she is laughing about? She says she does not know. Well then, neither do I. Nothing that is said to her appears to have any effect on her; she just goes on in the same way as before. But tell me, does she not profit at all by what is said to her, or amend her ways after correction? Does she still think more of her own judgment and opinion than of the direction given her? Is she in all this quite incorrigible? If so, I would not give her my vote; but if she wishes to amend and desires to be cured, I should in that case make no difficulty about giving it to her. But you go on to say, my dear daughter, that she has so high an opinion of herself that she seems to think nothing of all that is said to her. Well, if she wishes to be a saint after a special and peculiar pattern, that is a different matter. Certainly, this kind of sanctity is always to be dreaded. If we wish to be true saints, we must follow the simple pattern set us by Our Lord and by Our Lady. Moreover, those who are really holy never know that they are, and the greatest saints are those who are the least ready to think themselves such. What are you saying, my dear daughter? You want to be told how, except through Superiors, you can possibly know the state of mind and disposition of these individuals, so as to give them or not your vote with a good conscience. Well, you must carefully observe them; and then, too, you will learn a great deal from what is said of them in Chapter; for why are these Chapters held, if not that, by hearing the opinion of all the sisters, we may ourselves better determine what we ought to do? "She is so obstinate," you say, "in her own judgment, that she will soon be the same in her own will." But is she not open to correction

or who does not behave alike to all the sisters, showing preference to one above another. Well, you must not be so strict about all these little things. You must remember that these preferences and attachments are the last things we renounce, and that it takes time to reach the point when we have no inclination for one more than for another, and of so mortifying our affections that they make no outward show (13). In this, however, as in other things, you must observe whether the sister is incorrigible or not.

“Then,” you say, “supposing the feeling of the other sisters should be quite contrary to what we know about the matter, and supposing we are, as it were, inspired to mention something which we have discovered to the advantage of this particular sister, must we nevertheless refrain from telling it?” No; although the feeling of the others may be quite opposed to yours, and you may be alone in this opinion, express it, for it may help them to determine what to do. The Holy Ghost presides over communities, and amid the variety of opinions, that

in this? If she judges the actions of others, you must teach her to do so no longer, and to judge herself instead of others. And if she is keen in observing what is right for others but not for herself, alas! what would you have? These are the miseries of human nature. You must teach her to correct herself, and remind her that in reading the Rules and Constitutions she must attend to what concerns herself alone, for she must absolutely amend. . . .

(13) The great St. Paula, holy as she was, loved her husband and children so much that, at their death, she thought she must die herself of grief, so bitterly and continually did she weep, and so strong was the affection which bound her to them. Yet this did not prevent her being a great saint, and perfectly resigned to the will of God.

mode of action is chosen which is judged to be the most likely to redound to His glory. As to your own wish that others should give their vote or not give it, and your inclination to give your own or to withhold it, all such wishes and inclinations must be despised and rejected like any other temptation (14). But you must never, among the sisters,

(14) *temptation.*—You are afraid that in expressing your feeling, which is contrary to that of the others, you may be mistaken in your own judgment. Pardon me, my dear daughter, it is not your own judgment; you must say simply and truthfully what God inspires you to say. Do you say, my daughter, that when a subject is told to do something, she answers that it is very hard to do it and to have to observe such a point of the Constitutions? Yes; but in spite of her saying this, does she cease to keep this rule which seems to her so hard? Because it is nothing to find a thing difficult to do, as long as one does not give up doing it; and sometimes people exaggerate their difficulties. You must pay more attention to what she does than to what she says. And you, my daughter, say that you know some Religious who, although subjects have expressed the desire to go back into the world, feeling sure that they can never follow such a vocation, refuse them permission, making them wait till the tenth month of their Novitiate; then if they persist in their desire to leave they are dismissed, but if the desire passes away they are kept. All that is very well, but I should not keep them by force, if they wish to go out before that time, nor should I fix upon any special period for their dismissal; I should like you to have a little patience and see if this distaste will pass off. It is true that in such a case it is very difficult to discover their real state of mind, and you are quite right in asking if their Profession should not be delayed for a time. Yes, my daughter, that might be done, in order to understand them better.

You ask if, when you see subjects doing their work as eye-servants, and because they are only thinking about what the Superior or the Mistress will say about it, you are to take any notice of it. Well, it is sometimes good to do a thing for our Superior's sake, because we may in time go on further and do it purely for God. Speaking of this, I will tell you of a good woman who came to me the other day firmly resolved never to forgive a person who had offended her. At last, after much



show your preferences or your antipathies in these matters.

Finally, with regard to any imperfections which subjects may bring with them from the world, this rule must be observed: if they are seen to amend, however much they still continue to commit faults, you must not reject them, for by

resistance, I succeeded in persuading her to yield; but she declared that she would only pardon her enemy for the love of me, not for the love of God; and I had great difficulty in making her unsay this. Now, those of whom you speak, who act, you say, only to please their Superiors, and more for one than for another, show that they are doing what they do for the creature rather than for the Creator; for if they did it for God, all Superiors would be the same to them. But never mind—their intention may be one day purified.

You ask, again, if you should receive as a subject one who is deaf, or who has some other similar infirmity. I have already told you that I should pay no attention whatever to physical infirmities—unless, indeed, they are very aggravated. It is true that deafness does render a person almost beyond the power of correction, because it is so difficult to make her understand what her fault is and in what way she should amend; but as for other infirmities, I should disregard them. Oh, my dear daughter, have I not already said: “If all people entered Religion, how could they be maintained?” So you say: “If we only receive the infirm, who will wait on them?” We must not be so cautious: God will call the strong to help the weak.

Ah, well! my dear daughter, it takes time to cure our passions and faulty inclinations, and so, if a sister should be in the habit of speaking in too flattering and fawning a manner, you must forgive her and, if possible, teach her to give up this habit. And with regard to these failings, we must act as we do in confession. A man comes to me as a penitent and accuses himself of having blasphemed the name of God two hundred times. I say a great deal to him for his amendment, and seeing him full of good-will in that respect, I give him absolution. He comes back to me after a time, saying: “I accuse myself of having blasphemed the name of God one hundred times.” Most certainly I give him absolution, because I clearly see the amendment of this man, and I judge from it that he is not incorrigible.

their amendment they prove that they are not incorrigible (15).

(15) You say, if a person has nothing in her disposition and natural qualities to recommend her, and, in addition, is almost continually in the Infirmary, should you not hesitate about giving her your vote ; seeing that, being always out of health, you have no opportunity of getting acquainted with her character and qualifications ? To this I reply that if she has not the qualifications necessary for your vocation, you are quite right in your hesitation ; but as regards her bodily infirmities, I should not pay too much attention to them—unless, indeed, they are such as to prevent her from observing the Rule. And as for the difficulty of finding out what her disposition is, certainly, in sickness, the character and temper of a person is more easily known than at any other time. And sickness is in itself a long probation.

Have you nothing more to say ? What time is it ? Have you said Compline ? If not, when do you mean to say it ? Go now, for I am afraid of breaking the Rules. Go, my dear daughters. I entreat Our Lord to bless you. May God fulfil all your desires and give you His holy peace. Amen.

## CONFERENCE XVIII

### THE SACRAMENTS AND DIVINE OFFICE

*On the right way of receiving the Sacraments and of reciting the Divine Office, with some remarks on Prayer.*

BEFORE learning how we ought to prepare ourselves to receive the Sacraments, and what fruits we ought to derive from their reception, we must first understand what Sacraments are, and what their effects are. The Sacraments, then, are channels through which, so to speak, God descends to us, as we through prayer ascend to Him, since prayer is nothing else than the lifting up of our mind and heart to God. The effects of the Sacraments are various, although they all have but one and the same aim and object, which is to unite us to God. By the sacrament of Baptism we unite ourselves to God, as a son to his father; by that of Confirmation, as the soldier to his captain, getting strength to fight and conquer our enemies in all temptations; by the sacrament of Penance we are united to God like reconciled friends; by that of the Eucharist, as food with the body; by that of Extreme Unction we unite ourselves to God like a child coming from a distant country, who, with one foot already in his father's house,

reunites himself with his father, his mother, and all his family. Now, these are the different effects of the Sacraments, but they all demand the union of the soul with God.

At present we will only speak of two of the Sacraments—the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of the Eucharist; and, in the first place, it is most necessary for us to know why it is that, receiving these two sacraments so often, we do not at the same time receive the graces which they bring to well-prepared souls, graces which are actually joined to the sacraments. I will tell you in a word; it is for want of due preparation. We must therefore know how we ought to prepare properly for the reception of these two sacraments, and indeed of all the others. Now, the first preparation is purity of intention; the second is attention; the third is humility.

As for purity of intention, that is absolutely necessary, not only in the reception of the Sacraments, but also in all that we do. Now, our intention is pure when we receive the Sacraments, or do any other thing, in order to unite ourselves to God, and render ourselves more pleasing to Him, without any admixture of private interest. You will know that you have this pure intention if, when you desire to communicate and are not allowed to do so, or when after Holy Communion you feel no consolation, you nevertheless can be at peace, without yielding to a feeling of disquietude which, without your consent, may assault you. If, on the contrary, you yield to disquietude because you are not allowed to communicate, or because

you had no consolations, is it not evident that your intention was not pure? Is it not certain that you only sought to unite yourself to God for the sake of consolations? That union with Him which you pretended to desire, would certainly have been effected by practising the holy virtue of obedience; and in the same way, if we desire perfection, with a restless, impatient kind of desire, is it not quite plain that it is only a form of self-love, which cannot endure the idea of any imperfection being seen in us? If it were possible that we, when imperfect, could be as pleasing to God, and as closely united to Him, as when perfect, we ought to desire to be without perfection, so as to nourish in ourselves holy humility.

The second preparation is attention. Certainly we ought to approach the Sacraments with great attention, both on account of the vastness of the work wrought by them, and also because of what each sacrament demands of us. For example, going to Confession, we should bring to it a heart lovingly sorrowful, and to Holy Communion a heart ardently loving. I do not mean, when I speak of this great attention, that we must have no distractions, for that is not in our power. But I do mean to say that we must be most specially careful not to dwell upon them voluntarily.

The third preparation is humility, which is a virtue most necessary to enable us to receive abundantly the graces which flow through the channels of the Sacraments. And this because waters, generally speaking, flow much more swiftly and with greater force when the channels are situated in

sloping and low-lying places. But besides these three preparations, I wish briefly to tell you that the chief of all is a total abandonment of ourselves to the mercy of God, the submission of our will and all our affections, without reserve, to His dominion. I say without reserve, because such miserable creatures are we, that we are always reserving something for ourselves. The most spiritual persons reserve to themselves the will of possessing certain virtues. When they go to Communion they say: "O Lord, I abandon myself entirely into Thy hands, but I entreat Thee to give me prudence so that I may live honourably." They never think of asking for simplicity. "O my God, I submit myself absolutely to Thy divine will, but give me great courage that I may do excellent work in Thy service." As for gentleness, and what they need to enable them to live at peace with their neighbour, no mention is made of that. "Give me," others will say, "that humility which is so necessary in order to set a good example;" but they never seem to think that they have any need of that humility of heart which makes us love our own abjection. "O my God, since I am wholly Thine, grant that I may always have consolations in prayer." It is true, our aim and end is to be united to God, and therefore to obtain whatever will bring about that union; yet these people never ask for tribulations or mortifications. Now, it is certain that to make a reserve of their own will and desires, however excellent they may appear to be, is not the way to effect that union. Our Lord, desiring to give Himself wholly to us, wishes that we, on our part, should give ourselves entirely to Him; in

order that the union of our soul with His divine Majesty may be more perfect, and that we may be able to say truly with the great Apostle of the Gentiles: *I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.*\*

The second part of this preparation consists in emptying our heart, that our Lord may fill it wholly with Himself. Certainly, the reason why we do not receive the grace of sanctification (since one single Communion well made is sufficient to render us holy and perfect) is, that we do not allow Our Lord to reign in us, as His goodness desires. He comes unto us—this Beloved of our souls—and finds our hearts all full of desires, affections, and petty wishes. This is not what He seeks, for He hopes to find them empty, that He may make Himself their Master and Ruler. To show how much He desires this, He tells His sacred bride † that she is to put Him *as a seal upon her heart*, so that nothing may enter there, except by His permission and according to His good pleasure. Now, I know well that the centre of your hearts is empty—you would otherwise be guilty of too great faithlessness; what I mean is that you have detested and cast out, not only mortal sin, but also all sorts of evil affections; but, alas! all the corners and innermost recesses of your hearts are filled with a thousand things, unworthy of the presence of this sovereign king. These are the things which bind His hands, and prevent Him bestowing on us the gifts and graces with which His goodness would have enriched us, if He had found us prepared for them. Let

\* Gal. ii. 20.

† Cant. viii. 6.

us then, on our part, do all that is in our power to prepare ourselves well to receive this *Super-substantial Bread*,\* abandoning ourselves wholly to divine Providence, not only for what concerns our temporal, but far more, for our spiritual welfare. All our affections, desires, and inclinations must be entirely subjected to Him; since we know well that Our Lord on His part will fulfil His promise to transform us into Himself, raising our lowness even to a union with His infinite greatness.

We may communicate for various ends: such, for instance, as to ask God for deliverance from some temptation or affliction, either for ourselves or for our friends or neighbours; or to obtain some virtue, provided that we desire this as a means of uniting ourselves more perfectly with God. We shall find, however, in times of affliction we are generally brought nearer to God, because we think oftener of Him. And as regards virtues, sometimes it is really better for us not to have them habitually, provided always that we make acts of such virtues when the opportunity of doing so presents itself; for the repugnance which we feel towards the practice of any virtue ought to humiliate us, and humility is worth more than all else (I).

Remember, too, that in all the prayers and petitions you make to God, you are not urging them

(I) This passage confirms the remark made above (p. 101), and brings out clearly the saint's idea. The disinclination which one may feel for the practice of virtue, even when it supposes the absence of the virtuous habit, may be a relative but very real good, in the case that this disinclination procures an increase of humility.

\* Matt. vi. 11.



for yourselves alone. You must, therefore, always say *we* and *us*, as Our Lord has taught us in the Pater Noster, in which there is no *mine*, or *my*, or *me*. This means, that your intention is to ask God to give the virtue or grace which you ask of Him for yourself, to all those who have the same need of it, and this should always be done in order to unite yourself more closely to Him. Otherwise we ought not to ask or desire anything for ourselves or for our neighbours, union with God being the end for which the Sacraments are instituted. We therefore must correspond to this intention of Our Lord, receiving them for the same end.

We must never think that by going to Communion for others, or by praying for them, we lose anything. We need not fear that by offering to God this Communion or prayer in satisfaction for the sins of others, we shall not make satisfaction for our own. The merit of the Communion and of the prayer will remain with us, for we cannot merit grace for one another; it is Our Lord alone Who could do that. We can beg for graces for others, but we can never merit them. The prayer we have made for them increases our merit, both as regards the reward of grace in this life and of glory in the next. And even if a person did not offer up some particular action in satisfaction for his own sins, his very determination to do all that he does for the pure love of God would be sufficient to make satisfaction for them; since it is certain that whoever is able to make a fervent act of charity, or an act of perfect contrition, satisfies fully for all his sins.

You would, perhaps, like to be told how to know

whether you are profiting by the reception of the Sacraments. Well, you will know if you advance in the virtues which are proper to them. For instance, if you derive from Confession humility and a love of your own abjection, you will know that you are profiting, for those are the virtues proper to that sacrament, and it is always by the measure of humility that we can gauge our advancement. Do you not remember that it is written: \* *He that shall humble himself shall be exalted*, and to be *exalted* is to have advanced. If, through Holy Communion, you become gentle (since that is the virtue proper to this sacrament, which is all gentleness and honey), you will be drawing from it the fruit which is proper to it, and thus you will be advancing. If, on the contrary, you do not become more gentle or more humble, you deserve to be deprived of the bread for which you will not work. †

When you wish to communicate, I should like you to act quite simply, asking permission of the Superior, resigning yourselves to accept humbly a refusal, if you are refused; or, if your request is granted, going to Communion with love. Although it may be mortifying to ask, you must not desist on that account, for the sisters who enter this Congregation enter only to mortify themselves, and the cross which they wear ought to remind them of this. If, again, one of you should feel that she cannot communicate so often as the others, on account of the knowledge she has of her own unworthiness, she may ask permission of the Superior to abstain, awaiting her decision with great calmness and humility.

\* Matt. xxiii. 12; Luke xiv. 11; xviii. 14. † 2 Thess. iii. 10.

I should like also to see that you are not at all disturbed when some fault which you possess, or some virtue which you lack, is mentioned. Instead of being disquieted, you ought to thank God for having shown you how to acquire that virtue, and how to correct yourself of that imperfection, and then take courage. We must have generous minds which cling to God alone, never consenting to the desires of our lower nature, but letting our higher nature reign and rule over us, since it is entirely in our power, by the grace of God, not to consent to the lower. Consolations and pleasing emotions ought not to be desired, since they are not necessary to make us love Our Lord more. We must not, then, stop to consider whether we have consolations, but we must act as we should do if we had them.

Again, I would not have you so scrupulous and anxious about confessing numbers of trifling imperfections, since we are not even obliged to confess venial sins if we do not wish to do so. If, however, we do confess them, we must firmly resolve to amend, otherwise it would be an abuse of Confession. Neither must we torment ourselves when we cannot remember our faults so as to confess them, for it is incredible that a soul who frequently examines herself should not have sufficiently noticed any faults of importance so as to remember them. As regards these many but trifling defects, you can speak about them with Our Lord whenever you perceive them; an act of self-humiliation, a sigh, will be enough for that.

You ask how you can make your act of contrition

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OUR LADY OF MERCY NOVITIATE

in a short time. I tell you that scarcely any time is required to make it well, since all that is necessary is to prostrate ourselves before God in a spirit of humility and repentance for having offended Him.

In the second place, you desire me to speak to you about the Office. I will gladly do so; and, in the first place, I must tell you that we ought to prepare ourselves for saying it the very moment we hear the bell which calls us to it, and we must, in imitation of St. Bernard, ask our heart what it is that it is going to do.\* And not only on this occasion, but also on entering upon any of our exercises, in order that we may bring to each of them the spirit which is proper to it. For instance, it would not be suitable to go to Office as we go to recreation: to recreation we must take with us a lovingly joyous spirit, and to Office a seriously loving spirit. When we say: *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, we must think that Our Lord on His part is saying to us: And be you attentive to Me (1).

Let those who understand a little of what they say in the Office, employ this talent faithfully according to the good pleasure of God. He has given it to help them in keeping recollected, through the good affections they may draw from it. On the other hand, let those who do not understand anything that they are saying, simply keep themselves in the presence of God, or make loving aspirations while the other side of the Choir repeats its verses

(1) attentive—to My love. (MS. and Coll.)

\* Vita I<sup>s</sup> S. Bern. lib. I. i. c. iv. (Patrol. lat., t. clxxxv.).

and they themselves are silent. We must also remember that we are reciting the same Office as the Angels, though in a different language, and that we are in the presence of the same God before Whom the Angels tremble. And just as a man who was speaking to a king, would be most intent upon what he was about, for fear he should commit some fault; and if, in spite of all his care, he should happen to commit one, would blush with shame; so in like manner should we behave at Office, being always on our guard, lest we should transgress. It is also very important that we should be careful to pronounce our words well, and to say the Office exactly in the manner prescribed. Beginners must be especially attentive to this. If, however, we should make some mistake, we must humble ourselves for it, but without being astonished, for it is not at all surprising, considering we make many mistakes elsewhere. But if we should make several, and were to go on doing so, it looks very much as if we had not taken our first failure sufficiently to heart. It is this carelessness which ought to overwhelm us with confusion, not because of the presence of the Superior, but out of respect for the presence of God and of His Angels. Now, it is almost an invariable rule, that when we often commit the same fault, it is a sign that we are wanting in a loving desire of amendment; and if it is a matter about which we have been often admonished, it looks very much as if we had disregarded the admonition. If we should miss two or three verses out of a whole Office by mistake, we must not torment ourselves with scruples, it not being volun-

tary. If you sleep throughout a good part of the Office, even though you may say all the verses with your side of the Choir, you are obliged to say it again; but if you are interrupted by coughing, or by the mistress of the ceremonies speaking on some matter concerning the Office, then you are not obliged to repeat (2).

When you enter the Choir after the Office has begun, you must take your place among the others and follow the Office with them, in case your assistance should be really necessary; and after it is finished, you must say to yourself what the Choir had said before you came in, leaving off again at the point at which you took it up. Or else you must first say to yourself what the Choir has already said, and then join in with it.

You must not say your Office over again because you were distracted in saying it, provided, of course, that these distractions were not wilful. If at the end of a Psalm you should find that you are not quite certain whether you have said it, because you have been so distracted and thinking so little of it, still pass on, humbling yourself before God. For we must not always think that we have been careless because our distraction has been long; indeed, it might last throughout the whole Office from no fault of our own. Bad though it may be, we must not worry ourselves about it, but simply from time to time drive it away in the presence of God. I wish you never to be troubled about any bad feelings

(2) *to repeat*—nor the Sacristan when occupied with the duties of her charge, provided she does not leave the Choir. (MS. and Coll.)

which you may have, but to make up your mind courageously and faithfully not to consent to them, remembering that there is a great deal of difference between feeling and consenting.

You would like me to tell you something about prayer. Many people make great mistakes about how they should pray. They think that a great deal of method is required, and are eager in striving to find out this particular art which they fancy it is so necessary to know. They are continually, as it were, examining and prying into their prayer, to see how they make it, or how it could be improved upon, and they think that they must neither cough nor move during it, for fear the Spirit of God should withdraw. Truly this is a great folly, as if the Spirit of God were so fastidious as to depend on the method and posture of those who pray. I do not say that we ought not to make use of the methods recommended to us, but we must not cling to them, as do those who think that they have never prayed well, unless they make their considerations before the affections which Our Lord gives them, whereas those affections are really the end for which we make the considerations. Such persons resemble people who, finding themselves at the very place to which they intended to go, yet turn back because they have not reached it by the road which was pointed out to them.

It is nevertheless necessary that we should behave with the greatest reverence when speaking to the divine Majesty, since the Angels, who are so pure, tremble in His presence. "But, alas!" some will say, "I cannot always so realise the presence

of God as to feel that humiliation of soul and that deep, awe-struck reverence which prostrates me in a rapture of sweetness and devotion before Him." I am not talking about that at all; the reverence that I mean is that which keeps all the highest and noblest powers of our soul prostrate and humbled before God, in recognition of His infinite greatness and of our profound littleness and unworthiness.

We must also be resolutely determined never to give up prayer for any difficulty that we may encounter in it, and never to go to it preoccupied with desires of consolation and satisfaction; for that would not be uniting our will with that of Our Lord. His will is, that entering into prayer, we should be prepared to suffer the pain of continual distractions, dryness, and disgust which may come upon us, and that we should remain just as constant as if we had enjoyed much peace and consolation. It is quite certain that our prayer will be none the less pleasing to God, nor less useful to ourselves, for having been made with difficulty. For, provided that we always put our will in accord with that of the divine Majesty, and that we be simply and steadily determined to accept lovingly all that is ordered by His good pleasure, whether in prayer or under any other circumstances, all that happens is certain to be profitable to us, and will make us pleasing in the sight of His divine Goodness. Therefore, my dear daughters, you will be praying well if you keep yourselves in peace and tranquillity close to Our Lord, or at least in His sight, with no other desire or intention than to be with Him, and to content Him.



The first method, then, which we should adopt in our prayers is the consideration of some point, such as the mysteries of the Life, Passion, and Death of Our Lord, which are the most useful; for it is a very rare thing for us not to be able to profit by the consideration of what Our Lord has done. He is the sovereign Master, Whom the Eternal Father has sent into the world to teach us what we ought to do; and therefore, besides the obligation which is laid upon us to form ourselves upon this divine Model, we ought to be most exact in our consideration of all His actions so as to imitate them. One of the most excellent intentions that we can possibly have in all our actions, is to do them because Our Lord did them—that is to say, to practise virtues because Our Father practised them, and as He practised them.

To understand this thoroughly, we must faithfully regard, weigh, and ponder these things in our prayer, for the child who really loves his father delights in copying his ways, and in imitating him in all that he does.

It is true, as you say, that there are souls who cannot pause and fix their thoughts on any special mystery, being attracted to a certain simplicity, full of sweetness, which keeps them in perfect tranquillity before God, with no other consideration than the knowledge that they are before Him and that He is their only Good. They may remain thus with profit to themselves, for it is good; but, generally speaking, all the sisters should begin by the method of prayer and meditation which is the safest, and tends most surely to the reformation of

life and change of behaviour—that which I have said circles round the mysteries of the Life and Death of Our Lord; in that path we may securely tread. We must, then, in good faith keep close to our Master to learn from Him what He wishes us to do. Those who can make use of their imagination may do so, but it must be done simply, soberly, and briefly. The holy Fathers have left to us many pious and devout considerations which we may use, for, since they were conceived by these great and holy personages, who will not venture to use them, and who would refuse to believe piously what they so piously believed? We must assuredly follow men of such authority. Some, however, are not content with what comes to us from such sources; they have invented all kinds of other imaginations, and these are just what we must not use in our meditation, as indeed they might harm us.

We ought to make our resolutions in the fervour of prayer, when the Sun of Justice enlightens us, and incites us by His inspirations. I do not mean by this that we must have sublime feelings and consolations, although when God gives them to us it is our duty to profit by them and to correspond to His love. But even when He does not give them to us, we must not be wanting in fidelity, but must live according to reason and the divine Will, making our resolutions with the keenest and loftiest part of our mind and soul, not wearying in our efforts, or failing to put these resolutions into practice, on account of any dryness, repugnance, or contradiction which may present itself. So much for what concerns the first mode of meditating

which many great saints have practised, and which is excellent when rightly made.

The second manner of meditating is to make no use of imagination, but to keep strictly to the letter—that is to say, to meditate purely and simply on the Gospel and on the mysteries of our Faith, conversing, as it were, familiarly and simply with Our Lord on all that He has done and suffered for us, but without trying to picture it to ourselves. Now, this is a much loftier and better method than the first, and more holy and safe for us; therefore, however little attraction we may have for it, we should incline towards it, taking care at every step in our meditation to keep our mind in a state of holy freedom, ready to follow the light and the impulses which God may give us. As for other methods of more sublime prayer, unless God absolutely gives them, I entreat you not to meddle with them yourself, without the advice of those who direct you.

## CONFERENCE XIX

### ON THE VIRTUES OF ST. JOSEPH (1)

*The just shall flourish like the palm-tree.\** Thus does Holy Church make us sing on every feast-day of her saintly Confessors; but as the palm-tree has a great variety of special properties beyond all other trees—of which, indeed, it is the prince and king, as much on account of its beauty as of the excellence of its fruit—so there are also many varieties of justice. Although all the just may be just and equal in justice, nevertheless there is a great disproportion between the individual acts of their justice. This is figured by the robe of the Patriarch Joseph, which descended to his feet, and was embroidered with a rich variety of flowers.† Every just man has the *robe of justice* which descends to his feet;‡ that is to say, all the faculties and powers of his soul are covered with justice, and its interior and exterior represent justice itself, being just in all their impulses and in all their actions, internal as well as external. Yet, nevertheless, we must admit that each robe is embroidered with different beautiful varieties of flowers, the diversity

(1) *Sermon preached by our Blessed Father on the Feast of St. Joseph.*

\* Ps. xci. 13.

† Gen. xxxvii. 3; xli. 42.

‡ Isa. lxi. 10; Bar. v. 2.

of which does not make them less pleasing or less worthy of admiration and commendation. The great St. Paul, the first hermit, was just with a most perfect justice, and yet it is undoubted that he never exercised so much charity towards the poor as St. John, who was called the Almoner on that account; nor had he ever any opportunities of practising hospitality, and therefore he did not possess that virtue in so high a degree as did many other saints. He had all the virtues, but not all of them in an equally high degree. Some of the saints excelled in one virtue, some in another, and although all have saved their souls, they have done so in very different ways, there being as many different kinds of sanctity as there are saints.

This being presupposed, I will introduce my subject by observing that the palm-tree, among a great number of peculiar properties, has three special ones, which also belong in a remarkable manner to the Saint whose Feast we are keeping; that Saint of whom Holy Church bids us say that he is like to the *palm-tree*. Oh, what a great saint is the glorious St. Joseph! He is not only a Patriarch, but the chief and leader of Patriarchs; he is not simply a Confessor, but more than a Confessor, for in him are enshrined the worth of Bishops, the generosity of Martyrs, and of all the other saints. It is, therefore, with reason that he is compared to the palm, which is the king of trees, and which has the properties of virginity, humility, courage and constancy, in all which virtues the glorious St. Joseph excelled so greatly. If we may venture to make comparisons, many would maintain that he

*mint**re*

surpasses all the other saints in these three virtues.

*omit* Among palms, there are male and female trees. The male palm-tree does not bear fruit, and yet it is not unfruitful, for the female palm would bear no fruit without it, or without its aspect. So that if the female palm is not planted near the male palm-tree, and is not in sight of it, it remains unfruitful, and bears no dates, which are its fruit; but if, on the contrary, it is near the palm-tree and in sight of it, it bears a quantity of fruit,\* but quite purely and virginally. The palm-tree does not contribute any of its substance to this production; yet no one can say that it has not a great share in the fruit of the female palm, which without it would not bear any, but would remain barren and unfruitful.

*read* God having destined (2) from all eternity, in His divine Providence, that a *Virgin should conceive a Son*,† Who should be both God and man, willed nevertheless that this Virgin should be married. "But, O God!" exclaim the holy Doctors, "for what reason didst Thou ordain two things so different, to be virgin and bride at the same time?" Most of the Fathers say that this was in order to prevent Our Lady from being calumniated by the Jews. For they would assuredly not have exempted the Virgin Mother from opprobrium, and would have dared to constitute themselves judges of her purity. Therefore, in order to shield and protect this

(2) determined.

\* Cf. Plin. Hist. Nat. (Bk. xiii. c. vii. al. iv.), cum notis Variorum.

† Isa. vii. 14.

purity and virginity, it was necessary that divine Providence should commit her to the charge and guardianship of a man absolutely pure and that this Virgin should conceive and bring forth this *sweet fruit*\* of life, Our Lord, under the shadow of holy marriage. St. Joseph, then, was like a palm-tree which, though bearing no fruit, is yet not unfruitful, but has a great share in the fruit of the female palm. Not that St. Joseph contributed anything towards that holy and glorious fruit, except indeed the shadow of marriage, which prevented Our Lady and glorious Mistress from being exposed to those calumnies and censures which the signs of her approaching Motherhood would have brought upon her. And although he contributed nothing of his own, yet he had a great part in this most holy fruit of his sacred Spouse. She belonged to him, and was planted close to him, like a glorious palm by the side of its beloved palm-tree, and, according to the decree of divine Providence, could not produce fruit, and must not do so except under his shadow and in his sight; I mean, under the shadow of the holy marriage which they had contracted together, which was unlike the ordinary marriages of this world, whether in respect of the communication of outward goods, or the union and conjunction of inward goods.

Oh! divine union between Our Lady and the glorious St. Joseph! By means of this union, that Good of eternal goods, Our Lord Himself, belonged to St. Joseph as well as to Our Lady. This is not true as regards the nature which He

\* Cant. ii. 3.

took in the womb of our glorious Mistress, and which had been formed by the Holy Ghost of the most pure blood of Our Lady; but is so as regards x grace, which made him participate in all the possessions of his beloved Spouse, and which increased so marvellously his growth in perfection; and this through his continual communication with Our Lady. For although it is true that she possessed every virtue in a higher degree than is attainable by any other pure creature, yet it is quite certain that the glorious St. Joseph was the being who approached most nearly to that perfection. And just as we see that a mirror placed opposite to the rays of the sun receives those rays perfectly, and another mirror placed opposite to the first, though it only takes or receives the sun's rays by reflection, yet reflects them so absolutely that you can scarcely judge which receives them directly from the sun and which only by reflection, so it was in the case of Our Lady. She was like a most pure mirror, receiving on a spotless surface the rays of the *Sun of Justice*,\* which poured into her soul all virtues in their perfection. All these virtues and perfections were then absolutely reflected in St. Joseph, so that it almost seemed as if he were as perfect, and possessed all virtues in as high a degree, as the glorious Virgin our Mistress.

But, to continue our subject, in what degree, think you, did St. Joseph possess that virtue which makes us like to the Angels, the virtue of virginity? If the Blessed Virgin was not only a virgin all-pure

\* Mal. ult. 2.



and all-spotless, but even virginity itself (as Holy Church sings in the responses for the Lessons of Matins, "Holy and immaculate Virginity," &c.), how great and super-eminent in this virtue must not he have been who was appointed by the Eternal Father to be the guardian, or, to speak more truly, the companion of her virginity (for she needed no guard other than herself)—how great, I repeat, must not he have been in this respect? They had both vowed to keep their virginity all through their life, and this is why God willed them to be united by the bond of a holy marriage, not to make them gainsay or repent their vow, but to confirm them in it, and enable them to strengthen each other to persevere in their holy purpose. This is why they renewed their vow to live together in virginity all the rest of their life.

The Spouse, in the Canticle of Canticles,\* makes use of most admirable expressions to describe the modesty, chastity, and innocent candour of His divine love for His most dear Bride. He speaks thus: *Our sister is little, and hath no breasts. What shall we do to our sister in the day when she is to be spoken to? If she be a wall, let us build upon it bulwarks of silver: if she be a door, let us join it together with boards of cedar, or with some other incorruptible wood.* So speaks the divine Bridegroom of the purity of the Blessed Virgin, of the Church, or of the devout soul, but these words are chiefly addressed to the Blessed Virgin, who was pre-eminently this divine Sulamite. *Our sister is little and hath no breasts*—that is to say, thinks not of marriage,

\* Cap. ult. 8, 9.

is not grown up to that estate. *What shall we do to her in the day when she is to be spoken to?* What does that mean? *In the day when she is to be spoken to?* Does not the Heavenly Bridegroom speak to her whenever He pleases? Yes, but by this expression is meant when marriage is spoken of to a maiden, and words spoken on this subject are of great importance, since it is a question of the choice and adoption of a vocation and state of life which is for all time. *If she be a wall*, says the divine Spouse, *let us build upon it bulwarks of silver*; if she be a door, instead of wishing to break it open, we will line it and strengthen it with boards of cedar, which is an incorruptible wood.

*Read* The most glorious Virgin was a tower\* and a high-walled enclosure into which the enemy could never enter. Neither could any desires find a place save the desire of living in perfect purity and virginity. *What shall we do to her?* for she ought to be married, He Who gave her this purpose to live a virgin, having thus ordained. If she be a tower or a wall, *let us set upon it bulwarks of silver*, which, instead of breaking down the tower, will strengthen it the more. Well, what was the glorious St. Joseph but a strong bulwark built up upon Our Lady, since she, being his spouse, was subject to him and under his care? And he, so far from making use of this supremacy over Our Lady to break her vow of virginity, carried out the divine purpose which made him a sharer in that vow, while, by means also of their holy union, and under the veil and shelter of holy marriage, the purity of Our Lady could persevere

\* Cant. iv. 4; vii. 4.

all the more admirably in its integrity. *If* the Blessed Virgin *be a door*, says the Eternal Father, we will not that that door should be opened, for it is the Eastern Door, through which none may enter nor go forth.\* This closed door must be lined and strengthened with incorruptible wood—that is to say, we must give her a companion in her purity, the great St. Joseph, who must on that account surpass all the saints, nay even the Angels and the Cherubim, in that most admirable virtue of virginity, a virtue which makes him resemble the palm-tree, as we have already said.

Let us pass on to the second peculiarity and virtue which I have observed in the palm-tree. There is, I consider, a most exact resemblance and conformity between St. Joseph and the palm in the great virtue of holy humility. For although the palm is the prince of trees, it is nevertheless the humblest, and the proof of this is that it hides its flowers in the springtime, when all other trees are displaying theirs, and does not put them forth till the summer heat is at its height. The palm keeps its blossoms shut up in little bags in the form of a sheath; and this very well represents the difference between souls aiming at perfection and others who are not—the difference between the just and those who live according to the ways of the world. For worldly and earthly-minded men, who are swayed by human laws, directly any good thought occurs to them, or any virtue stirs and animates them, become restlessly eager to display it and publish it abroad to all whom they may meet. In

\* Ezech. xliv. 1, 2.

doing this they run the same risk as trees which in the springtime are hasty in putting forth their blossoms—such as the almond-tree—for if by chance a frost surprises them, the blossoms perish and bear no fruit.

Those worldly men who so lightly and hastily, and in a spirit of pride and ambition, put forth all their blossoms in the springtime of this mortal life, always run the risk of being struck by a frost which destroys the fruit of their actions. On the contrary, the just always keep their blossoms closely shut up in the sheath of holy humility, and do not let them burst forth, if they can help it, till the time of great heat, when God, the divine *Sun of Justice*,\* will come into their hearts with all His mighty vivifying power, so that they may bring forth the sweet fruits of happiness and immortality. The palm does not show its blossoms until the burning heat of the sun has burst the sheaths in which they are enclosed, and almost immediately afterwards its fruit suddenly appears. So is it with the souls of the just; for they keep their blossoms—that is, their virtues—hidden under the veil of humility until death, when Our Lord suffers them to burst forth and be seen by all, being speedily followed by their fruits.

Oh, how faithful in this was the great Saint of whom we are speaking! Words fail when we try to express the perfection of this fidelity; for consider in what poverty and abjection he lived throughout his whole life; and what great virtue and dignity he kept concealed beneath that same poverty and abjection! What a dignity to be the

\* Mal. ult. 2.

guardian of Our Lord, and not only that, but to be even His reputed father, to be the husband of His most holy Mother! Truly, I doubt not that the Angels, wondering and adoring, came thronging in countless multitudes to that poor workshop to admire the humility of him who guarded that dear and divine Child, and laboured at his carpenter's trade to support the Son and the Mother, who were committed to his care.

There is no doubt, my dear sisters, that St. Joseph was more valiant than David and wiser than Solomon; nevertheless, seeing him so humbly working in his carpenter's shop, who would have imagined (unless enlightened supernaturally) that he was endowed by God with such marvellous gifts, so closely and carefully did he keep them concealed! But what must not his wisdom have been, seeing that God committed to his charge His all-glorious Son and chose him to be his guardian! If earthly princes consider it a matter of so much importance to select carefully a tutor fit for their children, think you that the Eternal God would not, in His almighty power and wisdom, choose from out of the whole of His creation the most perfect man living to be the guardian of His divine and most glorious Son, the Prince of heaven and earth? There is, then, no doubt at all that St. Joseph was endowed with all gifts and graces required by the charge which the Eternal Father willed to commit to him, over all the domestic and temporal concerns of Our Lord, and the guidance of his family, which was composed of three persons only, representing to us the mystery of the most holy and

adorable Trinity. Not that there is any real comparison in this matter excepting as regards Our Lord, Who is one of the Persons of the most blessed Trinity, for the others were but creatures; yet still we may say that it was a trinity on earth representing in some sort the most holy Trinity. Mary, Jesus, and Joseph—Joseph, Jesus, and Mary—a trinity worthy indeed to be honoured and greatly esteemed!

You understand, then, how exalted was the dignity of St. Joseph, and how full he was of all virtue. And yet you see how deeply he was abased and humbled, more than we can ever say or imagine. One instance alone is sufficient to prove this; he went into his own country and to his own town of Bethlehem, and, as far as we know, he alone was refused admittance into any of the inns, so that he was constrained to retire, and to conduct his most chaste Spouse into a stable among oxen and asses.\* Oh, to what an extremity of abjection and humiliation was he not reduced! His humility also, as St. Bernard explains,† was the cause of his wishing to quit Our Lady when he saw that she was with child; for St. Bernard says that he spoke thus to himself: “Ah! what is this? I know that she is a virgin, for we have together made a vow to keep our virginity and purity intact—a vow which nothing would induce her to break; yet I see that she is with child. How can it be that maternity is found in virginity, and that virginity does not hinder maternity? O my God! must not this be that glorious Virgin of whom the Prophets

\* Luke ii. 4-7.

† Homilia, II., *super missus est*, § 14.

declare that she *shall conceive* and be the Mother of the Messiah? \* Oh, if this is so, God forbid that I should remain with her—I, who am so unworthy of such an honour! Better far that I should quit her secretly on account of my unworthiness, and that I should dwell no longer in her company.” What admirable humility! It was the same feeling which stirred St. Peter when he was in the boat with Our Lord and had seen His almighty power manifested in the great draught of fishes, following instantly upon their obeying His command to cast their nets into the sea; a feeling of overwhelming humility making him cry out: *Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man,*† unworthy to be with Thee. “I know,” he seems to say, “that if I throw myself into the sea I shall perish, but Thou Who art Almighty canst walk without danger upon the waters, therefore I entreat Thee to depart from me, rather than that I should depart from Thee.” But if St. Joseph was careful to keep his virtues safely concealed under the shelter of holy humility, he was especially so with regard to the precious pearl of his virginity. For this reason he consented to be married, in order that no one might be aware of it, and that under the veil of holy marriage he might lead a still more hidden life. So, too, all men and women who wish to live a life of perfect chastity and virginity, are taught that this is not enough, and avails little if they are not also humble, locking up this treasure of purity in the precious casket of humility. If they fail to do this, they will be like the foolish virgins who, for want of

\* Isa. vii. 14.

† Luke v. 3-8.

humility and merciful charity, were shut out from the marriage feast of the Bridegroom, and were thus constrained to be guests only at the marriage feasts of earth, where the counsel given by the heavenly Bridegroom is not observed. He says \*—thus inculcating the practice of humility—“Going or *being invited* to the marriage feast, *take the lowest place.*” Thus we see how necessary humility is for the preservation of virginity, since, undoubtedly, none will be admitted to the heavenly banquet—that marriage feast which God prepares for Virgins in the celestial kingdom—unless they take with them this virtue.

We do not keep precious things, especially such as sweet-smelling ointments, uncovered and exposed to the air, for not only would their perfume waste itself and evaporate, but also flies would spoil them and make them lose their price and value. So too the souls of the just, fearing to lose the price and value of their good works, lock them up generally in a box, but not in a common one, rather in a box of alabaster, like precious ointment, such as that which St. Mary Magdalen poured upon the sacred Head of our divine Lord, when He restored her to a virginity, not indeed essential, but repaired. This is sometimes the most excellent kind, being acquired and re-established by penance, whereas that which is wholly unblemished is, or may be, accompanied by less humility. This alabaster box is, then, humility, in which we, imitating Our Lady and St. Joseph, ought to lock up our virtues and all that can make us esteemed

\* Luke xiv. 8, 10.



by men, and be content to please God and remain hidden under the blessed veil of self-humiliation; we must wait, as we have said, until God Himself shall come to take us into the place of safety, which is life eternal, and shall Himself manifest our virtues for His own honour and glory.

But what more perfect humility can be imagined than that of St. Joseph? I put aside that of Our Lady, for we have already said that St. Joseph received a great increase of all virtues by the reflection of those of the Blessed Virgin. He had a very great share in the divine treasure, Our Lord and Master, which he guarded in his house, and yet he behaved so meekly and humbly that it appeared as if he had no part in it. Yet no one can doubt that the holy Child, being of St. Joseph's family, and the Son of his own Spouse, belonged to him more than to any other excepting Our Blessed Lady. If a dove (to render the comparison more suitable to the purity of the Saints of whom I am speaking) carried in her beak a date which she let fall into a garden, would you not say that the palm-tree which sprang up from the date belonged to the owner of the garden? Well, if that is so, who can doubt that the Holy Ghost, like a holy Dove, having let fall this divine date into the enclosed and shut-up garden of the Blessed Virgin, a *garden sealed* \* and hedged in on all sides by the sacred vow of virginity and immaculate chastity, which belonged to St. Joseph as the bride to her husband—who can doubt, I repeat, that this divine palm-tree, which bears fruits of immortal nourish-

\* Cant. iv. 12.

ment, belongs most truly to St. Joseph, who yet, instead of becoming prouder on that account, becomes more humble?

How good it is to see the reverence and respect of all our Saint's dealings and intercourse both with the Mother and the Son! If he had for a moment wished to quit the Mother, not then fully understanding the greatness of his dignity, with what admiration and profound self-abasement was he not afterwards overwhelmed when he saw himself so much honoured by Our Lord and Our Lady, who actually obeyed his will and did only what he commanded! This, indeed, is a thing beyond comprehension, and we must therefore pass on to the third property we remark in the palm—namely, a marvellous union of courage, constancy, and strength—virtues which are pre-eminently found in our Saint.

The palm has a strength, courage, and even constancy far beyond all other trees, therefore it takes the highest rank among them. The palm shows its strength in this, that the more it is laden, the more it shoots up and the higher it grows; which is quite unlike all other trees, and indeed all other things, for the more heavily they are laden, the more they bow down to the earth. The palm, however, shows its strength and constancy, never bending down, whatever load is placed upon it. It is its instinct to shoot upwards, and nothing can prevent it from doing so. It shows its valour in its sword-shaped foliage, and seems, therefore, to have as many weapons of defence as it has leaves.

Certainly St. Joseph is most justly said to resemble

the palm, for he was always constant, persevering, strong, and valiant. There is a great difference between these four virtues. We call a man constant when he remains firm, and prepared to suffer the assaults of the enemy, without surprise or loss of courage during the combat. Perseverance, however, has chiefly to do with a certain weariness of mind which comes upon us when we have suffered a long time, and this weariness is as powerful an enemy as we can meet with. Now, perseverance enables a man so to disregard this enemy that he gains the victory over it by continual calmness and submission to the will of God. Strength makes a man vigorously resist the attacks of his enemies. And valour is a virtue which makes us not only hold ourselves in readiness to fight or to offer resistance when the occasion presents itself, but also to attack the enemy at the moment when he least expects it.

Now, our glorious St. Joseph was endowed with all these virtues, and practised them marvellously well. As regards his constancy, did he not display it wonderfully when, seeing Our Lady with child, and not knowing how that could be, his mind was tossed with distress, perplexity, and trouble? Yet, in spite of all, he never complained, he was never harsh or ungracious towards his holy Spouse, but remained just as gentle and respectful in his demeanour as he had ever been. But what valour and strength did he not display in the victory which he gained over the two greatest enemies of man, the devil and the world? And that by the practice of a most perfect humility, as we have said, through-

out the whole course of his life. The devil, who for want of humility, and because he would not accept it for his inseparable companion, was driven out of heaven and cast down into hell, is so great an enemy to the lowly virtue, that there is no artifice or invention he will not use to make men fall away from it—so much the more because it is a virtue which renders them infinitely pleasing to God. We may, therefore, well say: “Valiant and strong is the man who, like St. Joseph, perseveres in humility; he will be conqueror at once of the devil and of the world, which is full of ambition, vanity, and pride.”

As regards perseverance, which overcomes that secret enemy of our souls, weariness and dejection under the continued assaults of humbling, painful circumstances—ill fortune, as we say—and the thousand accidents and misadventures of daily life, how greatly was the Saint tried in this way by God and man in his journey into Egypt! The Angel commanded him to set forth immediately and to take Our Lady and the Holy Child into that country.\* Instantly, without a moment’s delay, without even a word, he obeys. He does not ask: “Where shall I go? what road shall I take? How shall we be fed? Who will receive us there?” With his tools on his back, so that he may earn his poor livelihood and that of his family in the sweat of his brow, he sets forth on his journey. How heavily this dejection and distress of mind, of which we have spoken, must have oppressed him, since the Angel had not told him how long a time he must remain in Egypt,

\* Matt. ii. 13, 14.

and he could not settle down in any fixed abode, not knowing when he might be commanded to return.

St. Paul\* greatly admired the obedience of Abraham, when God commanded him to leave his *country* † without telling him *in what direction he should go*. The Patriarch did not reply: "Lord, Thou hast bid me go forth; tell me only if I shall pass through the South gate or through the North?" but instantly set out and went whither the Spirit of God conducted him. How much more shall we not admire the perfect obedience of St. Joseph! The Angel did not tell him how long he was to remain in Egypt, and he did not inquire. He remained there for the space of five years, as is generally believed, without asking any question as to his return, secure that He who had commanded his departure would also command his return, and he remained ready always to obey the divine voice. He was in *a land* not only *strange* ‡ but hostile to the Israelites, inasmuch as the Egyptians resented the fact of their having escaped from their tyranny, and also of their having been the cause of many of their nation being drowned in the depths of the Red Sea, when in pursuit of them. I leave you, therefore, to imagine how great must have been St. Joseph's desire to return, on account of the continual fear in which he lived among the Egyptians. The anxiety, too, of not knowing when he might depart, must greatly have afflicted and tormented his poor heart. Yet he

\* Heb. xi. 8, 9.

† Gen. xii. 1.

‡ Heb. ult. supra.

remained always himself, always gentle, tranquil, and persevering in his submission to the good pleasure of God, to Whose guidance he yielded implicitly, for as *he was a just man*,\* his will was always absolutely united and conformed to the will of God.

To be just is, indeed, to be perfectly united to the divine will, and to be always conformed to it, in all sorts of events, whether prosperous or adverse. That St. Joseph was this, no one can doubt. See how the Angel moulds him like wax in his hands! He tells him that he must go into Egypt; he goes. He commands him to return into his own country; he returns. God wills that he should be always poor, which is one of the heaviest trials that He can lay upon him, and he submits lovingly, not for a time only, but for his whole life. And what poverty—despised, rejected, needy poverty!

That voluntary poverty which is one of the vows of Religious is very mild, since it does not prevent them from receiving and taking things necessary to them; forbidding and depriving them only of superfluities. But the poverty of St. Joseph, of Our Lord and of Our Lady, was not like this, for although it too was voluntary, and although they loved it dearly, it was nevertheless abject, mean, despised, and most needy; for every one looked upon this Saint as a poor carpenter.† Though he toiled with the most affectionate zeal for the support of his little family, yet he could not earn enough to prevent their wanting many necessary

\* Matt. i. 19.

† Matt. xiii. 55; Mark vi. 3.

things. Then, as the years went on, and his poverty and abjection continued, he still submitted always most humbly to the will of God. He never allowed himself to be conquered or subdued by dejection of mind, which yet, no doubt, constantly attacked him, but always increased and grew in more perfect submission, as in all other virtues. So, too, it was with Our Lady, who day by day gained an increase of virtues and perfections from contact with her all-holy Son, Who Himself being unable to grow in any perfection—since He was, from the moment of His conception, what He is and will be eternally\*—bestowed upon the Holy Family, of which He deigned to be a member, this grace of continual growth and advance in perfection. Our Lady drew hers from His own divine Goodness, and St. Joseph received it, as we have said, through the intervention of Our Lady.

What more remains to be said, except that we can never for a moment doubt that this glorious Saint has great influence in heaven with Him Who raised him there in body and in soul—a fact which is the more probable because we have no relic of that body left to us here below! Indeed, it seems to me that no one can doubt this as a truth, for how could He Who had been so obedient to St. Joseph, all through His life, refuse him this grace? Doubtless when Our Lord descended into Limbo He was accosted by St. Joseph in words like these: “Oh my Lord, remember, if it please Thee, that when Thou didst come down from heaven to earth,

\* Heb. xiii. 8.

I received Thee into my house and my family, and that at the moment of Thy birth I received Thee into mine arms. Now that Thou art returning to heaven, take me there with Thee; I received Thee into my family, receive me now into Thine. I have carried Thee in my arms, take me into Thine; and as I carefully nourished and protected Thee in Thy mortal life, take care of me and lead me into life immortal." And if it is true, as we are bound to believe, that in virtue of the Blessed Sacrament which we receive, our bodies will come to life again in the day of judgment,\* how could we doubt that Our Lord raised up to heaven, in body and soul, the glorious St. Joseph? For he had the honour and the grace of carrying Him so often in his blessed arms, those arms in which Our Lord took so much pleasure. Oh, how many and what tender kisses His sacred lips bestowed on him, to reward him for his toil and labours!

St. Joseph is, then, undoubtedly in heaven in body and soul. Oh, how happy shall we be if we can merit a share in his holy intercession! for nothing will be refused to him either by Our Lady or by her glorious Son. If we have confidence in him, he will obtain for us growth in all virtues, but especially in those which, as we have seen, he possesses in a higher degree than any other man. These are great purity of body and mind, humility, constancy, courage, and perseverance. These virtues will make us victorious in this life over our enemies, and through them we shall merit the grace

\* John vi. 55.



to enjoy in eternal life the rewards prepared for those who shall imitate the example given by St. Joseph whilst in this life—a reward which will be nothing less than eternal happiness, in which we shall enjoy the unclouded vision of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Blessed be God!

## CONFERENCE XX

### WHY WE SHOULD BECOME RELIGIOUS

*In which it is asked what should be our aim  
in entering Religion.*

THE appeal which our Mother has made to me, my dear daughters, to explain to you what should be your aim in entering Religion, is indeed the most useful, important, and necessary question that can be put. Truly, my dear daughters, many enter Religion without knowing why they do so. They come into a Convent parlour; they see Nuns with calm faces, full of cheerfulness, modesty, and content, and they say to themselves: "Ah! what a happy place this is! Let us come to it. The world frowns on us; we do not get what we want there." Another says: "Oh! how perfectly they sing in this Convent!" Others come in order to find peace, consolation, and all sorts of sweetness, saying in their thoughts: "How happy the Religious are! They have got safe away from all their home worries; from their parents' continual ordering about and fault-finding. Really one can never satisfy one's relations, and as soon as one thing is finished another has to be begun. Our Lord has promised many consolations to those who quit the world for His service; let us, then, enter Religion."

Now, my dear daughters, these three reasons for entering into the house of God are worth nothing at all. It must of necessity be God Himself Who builds the city;\* otherwise, built though it may have been, it must fall to the ground. I am willing to believe, my dear daughters, that your reasons are quite different; that you all are in good faith, and that God will bless this little flock in its first beginning. Two similitudes occur to my mind, which might make you understand how, and on what foundation, your reasons must rest in order to be solid. I will, however, content myself with explaining one of them, and that will be sufficient. Suppose the case of an architect wishing to build a house; he does two things. In the first place, he considers whether his building is intended to be for the use of some private individual, of a prince, or perhaps even of a king, as on this depends the manner in which he must set to work. Then he calculates methodically whether his means are sufficient for the undertaking; for who would begin to build a high tower without having provided himself with the necessary materials? He would only expose himself to just ridicule for having begun a thing which he could not finish to his credit. Then, too, he must make up his mind to destroy the old building which stands on the site of the new one he has to erect. Well, my dear daughters, we desire to erect within our souls a great building, even the dwelling-place of God. First, then, let us consider maturely whether we have sufficient courage and resolution to crucify and annihilate ourselves, or, rather, to

\* Ps. cxxvi. 1.

permit God to do this for us, so that He may then rebuild us and make us the living temples of His majesty. I tell you, my daughters, that our only aim ought to be to unite ourselves to God, as Jesus Christ united Himself to His Eternal Father—that is, by His dying on the cross. For I am not now speaking to you of that general union which is effected by Baptism, in which Christians unite themselves to God by receiving this divine sacrament, the stamp of Christianity, binding themselves to keep His Commandments and those of Holy Church, to perform good works, and practise the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. This union is indeed a true one, and may justly look for paradise. Those who have united themselves by this means to God as to *their* God, are not bound to do more; they have attained their end and aim by the general and broad way of the Commandments (well observed). But for you, my dear daughters, this is not the way. Besides this obligation, which is binding upon you in common with all Christians, God, by a very special act of love, has chosen you to be His dear brides.

You must understand clearly how and what it is to be Religious. It is to be bound to God by the continual mortification of ourselves, and to live only for Him. Our heart is surrendered always and wholly to His divine Majesty; our eyes, tongue, hands, and all our members serve Him continually. This is why Religion, as you see, furnishes us with all the means suitable to this end, such as prayer, spiritual reading, silence, the inward secret withdrawal of the heart to rest in God alone, and constant aspirations to Our Lord. We cannot possibly arrive at this

except by continual mortification of all our passions, inclinations, tempers, and antipathies, and are therefore obliged to watch unceasingly over ourselves so as to destroy all these. Remember, my dear daughters, that *unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.\** The words of Our Lord are quite clear on this subject, His own sacred lips themselves having spoken them. Consequently, you who are aspiring to be Novices, and you who are preparing to be professed, look well again and again into your own hearts to see if you have resolution enough to die to yourselves and to live only to God. Weigh the whole matter well; there is still time for consideration before your veils are dyed black. I declare to you, my dear daughters, plainly and most seriously, that those who desire to live according to nature should stay in the world, and only those should enter Religion who are determined to live according to grace. Religion is nothing else than a school of renunciation and self-mortification; for which reason it provides you, as you see, with many instruments, both outward and inward, for mortifying yourselves.

“But,” you will say to me, “that is not what I was intending at all. I thought that in order to be a good Religious, it was sufficient to desire to pray well, to have visions and revelations, to see Angels in human form, to be rapt in ecstasies, to love the reading of good books. And then, I was so virtuous, I thought, so mortified, so humble! every one ad-

\* John xii. 24, 25.

mired me. Was it not being very humble to speak to my companions so nicely about devotional subjects; to tell those who had not heard the sermons all about them; to behave with gentleness to all members of the household, especially when they did not contradict me?" Certainly, my dear daughters, that was all very well for the world, but Religion demands that we should do works worthy of our vocation\*—that is to say, that we should die to ourselves in all things, as well in what is good in our opinion as in what is bad and useless. Do you think that the monks of the desert, who attained to such a close union with God, arrived at it by following their own inclinations? Certainly not; they mortified themselves in the very holiest things, and though they delighted in singing divine canticles, in reading, praying, and so on, yet they never did these things in order to please themselves. On the contrary, they deprived themselves voluntarily of these pleasures, in order to apply to painful and laborious works.

It is, indeed, quite true that devout souls receive a thousand sweetnesses and satisfactions amid the mortifications and labours of holy Religion, for it is to them chiefly that the Holy Ghost distributes His precious gifts. But still, they must seek in it God only, and the mortification of their tempers, passions, and inclinations. If they seek anything else, they will never find the consolations to which they aspire. It is true, however, that we need an invincible courage not to grow weary of ourselves, because

\* Eph. iv. 1.

there will always be something to do and something to renounce. The work of Religious ought to be to cultivate their souls well, so as to root out all the bad growths which spring from our depraved nature so luxuriantly, that we have continually to begin this work afresh. And just as the husbandman must not grumble or fret if he does not reap a good harvest, because no blame attaches itself to him, provided that he has done his best in tilling and sowing the land, so also the Religious must not grieve if he does not at once gather in the fruits of virtue and perfection, provided that he has cultivated the soil of his heart with great fidelity, and rooted out all that appears contrary to that perfection at which he is bound to aim; for not until we reach paradise shall we be perfectly cured.

When your Rule bids you \* ask for books at the appointed time, do you suppose that, generally speaking, those which you like the best will be given to you? Not at all: that is not the intention of the Rule; and this applies to other cases. A sister feels herself, as she thinks, much drawn to making meditation, saying Office, or going into retreat, and the command is given to her: "My sister, go to the kitchen," or "Do such and such a thing." This is sad news for a Nun who is very devout. I tell you, however, that we must die in order that Christ may live in us,† for it is impossible to arrive at the union of our souls with God by any other means than through mortification. These words, "You must die," sound hard;

\* Cap. xviii.

† Gal. ii. 20.

but they are followed by others of inexpressible sweetness—"that you may be united to God by this death." You must know that nobody *putteth new wine into old bottles*;\* and as the wine of divine love cannot enter where the old Adam reigns, he must of necessity be destroyed. "But," you say, "how destroy this old Adam?" How, my dear daughters? Why, by exact obedience to your Rules. I assure you, and I speak to you on the part of God, that if you are faithful in doing all that they teach you to do, you will undoubtedly attain to that end to which you aspire—namely, the union of yourselves with God. Observe that I say *doing*, for we do not acquire perfection by folding our arms. We must strive in good earnest to conquer ourselves, and live according to reason, the Rule, and obedience, and not according to the inclinations which we brought with us from the world. Religion does, indeed, tolerate our bringing with us our bad habits, passions, and inclinations, but not our continuing to follow them in our daily life. She gives us Rules which are to act upon our hearts like presses, forcing out all that is contrary to God in them. Live, then, with courage and cheerfulness according to these Rules.

"But," one of you will say to me, "alas! what shall I do? I have not got in the least degree the spirit of the Rule!" Truly, my dear daughter, I can easily believe that, for it is not a thing which we bring from the world into Religion. The spirit of the Rule is acquired by practising the Rule itself faithfully. I say the same with regard to

\* Matt. ix. 17.



holy humility and gentleness—those virtues on which this Congregation is founded. God will give them to us infallibly, provided that we take courage and do our utmost to acquire them. Happy and blessed indeed shall we be if, even a quarter of an hour before our death, we find ourselves clothed in this robe! Our whole life will be well employed if we spend it in stitching now one piece, now another to it; for this holy garment is not made of one piece only—there must be many pieces in it. You fancy, perhaps, that perfection is to be found ready-made, and that we have nothing to do but to put it over our head like any other dress. No, no, my dear daughters—no; this cannot be.

You tell me, my Mother, that our sisters the Postulants are full of good-will, but that they are wanting in strength to do what they wish to do, and that they feel their passions so strong that they fear even to begin the journey. Courage, my dear daughters! I have often told you that Religion is a school in which we learn our lessons. The master does not always require that the scholars should know these lessons without a mistake; it is enough if they have given their attention and done their utmost to learn them. Let us do what we can, and then God will be satisfied, and our Superiors also. Do you not constantly see people who are learning to fence? They often fall; and the same with those who are learning to ride; but they are not considered beaten, for it is quite a different thing to be sometimes worsted and to be absolutely conquered. Your passions at times

get the upper hand, and therefore you say: "I am not fit for Religion, because I have passions." No, my dear daughters, it is not so at all. Religion does not congratulate herself very highly on moulding a character gentle and tranquil in itself, and, so to speak, already formed. But she does triumph greatly when she brings back to virtue and submission souls strong in their own inclinations; for such souls, if they be faithful, will surpass the others, winning at the point of the sword what those others possess without taking any trouble about it.

It is not required of you that you should have no passions; that is not in your power, and God wills that you should be conscious of them until death, for your greater merit. Nor even is it required that they should be already weakened, for that would mean that a soul who has not yet subdued its passions could never be fit to serve God. The world is mistaken in this idea. God rejects nothing in which no malice or ill-will is to be found; for I ask you, how can a person help being of such and such a temperament, and subject to such and such passions? The whole point lies, then, in what we do by virtue of that which depends on our will; sin being so entirely dependent on our will, that without our consent there is no sin at all. Suppose the case of anger surprising me. I shall say to it: "Come as often as you please, blaze up as furiously as you will, you will meet with no favour from me; not one single word will I utter to which you urge me." God has left us this power; otherwise, in demanding perfection of us, He would be laying

upon us an obligation impossible for us to fulfil. That would be injustice, and God can never be unjust.

Speaking on this subject, a story occurs to my mind which I will tell you, as it will be useful and is to the point. When Moses came down from the mountain where he had spoken face to face with God, he saw the people worshipping a golden calf which they had made. Full of just anger and zeal for the glory of God, he cried out, turning to the Levites: *If there is any one who is on the side of God, let him take sword in hand and slay all who approach him, sparing neither father nor mother, brother nor sister; let him put every one of them to death. The Levites did as he commanded, and vied with each other in the deadly work.\** So do you, my dear daughters, take in hand the sword of mortification to kill and annihilate your passions; and she who has the most to destroy, will be the most valiant if she will only co-operate with grace. These two young souls whom I see before me (1), one but little more than sixteen years of age, the other only fifteen, have but little to put to death, since their spirit is scarcely yet awakened; but those great souls who have gone through many experiences, and tasted the sweetness of paradise, it is for them to put to death and annihilate their passions.

(1) This Conference was held in the first Convent of the Visitation at Paris, founded May 1, 1619. According to the *Novitiate Book* of that House, the *two young souls* here mentioned must have been Sisters Marie-Catherine Carnus and Hélène-Marie Grison, who were clothed November 25, 1619, one being fifteen and the other sixteen years and nine months.

\* Exod. xxxii. 26-28.

As regards those, my Mother, whom you say have so great a desire for perfection that they wish to surpass all others in virtue, they do well indeed in thus satisfying their self-love; but they will do far better in following the rest of the Community by keeping their Rules strictly, for that is the right road which leads to God. You are very happy, my dear daughters—much happier than those of us who are in the world. When we ask our way, some tell us, “To the right,” others “To the left,” and very often in the end they misdirect us; but as for you, you have only to let yourselves be carried along. You are like those who travel by sea; the vessel carries them along, and they remain on board free from care or exertion; while they repose they are still going on their way, and have no need to inquire whether they are on the right track or not. That is the duty of the mariners, who, always seeing the pole-star, the sure guide of the vessel, know that they are steering aright, and say to the others on board: “Courage! you are on the right road!”

Follow, then, without fear your divine lodestar, Our Lord Himself; the vessel is your Rule; those who guide it, your Superiors, who generally say to you: “Proceed, sisters, by the exact observance of your Rules; you will then at last happily attain to the vision of God. He will guide you safely.” But notice that I say: “Proceed, by exact and faithful observance,” for *he that neglecteth his own way shall die*, says Solomon.\*

You tell me, Mother, that our sisters say: “It is

\* Prov. xix. 16.

all very well to live according to Rule, but that is the ordinary path. God draws us by special attractions; each has her own particular one; all are not led to Him by the same road." They are right in saying this; it is perfectly true; but it is also certain that if the attraction comes from God, it will without doubt lead them to obedience. It is not for us who are subordinates to decide anything about our special attractions; that is the duty of our Superiors, and for that, individual direction is prescribed. Be faithful to this direction, and be sure that you will then reap a harvest of blessings. If you do as you are taught to do, my dear daughters, you will be indeed most happy; you will live contented, and will experience even in this world a slight foretaste of the joys of paradise. But if Our Lord should deign to give you some inward taste of sweetness, beware of clinging to it. It is like the aniseed comfit that the apothecary sometimes mixes with the bitter potion which he prepares for his patient. The bitter medicine must be swallowed for health's sake, and in spite of the sweetness of the sugar, the patient must afterwards of necessity experience all the bitterness of that healing draught.

You see, then, clearly what should be your aim and motive if you desire to be worthy brides of Our Lord, espoused to Him on Mount Calvary. Live your whole life, then, and form all your actions according to this motive, and God will bless you. All your happiness depends on perseverance; I exhort you to this, my dear daughters, with my whole heart, and pray Almighty God to fill you with His grace and divine love in this world, and to

make us all the happy partakers of His glory in the next.

Adieu, my dear daughters. I bear you all in my heart. To recommend myself to your prayers would be superfluous; for I believe that your charity never fails me in this respect. Every day I will send you my blessing from the Altar, and now receive it in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

## CONFERENCE XXI

### ON THE SUBJECT OF ASKING FOR NOTHING AND REFUSING NOTHING

MY Mother, I was speaking one day to an excellent Nun, who asked me if, wishing to go to Communion oftener than the rest of the Community, she might ask permission of the Superior to do so. I told her that if I were a Religious, I think I should not ask to be allowed to communicate oftener than my brethren, nor to wear sackcloth, a hair shirt, or an iron girdle, nor to perform extraordinary fasts, nor to use the discipline, nor anything of that kind. I should content myself with following in all respects the ways of the Community. If I were in strong health I would not eat four times a day; but if I were desired to take these four meals, I would do so, and say nothing. If I were in feeble health, and yet was told to eat only once a day, I would obey without thinking whether I was in feeble health or not. I (1)

(1) . . . I wish for few things; what I do desire, I desire for God; I have scarcely any desires, but were I to begin life again, I would have, or would wish to have, none at all. If God came to me, favouring me with the sensible feeling of His presence, I also would go to Him, accepting His grace and corresponding therewith; but if He did not choose to come to me, I would stay where I was, and would not move towards Him. What I mean is that I would not strive after the feeling of His presence, but would content myself with apprehending Him by faith alone. (*Var.*)

wish for few things, and what I do wish for, I wish for but slightly. I have scarcely any desires, but if I could begin my life over again, I would have none at all. If God came to me, I would also go to Him; but if He did not will to come to me, I would stay where I was, and would not go to Him (I).

I say, then, that we must neither ask anything nor refuse anything, but leave ourselves absolutely in the arms of divine Providence, without busying ourselves with any desires, except to will what God wills of us. St. Paul practised this self-abandonment most excellently at the very moment of his conversion, for when Our Lord had smitten him with blindness, he cried out instantly: "Lord,\* what wilt thou have me to do?" and from that time forth he continued in absolute dependence upon the will and commands of God. Our whole perfection lies in the practice of this; and the same St. Paul, writing to one of his disciples, forbids him, among other things, to allow his heart to be engrossed with any strong desire, so well did the great Apostle know the danger of this failing.

You say: "We must not, then, desire virtues, although Our Lord says: *Ask, and it shall be given to you.*" Oh, my daughters, when I say that you must ask for nothing and desire nothing, I am speaking of earthly things; as for virtues, we may, of course, ask for them, and in asking for the love of God, we comprise all, for it contains them all.

(I) The last lines of the "variant" give the real meaning of this proposition, incompletely put forward in the text.

\* Acts ix. 6.



But, you say, as regards external matters, may we not desire mean and lowly offices and employments, because they are more laborious and troublesome, and give more opportunities of humbling ourselves for God's sake? My daughter, David said \* that he would rather *be abject in the house of the Lord* than be great among sinners; and *It is good, O Lord,†* he says, that *Thou hast humbled me that I may learn Thy justifications*. Yet, nevertheless, such a desire is very suspicious, and may spring from a merely human source. How do you know whether, having desired mean offices, you will have strength to accept the humiliations which will meet you in them at every turn, and the bitternesses, weariness, and disgust which may come upon you? For even though you may at the present moment feel strength sufficient to endure mortifications and humiliations, how do you know that you will always have it?

In short, a desire for any special occupations, whatever they may be, whether mean or honourable, must always be regarded in the light of a temptation. It is always best to desire nothing, but to hold ourselves in readiness to receive whatever obedience may impose upon us. Whether these duties, so imposed, be exalted or lowly, I should accept them humbly without saying a single word, unless questioned on the subject, when I should reply simply and truthfully, saying just what I thought.

You ask me how we can practise this holy indifference when sickness comes upon us. I find in

\* Ps. lxxxiii. 11.

† Ps. cxviii. 71.

the Holy Gospels\* a perfect model in St. Peter's wife's mother. That good woman, *lying sick of a great fever*, practised many virtues, but the one which I admire the most is her absolute self-surrender to the Providence of God and the care of her superiors. She was stricken with fever, still was tranquil and peaceful, without any disquietude about herself, and causing none to those who were with her. Yet we all know what is the natural condition of a fever patient; the burning restlessness makes repose impossible, and is accompanied by a thousand other discomforts. Now, this great surrender which our sick woman made of herself into the hands of her superiors, prevented her from being the least anxious or uneasy as to her health, or as to the probability of her recovery; she was content to bear her malady with sweetness and patience. Oh, how happy was this good woman! Certainly she deserved to be well cared for, as indeed she was by the Apostles, who, without any solicitation on her part, provided for her cure, out of charity and compassion for all that she suffered. Happy will those Religious be who make an absolute surrender of themselves into the hands of their Superiors, and these Superiors will assuredly, through motives of charity, wait on them and provide most carefully for all their wants and necessities. Remember, too, that charity is much stronger and more assiduous than mere natural affection.

This sick woman knew very well that Our Lord was at Capharnaum, and that He was healing the

\* Matt. viii. 14, 15; Luke iv. 38, 39

sick, yet she did not fret and disquiet herself, trying to send some one to let Him know that she was suffering. But, what is more admirable still, she saw Him enter her house, as the sovereign Physician, yet so little was she occupied about her cure, that she did not even think of Him in this capacity. In her eyes He was her God alone, to Whom she belonged in health and in sickness, being as content to be sick as to be in perfect health. How many would have used little arts and subterfuges that they might be healed by Our Lord, and would have said that they only asked for health that they might serve him better, fearing that He might need something done which in their sickness they could not do! But this good woman had no such thought, and showed her perfect resignation in not even asking to be healed. I do not, however, say that we may not very justly ask this of Our Lord, Who alone can give us the boon, but it must be with this condition, if such is His will; for we should always say: *Fiat voluntas tua*.\*

It is not enough to be sick and afflicted because God wills it; but we must be so as He wills, when He wills, for as long as He wills, and exactly in the manner in which it pleases Him; neither choosing nor rejecting any sickness or affliction, however mean and abject it may seem to us; for sickness and affliction without abjection often inflate the heart, instead of humbling it! But when we have any kind of pain or ill without honour, or when dishonour, degradation, and abjection are themselves the very ills from which we suffer, what opportunities arise

\* Matt. vi. 10.

for exercising patience, humility, modesty, and sweetness of mind and heart! Let us, then, be most careful, like this good woman, to keep our hearts submissive, profiting, as she did, by our maladies, for *she rose up* as soon as Our Lord had driven away the fever, and *ministered to Him*. In doing this she certainly showed great virtue, and that she had profited by her sickness, for, being once rid of it, she desired only to use her health for the service of Our Lord, employing it for this purpose the very instant she had recovered it. Truly she was not like people in the world, who, after a few days' sickness, require weeks and months to recruit themselves.

Our Lord upon the Cross shows us how we must mortify our softness. When a burning thirst was consuming Him, he asked for nothing to drink, but simply made known His necessity, saying *I thirst*. After which He made an act of perfect submission; and when some one offered Him, on the point of a lance, a sponge steeped in vinegar to slake His thirst, He moistened His blessed lips with it.\* How wonderful! He knew that it was a beverage which would increase His suffering, yet He took it simply without showing any displeasure or disgust; to teach us with what submission we ought to take the remedies and nourishment presented to us when we are sick, without showing so much repulsion and dissatisfaction, even though we may be doubtful whether they will do us any good. Alas! when we are suffering even the very slightest inconvenience, we do just the very contrary to what our gentle Master has taught us, for we never cease bemoaning ourselves, and seem as if

\* John xix. 28-30.

we could not find a sufficient number of persons to carry our complaints and lamentations to, or who will listen to the catalogue of our aches and pains.

Our suffering, whatever it may be, is quite unexampled; what others may have to endure is not to be compared with it. We are too impatient and worried for words; nothing can be found to satisfy us. Truly, it is a sorrowful thing to see how little we imitate the patience of Our Saviour, Who forgot His own grief and agonies, and even strove to hide them from men, contented that His heavenly Father, through obedience to Whom He endured them, should look upon them, and that thus His wrath should be appeased towards that human nature for which He suffered.

Do you ask what I desire should remain most deeply engraved upon your mind, so that you may put it in practice? (I) Ah, my dear daughters, what shall I say, except those excellent words I have so often already recommended to you: Desire nothing, refuse nothing. These words say everything, for they teach us the practice of perfect indifference. Look upon the Infant Jesus in the Crib; He accepts poverty, nakedness, the company of brute beasts, all the inclemencies of the weather—all, in fact, that

(I) This is the last farewell which our beloved Father addressed to his dear Sisters of Lyons, on the Feast of St. Stephen, in the evening, the eve of the day before his most blessed death. *He died on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, 1622.* (MS.)—When he saw the torches lighted to conduct him home, he said, with astonishment, to his servants: “Ah, what are you doing? I could well have passed the night here without thinking about it. I must go; obedience calls me *A Dieu*, farewell, my dear daughters. I take you all into my heart, and bequeath it to you as a pledge of my friendship.” (MS.)

happens to Him by His Father's permission. We are never told that He stretched forth His little hands to His Mother's breast; He left her to provide all that was necessary to Him, but, at the same time, He never refused the little comforts which she gave Him. He received the services of St. Joseph, the adoration of the kings and of the shepherds, all with equal indifference. So, too, ought we to desire nothing and to refuse nothing, but to suffer and to receive with perfect evenness of mind all that the Providence of God may permit. May God give us grace to do this.

*Blessed be God.*

THE END



















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