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THE NUN

HER CHARACTER AND WORK

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THE NUN: HER CHARACTER AND WORK

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THE NUN

HER CHARACTER AND WORK

BY

ETIENNE LELONG

SOMETIME BISHOP OF NEVERS

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

MADAME CECILIA

RELIGIOUS OF ST. ANDREW'S CONVENT, STREATHAM

THIRD EDITION

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

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MAIN

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

THESE Conferences are, for the first time, presented to English-speaking religious in their mother-tongue. They are translated from Monseigneur Etienne Lelong's work 'La Sainte Religieuse.' He adds an explanatory sub-title: 'Instructions sur les Grandeurs et les Obligations de la Vie Religieuse.' This exactly defines the contents and scope of his valuable work.

The Author, Monseigneur Etienne Lelong, was born at Châlon-sur-Saône on December 3, 1834. From his earliest childhood it was manifest that he was called to the priesthood. After successfully completing a brilliant course of studies, he received Holy Orders in 1857. Twenty years later he was appointed Bishop of Nevers, and he held this see until, by a sudden death, God called this faithful pastor to receive his eternal reward in 1903.

'La Semaine Religieuse de Nevers' in an obituary notice thus speaks of the deceased prelate:

'His panegyric may be summed up in one word: Monseigneur Lelong was *a bishop* in the fullest

sense of the word. He was a bishop by the integrity of his faith, and his unwearied zeal for the maintenance of ecclesiastical discipline; he was a bishop by his devotedness and filial obedience to the Sovereign Pontiff; he was a bishop in his administration of his diocese, in his supernatural charity and respect for his priests; he was a bishop by his dignified firmness in upholding the imprescriptible rights of the Church, and he was a bishop by the edification given by his saintly life. Therefore, the clergy and laity of Nevers are justly proud of their deceased bishop.'

Among the many objects of his episcopal and paternal solicitude, we may mention the 'Congrégation des Sœurs de la Charité et de l'Instruction Chrétienne de Nevers.' These Conferences are a proof of his devotedness to this congregation, and in them he dwells particularly upon their characteristic spirit and the works of zeal proper to the congregation. These Instructions, therefore, have a special interest and application for all religious, who are called, by their special constitutions, to a mixed life, in which action and contemplation are united.

This does not, however, prevent the volume from being of service to other Religious Orders or Congregations, since the foundations of all such institutions are the same. In varying proportions,

according as the Congregation is devoted to the active, contemplative or mixed life, prayer and labour form the two foundation-stones. Consequently all religious, whatever be their respective spirit and vocation, can read this work with spiritual profit. It contains instructions alike for the Marys and the Marthas of Religious Life. The Conferences reveal a master of the spiritual life, a skilled director of souls, thoroughly conversant with the peculiar difficulties and grave obligations inherent to Religious Life, whatever be its exterior form.

The Sisters of Charity of Nevers had the honour of receiving into their Congregation that privileged child, to whom our Lady appeared eighteen times at Lourdes, Bernadette Soubirons, who took the name of Sœur Marie-Bernard in religion. She died with a great reputation for holiness at the Mother House in Nevers in 1879, at the age of thirty-five.

This religious institution has an interesting history, and those who read these Conferences may like to have a few details concerning the religious to whom they were primarily addressed. The Superiors of the Mother House of Nevers have published a short account of their Congregation; the information subjoined is taken from this pamphlet.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity, and of Christian Instruction, was founded at Saint

Saulge, a little town of Nivernais, in 1680, by Dom de Laveyne—a Benedictine monk—and Marie Scholastique de Marchangy. The Annals of the Congregation relate that the foundress was favoured with rich gifts of nature and of grace. She was extremely intelligent and virtuous. Her great desires were to work for the glory of God and to serve His poor, whom she loved so dearly. Even in the flower of her youth, her virtue was so mature, that she was capable of the most remarkable heroism in accomplishing works of zeal and charity.

In 1685, Nevers became, and remains, the Mother House of the Congregation. For some years the saintly Founder strove to inculcate that spirit which has ever distinguished this institution.

Dom de Laveyne thus explains the twofold aim of the Congregation : ' Consider how your rules set forth the two forms of Religious Life—that of Martha and of Mary. Martha represents the active life, devoted, as far as it is necessary, to the good of your neighbour by works of mercy. Mary represents the contemplative life in which the soul applies itself purely to God and His service of worship.'

The Sisters of Nevers devote themselves to nursing the sick. They have likewise hospices for the deaf and dumb, for the aged, and for the insane. They superintend public kitchens, crèches, dispensaries, and workrooms. They have orphanages,

day-schools, boarding schools and houses of retreat, likewise homes for penitents. The good Sisters fully live up to their epithet of charity, for no good work seems alien to their constitutions. They succour alike old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. At the present moment, this Congregation has 187 charitable institutions under its care in France, Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, and England. Their English house is at Withdean, Brighton.

During the two hundred years that the Congregation has existed, the religious have passed through troubled times, and their devotedness has never failed. Thus, when the French Revolution broke out, some of the Sisters of Nevers were imprisoned. The poor clamoured for their 'good mothers' to be given back to them and prayed incessantly for the deliverance of these confessors of the Faith. God heard the prayers on their behalf, and just when these religious were looking forward to receiving the palm of martyrdom, their prison doors were opened by the death of the tyrant Robespierre. The bravery of the good nuns on this occasion is a striking proof of their sanctity, and a tribute to the training received in the Congregation. The persecution which dispersed the Religious Orders and Congregations of France in 1904 closed all the convent schools in France which were under the

Sisters of Nevers, but they were allowed to continue their other works of charity.

There are no lay sisters in this Congregation. Rich and poor are accepted on the same footing, and the constitutions lean rather to the reception of the poor and lowly. As the Congregation has so many works which differ so widely in character, it can utilise the talents of all who present themselves for admission, be they richly endowed mentally or simple souls 'of good will.' The Congregation does not receive aspirants over twenty-five years of age, nor widows, though dispensations from these rules can be obtained, if necessary. An aspirant, after having been accepted by the Superior-General, passes a short time in one of the branch houses. Thence she goes to the Mother House for a year in order to learn the rule, and to know something of the spirit of the Congregation. This first year is devoted to the contemplative life. At its expiration, the first year's novitiate commences and, for this probation, the novice is sent to one of the houses of the Congregation that she may get to know the works undertaken by the institution. The superiors are guided in the choice of the house to which a novice is sent by her special aptitudes. If the novices are deemed satisfactory in this apprenticeship to the active life, they are recalled to the Mother House of Nevers for the final year of

preparation for their profession. These two years of experience help them considerably, since it has shown them what difficulties they will have to meet, and what obligations they are taking upon themselves. At the close of this third year of preparation, the novices make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for one year. These vows are renewed each year, until ten years have elapsed since the aspirant made her vows. Then these young professed are allowed to take final vows which bind them for life to their Congregation and to God.

This brief notice concerning the Sisters of Charity of Nevers will, it is hoped, help those who read Monseigneur Etienne Lelong's Conferences, in their English garb, to understand his various allusions to their characteristic spirit and works.

MADAME CECILIA.

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THE NUN:

HER CHARACTER AND WORK

FIRST CONFERENCE

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.—Ephes. iv. 23.

ST. PAUL addresses these words to all Christians, and the spiritual renewal of which he speaks, constitutes the groundwork both of the Christian and the Religious Life. All who earnestly desire to lead a really Christian or Religious life—according to their respective vocation—must necessarily watch over themselves with all diligence, exercise due circumspection, and, from time to time, examine themselves as to how far they are fulfilling their special duties. They must watch over themselves, lest certain imperfections cause them to slacken their pace along the road to Heaven, or bring them to a complete standstill. When a vessel is sailing over the ocean out of sight of land, the captain frequently consults the compass in order to ascertain if his ship is following the right direction for a given port. Should he find that she has left the track, he

at once gives orders to his men to change the course of the vessel, knowing well that, when his ship loses her bearings, danger looms ahead.

Now, just as a prudent captain takes every precaution in order to steer his ship in the right course, and thus avoid dangers, so, by spiritual renewal in response to St. Paul's exhortation, religious assure the safety of their immortal souls, since human frailties and delusions are either prevented or remedied by the renewal of the interior life. Moreover, as the Apostle points out in his Epistle to the Romans,[1] this 'newness of mind' enlightens the soul as to what is 'the good, and the acceptable, and the perfect will of God,' and this deeper knowledge of God's holy will leads the soul on to accomplish it more perfectly.

It is important that you should be firmly convinced of the necessity of this continual renewal of the spiritual life for yourselves personally, and it will be profitable, I think, in this preliminary conference, to set before you clearly the motives which constrain you to strive to attain to this 'newness of mind.' Thus, this instruction will serve as an introduction to those which follow. In these consecutive conferences it is my intention to deal with the privileges and responsibilities of your holy vocation, trusting that, by God's blessing, these considerations will lead you to desire this spiritual renewal and spur you on in your resolution to attain to your goal.

It is certain that, in proportion as you realise

[1] Rom. xii. 2.

the greatness of the dignity to which you are raised by your religious life, and consider the numerous graces and favours of which it is the determining cause, you will feel drawn to prove your gratitude to God. This conviction will enable you to resist the suggestions of the flesh, which ever tend to drag down the soul to earthly things; it will help you to live in that blessed higher plane of the spiritual life which God destines for you; to take up your abode with our Lord on the Mount of the Transfiguration. There, you will long to pitch your tent, where it is so good to dwell with Him; in a word, you will better understand and practise St. Paul's exhortation, 'Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.'

This introduction has perhaps suggested a question, and you would like to ask me whether the Apostle's words were said for you; whether you, being religious, should take them home to yourselves. For, manifestly, all renewal presupposes a certain falling-off, and is this possible in the consecrated life? You know well that the Holy Scriptures warn us that: 'The life of man upon earth is a warfare';[1] and that: 'Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood: but against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places.'[2] But, you ask me, 'Does this law of continual combat, of which the issue may be death, or at least wounds, apply to religious?' 'Are they not exempt from it by the very fact of their vocation?' It is self-evident that men, who live in the midst of the world's

[1] Job vii. 1. [2] Ephes. vi. 12.

seducing pleasures, of its vanities, temptations, and lies, must bear the brunt of this combat. But religious, like Mary, have 'chosen the best part.'[1] They have made to their loved Master the same generous, courageous reply which, of old, Ruth, the Moabitess, addressed to her mother-in-law: 'Whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go.'[2] They have, once for all, closed their eyes to the vanities of the world. For these daughters of humility, poverty, chastity, obedience, mortification, and work, can there be combats involving possible defeats?

Yes, certainly defeats can and do exist. I would even go so far as to say *fortunately*, reverses are possible, for were it otherwise Religious Life would be without merit. Religious have no more claim to an exemption from the universal law of combat than the rank and file of Christians. On the contrary, instead of being without the field of battle, they are in the thickest part of the fight, precisely because religious constitute the *élite* of the Christian army. Therefore the enemy, fearing them more than the rest of the Christian soldiers, assails them with his fiercest attacks. The same conclusion may be deduced from the words which Solomon addresses to those souls who aspire to advance in the spiritual life: 'Son, when thou comest to the service of God, stand in justice and in fear, and prepare thy soul for temptation.'[3] St. Paul teaches the same truth when he says: 'All that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution.'[4]

[1] St. Luke x. 42.
[2] Ruth i. 16.
[3] Eccles. ii.
[4] 2 Tim. iii. 12.

When you asked to be admitted into the congregation, of which you are a member, the law of combat was not concealed from you. No vain hopes were held out to attract you; you were not hoodwinked. The superiors did not promise that the moment you entered Religious Life you could lay down your arms and enjoy a life of perfect peace; that henceforth no disturbing element would trouble your blessed state of security. No, this is not what you were told: superiors could not have spoken thus, knowing such a statement to be false. Undoubtedly you were led to expect a life of peace, but only as the result of hourly, generous fighting, which alone secures the possession of the glorious, immutable peace of eternity.

Even had you not been thus warned, would not your own experience have sufficed to teach you this truth? As a matter of fact, are you not bound to combat evil? Is there any one of you who has not had to struggle against those enemies, known as pride, curiosity, independence, sadness, and many others that you know well? Do they not in turn attack you, even as, in days of old, they rose up against men like St. Paul, St. Anthony, and St. Jerome—against those grand athletes of the Christian army, men who were not freed from the importunate attacks of these enemies by their lives of solitude and the constant practice of the most heroic virtues? God allowed these giants to be harassed thus for our instruction, as well as for their spiritual advantage. It is thus we learn that there is no place upon earth where temptation,

and, with it, the obligation to resist, does not exist.

Perchance, the thought arises spontaneously in your souls: Would to God that, in the Religious Life, we were assured of the permanent possession of the grace of God, of a course of unswerving fidelity, crowned by the unspeakable gift of final perseverance! Yet, no; such an assurance cannot be given; such is not God's plan. He grants it to those whom He has crowned in the kingdom of Heaven, as a reward for their victory, but the poor exiles of earth have not this privilege, never has it been accorded to them.

Nevertheless, all religious have better weapons of defence, and more abundant and effectual helps in the combat, than the simple laity. Their rules are a strong rampart, behind which they find cover from the enemy. They are better instructed as regards the foes' tactics and ruses. With David they can exclaim: 'Blessed be the Lord my God, who teacheth my hands to fight, and my fingers to war.'[1] But, notwithstanding these advantages, religious are not invulnerable to the attacks of their spiritual enemies. The intrinsic holiness of their state of life, *per se*, does not exempt them from the possibility of sinning. As the tempter glided into the 'paradise of pleasure,' so he enters the 'garden enclosed' of the Religious Life. His object is to kill the life of grace in the soul. Should he fail, and see no prospect of injecting these souls with his deadly venom—as is usually the case—he, nevertheless, at times gains partial victories, since

[1] Psalm cxliii. 1.

he succeeds in lessening their energy and fervour. He hinders them from advancing, and even succeeds in making them fall from the degree of virtue to which their generous efforts, aided by the grace of God, had raised them.

Who does not experience, more or less, this evil influence? Who is free from the reproach of conscience concerning some concession to the enemy or faults of frailty? Examine yourselves honestly and seriously. Remember your good dispositions when you crossed the threshold of the convent, when you took the habit, when you made your profession. Look back to those fervent retreats, and the days which followed. Then you said to your God in the words of the Psalmist: 'I have run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou didst enlarge my heart.'[1] You longed to practise perfectly the Evangelical Counsels. Doubtless, you still have this desire to be wholly your Lord's handmaid, to serve Him alone. But in your daily life, do you still perform your actions with the same perfection? Just as fine dust penetrates after a time into an apartment, no matter how well it is shut, and covers all the furniture, deadening its polish and beauty, so, as St. Leo tells us, the subtile dust of the world finds entrance into the souls even of religious. Has not this been the case with you, at least in some degree? If you listened attentively, might you not hear the voice of God addressing you in the words of warning dictated to St. John, when he was charged to reprove the Church of Ephesus: 'I know thy works and

[1] Psalm cxviii. 32.

thy patience . . . but I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first charity'?[1] In a word, do you not sometimes feel the necessity of renewing within you the spirit of your holy vocation?

In the course of the year there are certain seasons and days particularly favourable for this spiritual renewal. For example, during the holy season of Lent the Church calls all her children to renew their fervour, for all have need of this 'newness of mind.' As some of the holy doctors of the Church have remarked, the penitential season of Lent is observed precisely at the time when there is a mysterious renewal of Nature — renewal which symbolises that which should take place in the supernatural life of every child of the Church.

Lent is the springtime of souls. In spring the frosts disappear, the climate becomes more genial, and the sap circulates more freely in the trees and plants. Presently, the effect of this circulation becomes visible in the countless buds which burst forth. The leaves unfold, the flowers open, and when the sun's rays become more powerful, the fruits ripen in their season. In like manner, sin—the winter of the soul—seems to withdraw during the holy season of Lent, and souls are enlightened and made to bring forth fruit, thanks to the divine rays of grace. Thus Jesus prepares His people, whom He has regenerated by fasting and prayer, to receive His visit, for the feast of Easter is 'the Passage of the Lord'[2]—the time when He visits His Church.

[1] Apoc. ii. 4. [2] Exod. xii. 11.

Manifestly, all religious must participate in this general renewal—in this spiritual blossoming which is manifest throughout all centres of catholicity. The favourable effect of spring is not confined merely to common plants, that serve simply for domestic purposes. It is seen in the most delicate and most valuable flowers of our gardens. In these plants the effect of spring is even more varied and beautiful. Therefore, religious, whom the Fathers of the Church consider the most beautiful flowers in the mystical garden of that Church, ought necessarily, more than all others, to profit by the grace of spiritual renewal which circulates so freely during Lent. This grace must inundate your souls, penetrating them and thus becoming the source of fresh light and renewed courage to advance in the way of perfection. Never lose sight of this truth ; each year, as Lent comes round in its turn, say to yourselves with a deep and practical conviction : ' This Lent is for me an acceptable time, a day of salvation.'

It is hardly necessary for me to remind you that your annual retreats—together with their necessary complement, your monthly retreats—provide special opportunities for spiritual renewal. From this point of view alone, these means of grace are very precious. They are powerful helps in the great work of your sanctification, provided you esteem and utilise them fully.

But the obligation to vivify anew your spiritual life, and the opportunities for so doing, are not restricted to these special occasions. It is a duty which, day by day and hour by hour, you are called

upon to accomplish. Call to mind the words of the devout author of the 'Imitation of Christ': 'Every day we ought to renew our purpose and stir ourselves up to fervour, as if it were the first day of our conversion.'[1] You have every opportunity of putting this counsel in practice.

In their daily spiritual exercises, religious can, if they will, find favourable occasions and efficacious means of progressing in virtue. Holy Mass, meditation, spiritual reading, examination of conscience, Holy Communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, intercourse with one another—all these means of grace, as though endowed with speech, seem to cry aloud and simultaneously: 'Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.' Unfortunately, these voices are so often unheeded and disobeyed. Holy actions, fertile in themselves, become commonplace, because routine prevents their bearing fruit. Religious get too accustomed to these exercises; consequently, instead of bearing perfect fruits of holiness, souls crawl along in the furrow of their imperfections and venial sins. There is no impetus given by which 'the inward man is renewed day by day.'[2]

This tendency to slacken our heavenward march is an infirmity of our nature, which we should ever sorrow over and fear. Our Lord said to His Apostles: 'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh weak';[3] and we all experience the truth of these words. Do not, therefore, be astonished when you are conscious

[1] Book i. xix. [2] 2 Cor. iv. 16.
[3] St. Matt. xxvi. 41.

of a certain tendency to relapse from virtue, when at times you perceive some breach or fissure in your spiritual life. But, on the other hand, try to remedy the evil promptly. Set to work generously and profit by all the proffered means of sanctification. Keep up your fervour in spite of the obstacles you may have to overcome. That you may do this more effectually, obey the apostolic injunction : ' Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.'

This exhortation of the Apostle has another meaning. Consider what your vocation includes. It calls you to make daily progress. You are not permitted to stand still on the road to holiness and still less to retrace your steps. This is the unanimous teaching of the masters of the spiritual life, who look upon it as inauspicious when a religious fixes a limit to her aspirations after holiness and resolves to go no farther. They hold that such a one exposes herself to great danger, and compare her position to a boat that is sailing against the current. It can only get ahead by the vigorous use of the oars. The moment the rowers cease their efforts to advance, the boat is rapidly drawn in the opposite direction by the current. Hence the maxim : ' He who does not advance, goes backwards.'

The spirit proper to your vocation is resumed in the candid statement of the great Apostle of the Gentiles. After having suffered much and toiled unceasingly, he writes : ' Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended. ' But one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth myself to those that are before,

I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ.'[1] Such is the correct conception of the Religious Life. Religious true to their calling desire ever to ascend, to follow whither the One they love has preceded them. They follow the steep mountain path that they may find Him, who has already caught them in the net of His love.[2] They toil up the mountain of religious perfection, in order that the boundless horizon of God's mercy may stretch out more clearly and brilliantly before their eyes. Heedless of their sufferings, they ascend, ever higher and higher—that they may 'according to the riches of His glory . . . be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and to know also the charity of Christ, which surpasseth all knowledge'[3]: that even as 'deep calleth on deep' so, to the infinite love of the Creator, may respond the finite love of His creature. The fervent religious profits by each hour God grants her, in order to develop and strengthen in her soul that charity which St. Paul calls 'the bond of perfection,' for charity is of such a nature that it must increase unceasingly, until in Heaven it reaches its prescribed degree of intensity and fecundity.

Now, since this obligation to progress in virtue is binding upon all who are consecrated to God—i.e. even upon the pious laity—religious are in danger of forgetting this obligation just as ordinary Christians forget it in the world. They can easily

[1] Phil. iii. 13. [2] Psalm lxv. 11.
[3] Ephes. iii. 18.

yield to temptation, stand still and take their rest on the road. Watch that traveller. It is early morning and he starts off on the path that leads to the summit of the mountain, as though he were determined not to slacken his pace until he has reached the top. Presently his enthusiasm cools down. The path becomes narrower, steeper, stony, and, as he becomes weary, the thought presents itself: 'Why go farther ahead? What good is it? Even here, at this height, I have a glorious panorama stretching out before me. Yes, I will remain here and make no further effort to climb. Let those who are bold and strong have the glory of reaching the summit.'

Are not religious exposed to the temptation to act thus? As they climb laboriously up the very steep escarpment of the mountain of perfection, does not the voice of their lower nature suggest a like cowardly course of conduct? Are not they, too, frequently tempted in consequence to reason thus: 'Yes, I have gone far enough, I am already far above those below me on the plain. At the point I have reached I find ample spiritual enlightenment, virtue, and motives for hope: "The high hills are a refuge for the harts."[1] They are welcome to it, but for less valiant souls—in whose ranks I count myself—it suffices to be content with what has been attained. It is more prudent to rest content half-way up the mountain than to aspire to the heights which it might be equally presumptuous and dangerous to attempt to scale.'

[1] Psalm ciii. 18.

Yielding to such suggestions, some religious abandon their former resolutions. They renounce all thought of accomplishing their promise to climb without stopping until they had gained the summit. Granted, they are still faithful to the essential duties of the Religious Life, yet they pay but little attention to perfect their interior life, to cultivate those supernatural intentions which are to their actions what the soul is to the body. They do not examine themselves with sufficient earnestness and energy as to the purity of their intentions, their fidelity in corresponding with the faintest inspirations of grace, or in performing those numerous minor duties of their life—duties which are merely insignificant trifles in the world's opinion, but which are great before God when ennobled by charity. Such religious no longer understand, as applying to themselves, the words uttered by the 'great voice' that spoke to St. John: 'He that is just, let him be justified still, and he that is holy, let him be sanctified still.'[1] They are quite satisfied with the degree of holiness to which they have attained, and are decided to remain thus; they make no further progress in virtue for, as St. Thomas à Kempis so aptly remarks: 'As our purpose is, so will our progress be; and he hath need of much diligence that wisheth to advance much.'[2] Though still within the walls of their convent, these negligent religious no longer have the true spirit of their order. They would do well to listen to, and meditate upon, the beau-

[1] Apoc. xxii. 11. [2] Book i. xix.

tiful exhortation of St. Gregory of Nyssa. He writes:

'Let no man give way to sadness, when he realises by his own experience how subject human nature is to change frequently. Rather let him change himself repeatedly, in order to become holier and to advance daily from glory to glory, rising daily above his lower nature, and never deeming that he has reached the summit of perfection. For true holiness consists in aspiring continuously towards what is most perfect, and in setting no limits to the perfection that the soul desires to acquire.' [1]

My dear Sisters in Jesus Christ, never lose sight of this admonition. Let it ring continually in your ears that, ever on the alert, your eyes may 'never sleep in death,' lest at any time the enemy may say: 'I have prevailed' [2] against them. Thus will you be preserved from that drowsiness or somnolence, so detrimental to Religious Life, since it exposes religious to all kinds of delusions, and deprives them of countless graces and merits.

It is manifest that without making efforts and sacrifices which are painful to poor human nature we cannot exercise this vigilance over ourselves, and reanimate our good desires and generous resolutions; but the results of these efforts are so desirable, and so great, that those consecrated to God should never, for one instant, hesitate to make them generously. Moreover, to accomplish this great work, the religious is not single-handed.

[1] Orat., *de perfect. Christ.* [2] Psalm xii 4.

Left to her own strength, it would be impossible, but she can invoke the 'Creator Spirit,' who is also the Spirit of renewal.

The Church invokes the Holy Ghost, and prays God to send down Him who 'renews the face of the earth.' The religious, likewise, should rely upon Him to effect in her a perpetual renovation of spirit. That which would be an impossibility without help from on high, becomes possible and easy when the religious receives divine assistance; for then the soul—enlightened, enkindled, and vivified by the Divine Spirit—experiences that mysterious transformation which enables it to 'go from virtue to virtue,'[1] until the vision of 'the God of gods shall be seen in Sion.'

Only in Heaven is the work of renewal perfected and rendered stable. There, our Lord 'will make all things new'; not only will there be 'a new heaven and a new earth,' but the human soul will be renewed so perfectly that no subsequent modification or falling away can possibly take place. While the redeemed were upon earth they were necessarily exposed to the liability of retrograding: they required unceasing vigilance, and continually had to renew their fervour. But, as the Scriptures tell us, in Heaven where all things are immutable, they will see 'the God of gods.' The Beatific Vision will strengthen and establish them for ever in all virtue, and in the possession of all that is good—in that plenitude of existence which is the very essence of the Divinity.

[1] Psalm lxxxiii. 8.

Such is the consoling prospect which faith opens out before our eyes. This prospect, my dear Sisters, is well fitted to encourage you, and to stir you up to accept heartily the labour of acquiring that ' newness of mind '—a labour that is inherent to our condition of creatures, who inhabit a passing, ever-changing world. This hope is consoling, for even here below you can catch a glimpse of that city which hope reveals. You can salute it from afar, and rejoice that in those blessed realms the arduous law of working out your renewal no longer obtains, since all who dwell therein participate in the immutability and stability of God Himself.

SECOND CONFERENCE

ESTEEM FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

I preferred her before kingdoms and thrones.—Wisdom vii. 8.

KING SOLOMON, who in the early years of life had such a great esteem for divine wisdom, tells us that he preferred wisdom 'to kingdoms and thrones.' What he says of wisdom we must say of our religious life, which is nothing less than the practical manifestation of that wisdom which Jesus Christ revealed to the world more completely. If you would be always good, fervent religious, you must begin by esteeming your vocation. It is absolutely necessary that you should have a high conception of your calling, and give it the preference above all other paths in life, if you would effectually work at that renewal of spirit of which I spoke in the preceding conference—at that renovation of mind which leads the soul to climb the heights of sanctity, until it reaches the top and finds there rest and reward. This esteem is necessary also in accordance with the law, that the measure of our appreciation of anything is exactly the measure of the efforts we shall put forth to obtain full and lasting possession of it.

Consider the different vocations of people in the world. We may say that, at the entrance to each earthly career, the esteem men have for it stands like a sentinel exhorting and impelling certain persons to take up that particular calling, strengthening them against those disappointments which they will find everywhere, and enabling them to resist temptations to pusillanimity and discouragement, which inevitably follow failures. To prove the truth of the principle that esteem for a calling attracts and upholds, it suffices to cast a glance over the various earthly careers. Take, for example, the harassed, dangerous career of arms, in camp and on the battle-field. Think of the monotonous life of the merchant in his counting-house, or of the mother in her home. In all paths of life, from the lowest to the highest, it is necessary that those who walk thereon should esteem their calling. It is this esteem which leads men to adopt, love, and follow bravely any given profession.

Suppose that some man, having no esteem for a given calling, follows it from some other motive—good or even bad—and persists in this career notwithstanding the lack of attraction. It is certain that he will never excel and, above all, he will never be happy in this profession. Just as the galley-slave, at each step, drags about the iron ball fastened to his foot, and is reminded by it, at every moment, of his dishonourable and painful captivity, so the man, who dislikes his calling, remains in it by compulsion and accomplishes his duties with difficulty and distaste.

More than all others, religious are bound to esteem their vocation, which, on account of its intrinsic excellence, merits and claims a higher estimation. Therefore in this conference I desire to set before you, my dear Sisters, the motives for this esteem, and the obstacles that may annul it, so that you may be convinced of the obligation laid upon you to love and prize your holy vocation.

The esteem in which you held the kind of life you proposed to take up was the origin of your vocation ; it was the first ray of light that penetrated your intelligence and pointed out to you the road you were called to follow. Look back over your past years, recall the memories of childhood, and you will be convinced of the truth of my statement. When you were passing through that period when the young begin to think of the future, you asked yourself what yours would be, what path you should take in life. So far, you had taken no decisive step —you were free to choose the world and remain a secular. It offered you a suitable position. To some of you the world presented its tempting offers, and held out hopes of prosperity and pleasures, which are neither blamed nor forbidden by the law of God, provided men refrain from offending Him in their enjoyment of them.

Nevertheless, these pleasures were powerless to win you ; they had no attraction for you, because your aspirations were turned to higher and better things. This was the beginning of your vocation ; the Religious Life seemed incomparably grander and more desirable. It won your affection. As

the sun rises higher and higher in the heavens, its brilliancy dissipates the dim light of the inferior planets; and, in like manner, the pure, radiant light of your vocation annihilated all terrestrial rays. Among the various vocations and callings which are followed in the turmoil of the world's stage, the Religious Life alone attracted you. You heard the call. How did it reach your soul? I know not. Perhaps God made use of the influence of one of your mistresses, in whom you felt the sweet persuasive force of virtue personified. You saw how devout and happy her life was, and you resolved to imitate her example—to render others happy, even as she had brightened your life. Perhaps grace chose some other means of speaking to your soul. In any case, no sooner were your thoughts turned towards Religious Life, than you were conscious of a strong attraction, and your intelligence and heart gave the preference to the consecrated life.

In the same measure that the desire to give yourself wholly to your God increased, did your esteem for this life grow. The more willingly you responded to the first suggestions of a vocation to the cloister, the more you studied the various aspects of conventual life—either in the spiritual books which fell into your hands, or from the counsels and instructions of a wise director, to whom you had confided your aspirations—the more your esteem increased; thus esteem and desire developed side by side. The longing of your soul was not the result of a passing enthusiasm or unreasoning ardour, but

the outcome of well-grounded, reasonable convictions. You knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that the Religious Life alone would satisfy the yearning of your soul, and in the words of the Psalmist you said to your God: 'I have thought on my ways: and turned my feet to Thy testimonies. I am ready and am not troubled, that I may keep Thy commandments.' [1]

Undoubtedly, this esteem for Religious Life guided you to the novitiate. Without this attraction you would not have entered religion; indeed, you could not have taken the step. Nothing short of this supernatural impulsion would have given you the courage to overcome the obstacles which blocked your path. Question your own experience. Is there one of you who has not had to surmount either interior or exterior obstacles? If you have not had to arm yourself against the entreaties and tears of your sorrowing family, you have been forced to face and combat the weakness of the flesh, which, seeing its satisfactions threatened, experienced a strange repugnance and raised a strong opposition.

Material obstacles blocked the way, such as money and health. They seem to say: 'Give up your idea; it is a beautiful dream, but nothing more; you will never realise it.' Nevertheless, you entered the convent. Nothing made you swerve from your determination; you were stronger and more skilled than all those who conspired against the execution of your desire.

[1] Psalm cxviii. 59.

What was your secret—what weapon of defence enabled you to gain the victory ? You were inspired, enlightened, upheld, and carried onward by the esteem for the religious vocation, for which you felt such an irresistible attraction. Even as of old the Magi followed the guiding star, so esteem for your vocation, by enlightening your faith, enabled you to rise above or pierce the dark clouds of earth, which threatened to conceal its light. This attraction urged you to set out, to leave your country and your family, that you might go to the Bethlehem of the Religious Life where Jesus Christ was waiting for you, that He might be wholly yours. You have attained the goal of your hopes ; you are happy in your consecrated life. Whence comes this contentment and joy ? From your esteem for this vocation, which made you love and prefer it to the society of your parents, the joys of home life, the satisfaction of your natural inclinations, and all worldly attractions, even the most enticing.

Now, my dear Sisters, I would remind you of a great principle, namely, that all material things are nourished and developed by the elements whence they spring. The life-giving sap drawn from the earth causes the grain of wheat to germinate, gives it the strength to break through its hard envelope, and brings forth the tender bud. The subsequent growth of the plant, its complete development till it attains to its maturity, is due to this vivifying sap. This gives us an instructive parallel with the divine plant of Religious Life. Your esteem for this vocation was the principle which gave it birth and

growth. And it is this same principle which provides the sap that is required in order to verify and strengthen your vocation so that it may resist all the attacks of the enemy, and cause it to bear such fruits as were reasonably anticipated.

Consider what your holy calling exacts. What is required of you, if you would live up to the grand comprehensive title of *religious* ?

True religious perfection consists in three things: (1) The constant, faithful accomplishment of all the obligations of this holy calling. (2) Acceptance, with resignation and even joy, of all its hardships. (3) Continual progress in holiness by means of all the spiritual helps given by the rule.

You will readily admit that, without esteem for your calling, it would be utterly impossible to put these three points in practice. The facility or difficulty which you will experience in observing these three conditions will be in direct ratio to your esteem for your vocation. It would be as unreasonable to expect a nun, who had ceased to appreciate her high calling, to be fervent, as it would to expect a furnace to burn without fuel. We will now develop this question more fully.

The daily life of a religious consists of a series of actions that are by no means either flattering or agreeable to human nature. In all religious communities, with the exception of some slight modifications, the days are spent in the same kind of occupations and in spiritual exercises. This regularity naturally tends to engender a certain monotony, particularly for those whose ardent

nature leads them to desire a more exciting, exterior life. Such religious can only persevere in their vocation by clinging to those higher ideals, which are powerful enough to scatter the clouds of sadness, and throw over the ever-monotonous scenes of conventual life a veil which invests them with a kind of charmed variety and continual freshness; a veil that completely transforms prosaic daily duties and raises them to a higher sphere, where all is divine—in a word, esteem for Religious Life is the gage of perseverance in it.

If you desire a proof of this assertion, consider the life of a novice who is serving her apprenticeship in a convent. See how cheerfully, joyously, and easily she bears the yoke; note how happy she is in complying with all the obligations of her vocation, even with those that are most trifling and burdensome. Why is this? Because she esteems her holy calling and is deeply impressed by the high opinion she has of it. This novice is convinced that these apparently insignificant things, these commonplace occupations, conceal sublime virtues, which are the very essence of Religious Life.

When this novice has been professed, what must she do in order to retain that fervour which distinguished her early years and made them so happy? How can she, after ten, twenty, thirty or more years of conventual life, perform her duties with the same disinterestedness and heartfelt joy as when she entered the novitiate? What will enable her to continue to fulfil her duties with the same fidelity; to accomplish the exercises in community; to

keep the rule of silence; to be charitable in thought and word; to be as careful about leading a life of union with our Lord? To put the question more briefly, how can this religious, throughout the whole course of her life, even to the hour of her death, deserve to be still called 'a fervent novice,' which is the greatest praise that can be meted out to a religious?

She must keep the esteem which she had in the commencement for her holy vocation; far from decreasing, it should increase with the years. Just as a postulant is full of joy when first she crosses the threshold of the holy sanctuary, where for so long she has desired to take refuge, so the professed religious must be able to say, with a conviction deepened by time: 'I prefer my religious life to all the most attractive pleasures of the world.'

There is no danger of the fervent religious finding her life wearisome. If she feels it to be a yoke—as in truth it is—this yoke is light, according to our Saviour's promise. It is the yoke of which St. Bernard, in the overpowering ardour of his love, exclaimed: 'O yoke of holy love, holding the soul gently, chaining it gloriously! How light is your weight, how delectable your burden!'[1]

Not only does the esteem in which religious hold their vocation have the blessed effect of keeping them in the path of perfect fidelity to duty, but it defends them from certain temptations which

[1] *De diligendo Deo.*

they must necessarily encounter on their heavenward journey.

It is true these temptations differ from those which would have assailed them in the world, and there are ample compensations for them; still they are a very real source of suffering. If a religious were not deeply rooted in the love of her vocation, she might be troubled and faint-hearted when tempted thus. The thought might occur that the cross is too heavy, beyond her strength. She might ask: 'Is this, then, the reward for all it has cost me to consecrate my life to God?' Such, however, are not the sentiments of the true religious, in whose soul the natural fear, irritation, and rebellion, inspired by acute suffering, is but a passing emotion that she quickly surmounts. The question rises to her lips: 'After all, what did I seek when I came here? Was it not the cross of my crucified Saviour? Am I not His spouse? All the better, then, that with Him I climb the hill of Calvary.'

Thus peace reigns in her soul; though the devil may vex and harass her both interiorly and exteriorly, she continues her onward course, like Moses: 'Rather choosing to be afflicted with the people of God, than to have the pleasure of sin for a time, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasure of the Egyptians.'[1] Thanks to this supernatural joy which raises her above these movements of her lower nature, she realises the superiority of her calling, in spite of its inherent

[1] Heb. xi. 25.

trials and sacrifices. All the grandeurs and wealth of the world could not counterbalance her attachment to her vocation, so as to lead her to abandon it.

Religious have another advantage in esteeming their vocation: it urges them on in the way of perfection and prevents them from halting on the road. On the other hand, a religious, whose esteem for her calling has grown weak, walks with faltering steps along the narrow path of holiness. She is quickly satisfied with a little effort, and even blames herself for having done too much. Imitating the Pharisee mentioned in the Gospel, she is fond of making comparisons—more or less false—which console and flatter her vanity. Contrast this line of conduct with that of the fervent religious, who duly appreciates the honour of having been called by God to practise the counsels, and endeavours to show her gratitude by daily progress in virtue. St. Paul, profoundly convinced of the greatness of his priesthood and fired by a noble ambition, exclaimed: 'I will honour my ministry.'[1] In like manner, the fervent religious resolves to honour her calling. She strives after perfection because she knows that this is the best practice—nay, the only means—which can render her pleasing to God, and obtain respect and reverence for the Religious Life even from the world. In this laborious work she is sustained by the knowledge that she thus renders herself more worthy—or rather, less unworthy—of a sublime vocation, so far beyond

[1] Rom. xi. 13.

her deserts, but which has been vouchsafed to her purely by the mercy of God.

Now, it follows necessarily, my dear Sisters, that since this esteem for the Religious Life is of such great importance; since it gives those consecrated to God a powerful motive for joy and fervour; furnishes them with defensive weapons in their trials; stimulates them to strive after holiness; and constitutes the keystone of the whole building—for these very reasons, it is precisely the point which the enemy will attack, the target at which he will aim. Therefore, I think it well to point out briefly the means which he employs to batter in this protecting wall, in order to lessen or stifle in the souls of religious this esteem for their vocation. It is necessary for you to be instructed concerning these snares of the devil, that you may avoid those he might set to entrap your souls.

One of the wiles by which Satan seeks to ensnare souls of every rank in life, is to inspire them with a distaste for their career, and he finds this trap efficacious, not only with the rank and file of Christians, but even with religious. When the enemy sees a religious overcome by weariness, or when her self-love has been wounded, when he finds her giving way to melancholy and sadness, then—cunningly profiting by the occasion—he endeavours to make her look at the seamy side of her life, and exaggerates its trials. Gathering together, as in a sheaf, all she actually suffers, or may have to suffer, he presents it to her imagination,

in order to frighten her and to suggest such thoughts as these: 'Can you endure such a life of slavery? Are you not compromising your liberty and happiness?' When such perfidious insinuations find entrance into a weak and impressionable soul, they may dim for ever in it that brilliancy which formerly lit up her vocation and rendered it so attractive.

Or, to attain the same end, the devil may profit by the relations which a religious is obliged to keep up with the world. This is particularly the case with those congregations that devote themselves to active works of charity. This necessary intercourse with the world has its advantages and disadvantages.

For the fervent religious, who faithfully keeps her rule, and maintains these relations as a matter of duty, who, animated with supernatural intentions, seeks to efface herself, that Jesus, the One she loves above all, may reign in the souls of men—this intercourse with the world, far from being dangerous, becomes a source of grace. She finds therein fresh motives for attaching herself to her vocation with love, joy, and gratitude. Far from being tempted to grow weary of it, she loves it more and more.

But for the religious who does not live by faith, who relaxes her vigilance, these relations with seculars may have the contrary effect. Seduced by the attractive glamour of the world, she might make comparisons between her daily life and that which her relatives and friends lead, and so begin

to envy them. For example, she sees a mother of a family, to whom God has granted temporal prosperity; she hears of the union, peace and joy that reign in the inner circle of that home, of the young children, those little ones who already give such bright promises for the future. Not only are they richly endowed by nature, but these gifts have been seconded by a sound Christian education. The mother, rejoicing in her offspring, looks forward to the full development of the gifts of nature and grace. The religious, of whom we are speaking, looks only at the bright side of this home circle, and this attracts her attention to the exclusion of the dark side. She does not see the cruel thorns, so often stained with blood, which are ever to be found, in more or less abundance, beneath earth's bewitching roses. The devil utilises these circumstances to conjure up a fascinating mirage before her eyes.

What a misfortune it would be should this tepid religious be seduced by these delusive appearances! What misery would follow if she were to allow her imagination and affections to dwell upon these things and to long for them, instead of strengthening her soul by the consideration of her sublime vocation, fixing her eyes lovingly on her crucifix and prostrate before our Eucharistic Lord, pouring out her soul in prayer: 'My God, I have more than all these things, since I possess Thee, the Sovereign Good.' The religious who does not act thus, when tempted by worldly pleasures, will soon perceive that she is losing her esteem for her vocation; she

resembles the fruit that, although worm-eaten at the core, still hangs on the branch. Presently, half-rotten, it will fall to the ground.

Consider further how the devil utilises our poor fallen human nature, which ever combats against the soul; it has its own end, aspirations, and ways of acting, and these are diametrically opposed to the methods by which God works. The author of the 'Imitation of Christ' speaks so justly of this subject in a splendid chapter, upon which you cannot meditate too often: 'Of the different movements of nature and grace.'[1] Human nature abhors the Religious Life, not because grace kills nature, but because it corrects and directs man's powers; and nature knows that this reformation cannot be effected without lamentation and suffering. Consequently, when those who are consecrated to God yield to the promptings and yearnings of nature, their esteem for their holy calling will sensibly and quickly diminish. It is said, with truth, that a man who rejects the doctrines of the Church is influenced by his affections rather than his intellect. The same holds good of the religious. The false, seductive ideas and longings that cloud her intelligence, and exercise a most dangerous influence over her life, have their source in her affections. As long as she persevered in the faithful discharge of her duties, she had a sincere esteem for her calling. Distaste and disenchantment are the fruits of negligence and tepidity, and, no sooner does the lukewarm religious resume her former

[1] Book iii. chap. liv.

life of fidelity and fervour, than her appreciation of her vocation springs up again.

I have merely touched on these considerations, my dear Sisters, though they might have been more fully developed, but I do not judge it necessary to do so. You have not given way to this fatal temptation. Thanks be to God, you esteem your vocation, even as in the first days of your novitiate; nothing has succeeded in making you take a lower view of it. What Solomon said of wisdom, you can say of your vocation: 'I preferred her before kingdoms and thrones, and esteemed riches nothing in comparison of her.'[1] Not once has it occurred to you to 'compare unto her any precious stone'; for you the precious stones of poverty, chastity, and obedience have ever been esteemed more than those base imitations, those counterfeit stones which circulate in the world under the names of fortune, glory, and pleasure. Comparing the world with your privileged vocation, you were intimately convinced that: 'All gold in comparison of her is as a little sand, and silver in respect of her shall be counted as clay.'

Do you wish, my dear Sisters, to maintain and augment in your souls this appreciation of a high opinion of Religious Life, which is so well-grounded? Are you desirous to be as free from the temptations in question during the remainder of your lives as you have been hitherto; or should they assail you, do you wish to gain an easy victory? Would you esteem your vocation, and on your death-bed congratulate yourself as heartily on having been

[1] Wisdom vii. 8 *et seq.*

called to religion, as when you presented yourself at the novitiate, which is the cradle of Religious Life?

If so, then, be faithful continually to all that this life includes and imposes. In proportion as you become worthy and fervent religious, you will grow in the appreciation of your vocation: the more you love it, the greater will be your efforts to progress in holiness. Then, for you individually, the words of the Psalmist will be realised: 'All good things came to me together with her, and innumerable riches through her hands.'[1]

Then, laden with these precious treasures, when you cross the threshold of eternity, you will be able to stand before the awful judgment seat of God; then you will understand, far more clearly than upon earth, how much your vocation really deserved all your esteem and affection. In an outburst of overwhelming joy, you will exclaim: 'How wisely I acted when I chose Religious Life in preference to all the honours and pleasures of earth!'

[1] Wisdom vii. 11.

THIRD CONFERENCE

NUNS SHOULD PARTICULARLY ESTEEM THEIR OWN CONGREGATION OR ORDER.

I shall die in my little nest.—Job xxix. 18.

It is right to esteem and cherish the Religious Life in all its multiple branches, but this is not sufficient. All religious should add to this general appreciation a special esteem for their particular congregation, for—according to St. Francis of Sales' charming comparison—it is the bark, provided by Divine Providence, in which they must sail over the ocean of time to the haven of eternity.

[1] [Thanks be to God there are ample reasons for attaching yourself to the congregation you have chosen, rather than to any other, or, to put it more accurately, to the one which God has chosen for you. Consider the twofold aim of this congregation, namely, Charity and Christian Instruction. Consider your holy founder, a saintly religious, who in establishing this congregation, was manifestly

[1] The passages in brackets are those which apply to active congregations employed in works of mercy and teaching, such as the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, to whom these conferences were addressed.

inspired by the Spirit of God. Think of its chief objects—the education of children, for whom Jesus showed such a special preference, and the care of the sick, a work of mercy which is so meritorious and so often counselled in the Scriptures. During the two hundred years your congregation has already existed, how much good it has done, how much it still does daily! How many souls has it been instrumental in sanctifying, both within its own ranks and among the simple faithful! Surely, these motives should suffice to make you proud of your religious family, and deeply grateful to God who has called you to become a member of it.]

All religious should be convinced of the grounds for esteeming their own congregation or order, so that—like a tree firmly rooted in the soil—they may resist all temptations against their vocation. It may be that throughout the whole of your religious life these temptations may never attack you. On the other hand, they may do so, for the supposition that religious are exposed to temptations against their vocation and may conceive a discontent and aversion for it, is no mere chimera; therefore, it is necessary to warn them against this snare of the devil.

Satan also tempts religious against the particular vocation to which they have pledged themselves, as well as against Religious Life in general, and tries to compromise their stability in the former. He troubles a religious by suggesting that she has not chosen the right congregation; that she is not where God would have her and should choose

some other convent. The devil will persuade her that her community does not aim high enough; he puts before her mind a picture of some other convent, telling her that there she could easily and rapidly advance in holiness.

One, who belongs to an active order that devotes itself to teaching or sick nursing, will be tempted to exclaim: 'If only I were a Carmelite, a Trappistine, or a nun of the Visitation, how much better I should get on! Cut off entirely from the world, I could sanctify my soul better. Here in the midst of all the children, or nursing the sick given over to my care, and overwhelmed with occupations, how can I apply myself to the work of my perfection?'

Now St. Jerome reminds us that it is not the habit, nor the place, which renders the soul holy, but the *manner* in which duties are performed.[1] There is no place where holiness can be obtained without effort or difficulty. Those communities which the devil tempts religious to envy have their imperfections and failings, because everywhere human nature is the same. Perhaps, while one, consecrated to a life of active work, is longing to enter an enclosed order, some cloistered nun is experiencing precisely the opposite temptation. She longs for an active life, she would like to have charge of a class of children, or of a sick ward—vainly imagining that she would be more courageous were she not so much alone. She argues as though perfection were exclusively to be found in some

[1] *Epist.* xlix. *ad Paulin.*

particular convent; whereas the religious, who tries daily to perform her duty more and more faithfully, and to love God more and more, will find means of advancing wherever she may be.

Neither does the acquisition of perfection depend on the greater or less abundance of spiritual helps. It is well to point this out, since those who place their confidence solely on exterior aids are subject to continual preoccupations and delusions. Sometimes a religious is sent to a branch house, where, as there are but few nuns, the environment differs from that of the Mother House. She does not feel that she can give the Superior her confidence; her confessor is very little help, because he only gives absolution and withholds all spiritual direction. He does not give her the advice and encouragement which she imagines to be necessary. Her companions displease her because their characters, conduct, and point of view differ from her own; hence she finds herself completely isolated from them. Discontented where she has been placed, she wishes to live in a more numerous community, in which spiritual consolations and aids are more abundant.

This religious does not perceive that she has all the essential means of advancing in holiness, and that, in reality, the consolations she yearns after—though good and lawful in themselves—are by no means *necessary* for her progress in sanctity. She overlooks the truth that privations favour spiritual growth, 'for power is made perfect in infirmity.'[1]

Had our dear Lord less merit during His desola-

[1] 2 Cor. xii. 9.

tion in the Garden of the Agony than in the glory of the Transfiguration on Mount Thabor? It is unquestionable that whatever be the occupations of a religious, and wherever she may be placed, she will always find the *necessary means* of sanctification. Provided she profits by them, she need have no fear as to their duration: the means will suffice if she is fervent in using them. Consider the facts of the case. Has she not always opportunities for prayer and for receiving Holy Communion? Is not the knowledge and faithful observance of the rule better than several directors? The spiritual aids, after which this religious yearns, however desirable and helpful, are not *essentials*. When they are granted, she does well to profit by them without inordinately attaching herself to them and without making her spiritual progress depend upon them. When God withdraws these means, He generously compensates for their loss by giving others, as a reward for the willing and joyful acceptation of this privation.

No matter what form weariness in Religious Life, and distaste for it, may take, this temptation springs from tepidity. Fervent religious are rarely assailed by it. Generally speaking, it attacks those who are lukewarm and negligent in the practice of their duties as religious. For such, life in community becomes an intolerable burden, which they desire to shake off; but far from candidly confessing that they wish to satisfy the cravings of their lower nature, they deceive themselves by putting forth some specious pretext as the real motive.

Those who are so ill-advised as to listen to the tempter, find that all their spiritual energy has evaporated. They do not devote themselves to works of mercy as in the past; they have other preoccupations, which engross and paralyse their faculties. The devil knows what he is about when he thus occupies the religious with the prospect of some imaginary perfection; by so doing, he prevents her from profiting by the means at her disposal; and who can count the graces and merits of which he succeeds in depriving her?

What can you expect of a religious who is continually harassed by the desire to exchange her special vocation for some other? How can she, forgetful of her own interests, devote herself to the children or the sick entrusted to her care? How can she maintain that evenness of temper and deep peace of soul which are absolutely necessary for the inception and development of holiness? May we not apply to her the words of the prophet Jeremias: 'Write this man barren, a man that shall not prosper in his days'?[1] But this is not all; not infrequently religious, who have so foolishly accepted and nourished this temptation, finish by renouncing their consecrated life. Having gone back to the world, they are overwhelmed by sadness and remorse, which, having come too late, are consequently useless. How is a religious to avoid these dangers, this bitter deception? She must resist the temptation the moment it presents itself, firmly convinced that her particular congregation

[1] Jer. xxii. 30.

is the one in which she must persevere, and that there she will find, in greater abundance than elsewhere, those means of perfection necessary for her sanctification.

To convince herself of this truth, she has but to consider the circumstances under which she sought and obtained admission to her congregation. She should recall to mind how God led her there by a chain of providential circumstances, and how the special call to this particular form of Religious Life was seriously examined by a wise director before she entered, and—ripened by prayer and reflection—was subsequently studied more deeply during her novitiate and held to be a real supernatural vocation. At that time this religious saw clearly it was God's Will that she should follow this particular path. Now, since then, nothing *essential* has changed; incidental modifications may have taken place within her own soul, and in exterior affairs, but there has been no upheaval of the foundation. That remains as firm as it was then; it is still unmoved, and will remain thus. The religious must never for one moment admit the slightest doubt as to this first, definite determination. Perfectly calm, and aided by the supernatural light—which God never refuses to those who seek it with simplicity and purity of intention—the candidate was firmly convinced of the reality of her call to Religious Life, and to that particular congregation, which she entered in obedience to a special attraction of grace. The motives still exist, and the religious cannot reject them by yielding to the caprice of her imagination,

nor suffer herself to renounce her holy vocation, simply to satisfy the cravings of nature that are ever ready to assert themselves.

She must hold on, and establish herself so firmly on the rock of the Will of God, that the waves of temptation may not engulf her in the ocean of infidelity. It is her right and her duty to say to herself: 'God has placed me here, and here I am determined to remain, until, by the voice of those in authority and certain proofs, God shows me that He no longer calls me.' The sentinel does not desert his post the moment he hears some faint noise, nor even when the bullets whistle past him. He waits until, in due time, his comrade relieves him. In the same way the fervent religious remains at her post, mindful of those weighty words of the author of the 'Imitation': 'A fancy for places and changes hath deluded many.'[1] She is vigilant lest she should increase—by her defection—the dupes and victims of Satan's snares.

It is not sufficient, moreover, for a religious to have a great esteem and a deep attachment for her congregation; she must prove the reality of these sentiments by manifesting them in her daily actions —for actions speak louder than words. She should look upon the congregation as her family—not in the order of nature, but in that of grace; as the family in which she finds the hundredfold, promised, even here below, by our Lord to all who, for love of Him, have renounced 'house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother.'[2]

[1] Book i. ix.

[2] St. Matt. xix. 29.

How many motives there are for this esteem and affection which religious owe to their spiritual family! How many benefits they have received and still receive from it! How much they owe their congregation! Consider these favours in detail. The early religious training in the blessed sanctuary of the novitiate; the many graces obtained through the pious exercises of the community; the good examples which are a continual source of encouragement, and a stimulus to fervour; the means of devoting her life to works full of merit; a share in that traditional heritage of virtue, which daily increases—all these favours come to the religious through her congregation. Further, she has the joy of working in concert with so many fervent souls, who, like herself, work at the posts assigned to them by obedience, and there procure, by their devoted labour, the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Each religious can say: 'I am a partaker with all them that fear Thee, and that keep Thy commandments.' [1]

Is it then possible for a religious to meditate upon the number and variety of the benefits which come to her through the instrumentality of her congregation, without feelings of deep gratitude, and without experiencing ardent desires to pay, as generously as possible, her debt of filial piety—a debt which she can never fully repay?

Consider now what are the obligations of this debt of gratitude, and how all religious should discharge them.

[1] Psalm cxviii. 63.

Before all, my dear Sisters, you must have a real respect and esteem for your congregation. You will show this attachment in your relations with the different superiors, who represent the congregation as far as you are concerned. You may never judge them rashly, criticise their actions, nor murmur against them. True, your superiors are not infallible, and God allows that, in spite of the best intentions, they sometimes make mistakes; but, if the inferiors accept with humility and docility the unpleasant consequences of these involuntary errors, God can cause even these mistakes to work out ultimately for the general good of the community. You must be convinced that the respect and esteem, which you show to your immediate superiors, is in reality given to your congregation, whose representatives they are. This line of conduct holds good even if, in the course of your religious life, you should witness some of those pitiable failings which ever cling to our frail human nature.

A religious congregation is a body composed of human beings, consequently it cannot be free from those imperfections to which all earthly things are subject. However regular and fervent the congregation may be *as a whole*, it is morally impossible that there should never be defections and breaches, at least occasionally and under certain circumstances. Now, suppose that you are forced to admit that these failings exist, what should be your line of conduct? That of a child, who sees human frailties and defects in his parents.

He conceals them by his silence, prevents their being known, content to speak of them in prayer to God alone. Should these defects be known, then with filial devotedness that child seeks to excuse them as far as he can by some extenuating circumstance.

A good religious does the same. She does not speak of these unpleasant or disedifying matters to anyone, not even to her sisters in religion. She conceals all that causes her suffering, because she knows well that such topics of conversation are both useless and dangerous. She never reveals these domestic troubles by her exterior behaviour. It would be a grave error to enlighten seculars concerning the little difficulties which may exist even within the convent walls. On no account should they be related to strangers, especially to those pious seculars who visit the convent. These confidential communications always have their drawbacks; they may lead to grave inconveniences, of which not the least is the bad example or scandal which such disclosures inevitably give to those who hear them.

Should a religious feel the need of pouring out her sorrows and troubles to a sympathising friend, to whom can she turn, if not to her superiors? By their very position of authority and their experience they are the best fitted to give the advice and consolation which the religious needs, also they have the grace necessary to accomplish their duties as superiors. That you may keep this mental attitude of respectful deference, and never

fail to show your esteem for your congregation by word and deed, call to mind the blessings bestowed upon the two sons of Noe, because they endeavoured to safeguard their father's good name when he had involuntarily given way to drunkenness. Cham, on the other hand, drew down a curse upon himself and his descendants for having revealed his father's shame.

The religious must not only esteem her congregation, she must also have a real filial love for it. Now, my dear Sisters, the first effect of love, its very first impulse, is a deep interest in all that touches the object of this love. A true friend wishes to know all that happens to his 'second self'; he rejoices in his joys, suffers in his sorrows, and follows up every incident of his daily life. The fervent religious acts thus towards her congregation; she considers it as an obligation of filial devotedness. However distant from the Mother House she may be placed, it is ever before her mind. She is as intimately attached to it as the branch is joined to the parent trunk, whence it draws the sap by which it brings forth leaves and fruit. Though she devotes all her energies in the house assigned to her by obedience, and loves her work, she is not so absorbed by it and so enclosed within this narrow circle as to lose sight of the congregation as a whole: with her, particular interests do not exclude those which are general.

The religious, however, must not fall into the contrary excess. Love for her own congregation

should never go so far as to render her prejudiced, blind and jealous as regards other communities. She does not envy other institutions with whose members she accidentally comes in contact. Nothing is more regrettable, more disedifying, than the sad spectacle of rivalry and competition sometimes witnessed between congregations that are called by the same Master to work in His Vineyard for the same end, that look forward to the same merits and rewards. Such an attitude of opposition is the fruit of petty human passions: it does not come from the Spirit of God. Precisely because religious have God, and not themselves, in view, when they do good works, they are justified in wishing that their respective congregations may be blessed in all works of zeal, and in striving to realise the noble aim by their individual efforts; but they are equally bound to rejoice when other communities succeed. The sentiments of St. Paul are theirs: 'So that by all means, whether by occasion, or by truth, Christ be preached; in this also I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.' [1]

The saints ever thought and acted thus. I might cite St. Bernard,[2] St. Vincent of Paul,[3] and many others, but will content myself with quoting the advice which St. Francis of Sales gave to the Sisters of the Visitation. They will suffice to prove my assertion, and all religious, whichever be their respective order, may profit by them. The saint

[1] Phil. i. 18.
[2] *Apolog. ad Guillelm.*, edit. Gaume, t. c. 1224, cap. iii. *et. seq.*
[3] *Vie de St. Vincent de Paul*, by Abelly I., iii. c. xxx. p. 337.

writes: 'The Daughters of the Visitation will always speak very humbly of their little congregation, giving the greater honour and esteem to all other orders. Nevertheless, they must love their own better than the rest, and when the opportunity occurs manifest their contentment with their own vocation. It is thus that a woman prefers her own husband, not as regards honour, but in affection. It is thus that a man loves his country, giving it the preference as regards love, though deeming other lands greater. It is thus that a pilot loves his own vessel above all others, however large or well-equipped these may be. We must admit that other congregations are better, richer, and more worthy of esteem, but they are not more excellent and desirable for us, because God has willed that our souls should be wedded to our little congregation, which is our spouse, our country, and our ship.'[1]

This reverential esteem and filial affection will necessarily urge you to render all the service in your power. You will do this by practising the religious virtues, and this path is open to all. You may be forced to admit with regret that, through lack of health or capabilities, there are certain services which you cannot render. But nothing need hinder you from serving your congregation by the acquisition of virtue. The less you can do in the way of exterior works, the more eagerly should you apply yourself to interior perfection as a compensation for your limitations.

[1] *Entretiens Spirituels*: 1er. entret. Œuvres complets, t. vi. p. 17.

Indeed, I unhesitatingly assert that a religious has no greater means of serving her congregation than that of making it known, esteemed, and loved by all who come in contact with her personally. A religious who is truly fervent, devout, diligent in the discharge of duty, ever humble, gentle, amiable, has an untold influence in procuring men's esteem for her congregation. She makes a deep impression on all who come in touch with her, and, by the simple ascendancy of her virtues, she sets forth the claims of her congregation to the love, sympathy, and veneration of all, and wins their favour for it. Contrariwise, it often suffices to diminish considerably the world's esteem for a given community, and so thereby greatly lessen its influence for good, if a religious gives an example of notable defects and makes little effort to correct herself. Such a religious is not necessarily really bad, she may simply be very imperfect.

The conviction of your responsibility in securing the esteem or disfavour of the world for your congregation, ought not to have a paralysing effect. It should not prevent you from rendering yourself as capable as possible, nor from putting forth all your energy in order to fit yourself to fulfil worthily any employment which your superiors may call upon you to undertake. The religious who really desires to serve her order prepares herself seriously, especially during the novitiate, striving to acquire the knowledge, to develop the talents as well as the virtues, which will fit her to fulfil any office, even those which require a capable person.

She will prepare herself thus, animated only by pure supernatural intentions, holding herself in readiness to take up with equal indifference any office imposed by obedience; willing to go anywhere, provided she can co-operate in procuring the prosperity of her beloved congregation. She desires success and endeavours to attain to it, not for her personal satisfaction, but for the honour of her community. Her sentiments are expressed in the words of the Psalmist: 'Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy Name give glory.' [1] Should success reward her efforts, she takes no glory to herself, but attributes it to her Alma Mater.

The same aims guide her when seeking to obtain recruits for her congregation. This does not mean that she carries on a reckless propaganda which always has its dangers. Knowing that vocations come from God alone, she does not presume to create them, but she strives to help those to whom God has given a vocation by cultivating it as far as lies in her power. This the religious effects by her fervent, edifying life, which ever exercises a beneficial influence upon those who are called to the perfect life, since by her good example the budding vocation is developed and strengthened in souls.

The exterior services rendered by religious to their congregation are, however, not always in direct ratio to their earnest desires and good will. The lack of physical strength, capabilities, and favourable occasions may prevent them from proving their gratitude in this manner. Fortunately, there is—beyond and above the plane of active

[1] Psalm cxiii. 1.

service—a yet 'more excellent way,' one which is practicable in all times, places, and circumstances; one which neither age, infirmities, nor incapacity can annul, and that means of serving your congregation is—as you have already realised—prayer.

What great things a religious can procure for her congregation by fervent prayer! Let this truth sink deeply into your souls. In the midst of your work, even when most pressed, do not neglect to pray for your religious family. Find time to recommend it daily to God. The day may come when illness will reduce you to inaction: when you will have to remain in the infirmary on a bed of suffering. Then by way of consoling yourself for your painful and enforced idleness, say to yourself: 'If I can no longer work for my beloved congregation, I can at least pray for it, and I will do so, thus I shall be more useful to it than by my former busy life of toil. Like Moses, who lifted up his hands upon the mountain, and obtained the victory for those who fought on the plain, so shall I obtain blessings for my congregation.'

Believe me, my dear Sisters, in a community the most useful religious are not always the most active, the most in evidence, the most praised for their services. No, the most useful, those who contribute above all others to its prosperity, are the members who pray. These are they who draw down from Heaven upon their community the most abundant benedictions.

Therefore, dear Sisters, love your congregation. Devote yourselves to it with all the energy of your soul. Concentrate your affections upon it. Love

God first and above all, but give your congregation the next place, since He so wills it. He commands you to love your spiritual family, and, in so doing, you accomplish His will and co-operate in the objects and aims which Providence designs your congregation to accomplish.

Look upon your beloved congregation as the spot where God, in His love, has given you a peaceful, happy abode, even as the nest is to the little bird. Dwell there in peace and safety under the protection of the maternal wings which shelter and protect that little nest. Wish for no other, but say rather with David: 'This is my rest for ever and ever: here will I dwell, for I have chosen it.'[1] I will not leave it, but will count it a joy to spend my days here. It is my consolation to know that, when I pass from earth to eternity, I shall be strengthened during this terrible passage by the presence and prayers of kindred souls, by the promise of those prayers they will offer for me, when I rest in my silent tomb. If ever adverse circumstances should force me to go forth bodily from my congregation, in spirit I would remain in it. I would still practise my rule faithfully, and strive to advance in the special virtues the rules recommend. Thus belonging to my congregation still in soul and will, I should remain attached to it by my affections, ready to rally with my sisters at the first signal. Yes; I, too, have said like Job, 'I will die in my little nest,' and I have confidence that nothing will be able to prevent the realisation of this holy hope.

[1] Psalm cxxxi. 14.

FOURTH CONFERENCE

GRANDEUR OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

He that is mighty hath done great things to me.—St. Luke i. 49.

FITTINGLY could our blessed Lady exclaim in her sublime Magnificat: 'He that is mighty hath done great things to me.' Considering all the inestimable favours and grandeurs bestowed upon her by Him who takes pleasure in the humble, she could praise the power and mercy of the God who had exalted her so far above all creatures. Well might she feel impelled—even as an act of justice—to sing her canticle of joyful gratitude. Looking around upon all the terrestrial vocations, so unutterably below her privileges, which fringed the glories of the heavenly Jerusalem, Mary felt an imperative impulse to proclaim the great things which God had done in her favour.

When the fervent religious realises the grandeur of the dignity to which she has been raised by her consecration to God, she cannot fail to experience sentiments akin to those of our Lady; the cry of love and gratitude involuntarily escapes her.

As I have previously reminded you, my dear

Sisters, every religious ought to have a high esteem for her holy calling. So far from diminishing, as years speed on their course, this attachment increases in proportion as time and succeeding events give her deeper convictions of the superiority of her sacred vocation above all others. With an ever-deepening conviction she can say with the royal prophet: 'The lines are fallen unto me in goodly places: for my inheritance is goodly to me.'[1]

The appreciation which a good religious has for her own congregation is not founded upon a mere passing enthusiasm of the imagination, nor the ingenuous outburst of a soul that is as quickly disillusioned as it is impassioned. It is obvious that, since such an esteem does not rest upon a firm foundation, we cannot expect it to survive the causes which gave it birth. Nor should we be astonished to see it rapidly disappear, giving place to distaste and weariness—to inopportune and dangerous yearnings. But true esteem for the religious vocation does not evaporate thus, since it is based upon the most real and most noble motives. No other vocation is more worthy of esteem.

Although you are convinced of this, my dear Sisters, nevertheless I do not deem it useless to place clearly before your minds the numerous motives you have for attaching yourself, heart and soul, to the life which, aided by God's grace, you have embraced. Therefore, the first of these motives—namely, the intrinsic grandeur and pre-

[1] Psalm xv. 6.

eminent excellence of your holy calling—will be the subject of this conference.

Truly, with the exception of the priesthood—with which it has a certain affinity—Religious Life, in spite of its apparent insignificance and lowliness, is a grand and noble life, and one which excels all others.

It is not difficult to prove this assertion.

Consider the primordial and unique source of all true greatness. It is God: He alone is great both by nature and abundance. From whatever point of view we contemplate God's excellence, we can with David truly say: 'Of His greatness there is no end.' Undoubtedly, in face of this Divine majesty—and too often in opposition to it—other grandeurs put in their claim to equal, if not surpass it. Do we not see human beings who use and abuse the gifts of the Creator and so make them serve as instruments of iniquity when they proudly revolt against God? They forget that all these gifts come from God, that, without Him, they would have nothing, not even their existence. Yet men fondly dream of a personal, independent sovereignty. They try to conceal their wretchedness from themselves, and, above all, from their fellows—they take their stand upon a pedestal composed of human elements. As long as they maintain this position of eminence they flatter themselves—and would fain persuade others—that this grandeur is theirs by inherent right. Thus, in the world, we frequently hear people spoken of as 'great people' because they have a large fortune, a certain renown, and are able to lead a luxurious life.

These things constitute greatness in the eyes of the world; yet they are but seductive, specious grandeurs, which win the esteem of men who look upon these worldly pomps with mingled admiration and covetousness. In reality, what are these incidental, borrowed, unstable grandeurs which have little value, if any, in the eyes of God? They resemble the statue, seen in a dream by Nabuchodonosor, which was made up of fine gold, silver, brass, iron, and clay. Daniel explained this image as a symbol of the four monarchies which should rule the world in succession. This 'great statue, however, which was great and high and the look thereof terrible,'[1] rested upon fragile feet of clay, so that little force was needed to overthrow it, in spite of its imposing appearance.

True grandeur belongs to God alone; though He may deign to invest His creatures with some of its rays. From this incontrovertible principle alone can we judge sanely of the true value of any calling. We must consider it from the point of view of God's sovereign and immutable grandeur, passing over all that gives it an artificial, conventional greatness, of which the weakness is continually manifested. The nearer a vocation brings a soul to God, the more closely it unites that soul to Himself; the greater it is effectually, the more it merits the epithet 'grand.'

Now, my dear Sisters—with the exception of the priesthood—is there any vocation which, more than yours, places the soul in an environment in which

[1] Dan. ii. 31.

opportunities are provided for easier, more frequent, and more intimate relations with Heaven and with God, who dwells therein ? I do not deny that this blessed and sanctifying intercourse is possible in every lawful calling. All can aspire to it ; possibly a simple Christian may attain, in his calling, to a closer union with God than a religious in her higher path. If, by chance, you ever meet with such a soul in the discharge of your duties, you ought to be overwhelmed with salutary confusion and spurred on to generosity in the pursuit of virtue. This exceptional example, however, by no means disproves the general principle that *per se*, and leaving on one side the more or less generous correspondence of this or that religious with the grace of her vocation, the Religious Life offers to its devoted followers greater facilities and more effectual means of advancing in the intimacy of the Divine friendship.

Religious Life—compared to other callings—is what the sanctuary is to the church, for there God, as it were, makes His presence more felt than in the rest of the sacred edifice. In religion the atmosphere is far more spiritual, and Heaven nearer than in the world ; there, the soul is attracted to our Lord by the very nature of the conventual life ; there, it is urged on to unite itself to Him by the practice of that perfect detachment, that self-annihilation, which Jesus recommended to His Apostles when He bade them follow Him. Undoubtedly, it is incumbent upon all Christians to follow Jesus ; in the Gospels He clearly lays

down this obligation: 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.'[1] Notwithstanding, there are different degrees of proximity; all are not called to follow Christ equally closely.

Now, ask yourselves what Religious Life is in reality? In what does it consist? Is it not a life spent 'looking on Jesus,' never for a single moment losing sight of Him? Does it not oblige you to walk in His footsteps, to reject, as a useless burden, all that might hinder or compromise your onward march? Are you not therein bound to follow His guidance, even though He turn aside and lead you along thorny, winding, or rough paths over the steep and blood-stained slopes of Calvary? What an honour to be permitted to keep so close to Him! But is not this a heritage proper to Religious Life, since, more than any other vocation, by its general organisation and all the exercises which mark out the day, it brings religious so close to their Divine Master?

Jesus Christ was poor; the religious pledges herself to practise poverty. Jesus Christ was chaste; the religious makes a vow of perpetual chastity. Jesus Christ obeyed; the religious leads a life of submission by obedience to the rule. Jesus Christ was scourged, crowned with thorns and crucified; the religious finds her sufferings in faithfully keeping her rule. There is one more point of resemblance between the religious and her Divine Spouse. He offered Himself willingly, it

[1] St. Luke ix. 23.

was a spontaneous offering. Is it not thus that, with full knowledge and will, and obeying the spontaneous impulse of her love for God, the religious binds herself to follow Jesus along that road which but few, comparatively, are called to tread?

Now, if following Christ signifies resembling and imitating Him, it also comprehends possessing Him and having intercourse with Him; and, from these points of view, the religious again has the advantage on her side. Who has greater advantages than she possesses of realising His presence, speaking with Him, and living with Him? St. Paul tells us that a wife's thoughts are continually occupied with the things of this world and the desire to please her husband, and, to a certain extent, this is her duty. The virgin, however, is preoccupied with one aim, namely, to please God by her purity of mind and body.[1] How fittingly do these words apply to those who have consecrated themselves to our Lord!

Consider how a nun's life is spent. She lives in God's presence, ever working for Him, ever united to and conversing with Him. She is continually and by varied exercises reminded of God's presence—by prayer, meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, spiritual reading, Communion, and the edifying examples of her sisters in religion. It is her privilege to be close to God, and ever to commune with Him.

Do you realise that this intercourse, which you are allowed and even commanded to keep up

[1] 1 Cor. vii. 34.

with God, is an unspeakable honour? Are you careful to profit by it? Does this privilege stir you up to show your gratitude to Him who has bidden you go up higher? This honour should not lead you to despise those whom God calls to follow Him in a lower path—for all vocations which come from Him are worthy of reverence and good in themselves, but it should arouse a deep appreciation for your consecrated life, which makes you a partaker in a greater measure of the only true greatness that exists in Heaven or upon earth, i.e. fellowship with God.

Further, the Religious Life offers great facilities for conquering self and successfully combating the unfortunate tendency of our nature—vitiated by the fall of man—to cling to the things of earth. This facility forms part of its greatness. A state of life is estimable and great in proportion as it provides the soul with the means of holding or regaining the sceptre of authority over the body, which, like a rebellious servant, so stubbornly resists the domination of the soul. Looked at from this standpoint, the majority of the paths trodden by the world merit little esteem—they are mean and paltry. Instead of enfranchising, ennobling, and raising men above their passions, these callings degrade and enslave them. They confine their votaries within the narrow circle of numerous trifling preoccupations, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to esteem eternal realities as, perhaps, they did formerly. Those who walk in these lower paths are surrounded by

numerous and subtle temptations, over which few completely triumph.

In the various secular avocations many lead a languid, enervated life. The spectacle is as sad as it is common. We see half-hearted Christians, whose conduct reveals the complete absence of those solid, manly virtues which should characterise all who profess to be disciples of a crucified Saviour. Poor souls! How little they know of the regal, saintly liberty, which the observance of the Gospel precepts would secure! They live enslaved by sin and the passions that form its cortège. The bonds that enchain them are legion—pride, vanity, pitiable efforts (the fruit of self-love) to satisfy all their desires on every occasion. They are slaves of those false preconceptions which lead them to base their esteem for their fellows in proportion as the latter are wealthy, live luxuriously, and enjoy a reputation that is often as ephemeral as it is hollow. Enchained by covetousness and sensuality, their only attraction and effort is to procure coarse pleasures; they are the bond-slaves of ambition, avarice, and jealousy, and, what is even worse, of themselves and their egoism. Such is the sad spectacle which the world only too often presents. Just as plants germinate and thrive in a favourable soil, so vices rapidly develop where Christians do not uproot their imperfections, nourish their souls, and cultivate virtue; the conditions, moreover, under which they live, the evil examples they see around on all sides, are by no means favourable to this spiritual growth.

Now, my dear Sisters, can there be any greatness of souls, any elevating and ennobling influence in those worldly, frivolous, self-concentrated lives, in which caprice rather than duty obtains a hearing?

Contrast Religious Life with the lives of worldlings, in which pride and sensuality generally reign supreme. In a convent there is time to think of our souls, to watch over ourselves, to throw off the heavy chains of bad habits and vices, or, at least, to break off those numerous little attachments which enslave so many lives. The soul refuses to yield to the miserable attractions of earth that ever tend to draw it down; it listens, rather, to the voice from above, whatever tone it may take—to the call that encourages and helps it to ascend. In the world, seductions, pleasures, and the comforts of life cause men to cling to earthly things, thus placing the soul under the dominion of the body; in religion, the soul reigns over the senses, thanks to the regenerating effects of mortification and to the discipline of conventual life, which keeps the flesh in subjection, even at the price of keen sufferings. These, however, have their compensation in the virile energy and noble independence they communicate to the religious.

The flattery of the world—that favours the soul's slumber and begets fond illusions—does not find entrance into the cloister. Religious 'of good will' are docile to the voice of truth, which enlightens them and deepens their convictions. Even as the flowers drink in the dew on a fine spring morning, so the soul of the religious steeps her memory in

the divine teaching and counsels of the Gospel. In the cloister, turning from the importunate phantoms—which have their origin in the senses—religious fix their minds upon the sacred realities of faith; in conformity with St. Paul's exhortation[1] they think of whatsoever things are true, modest, just, holy, lovely—in a word, of all that concerns virtue. Their will, strengthened by obedience, is firm and energetic, it is not at the mercy of every wave and storm, like a bark without a pilot. In a word, 'the sensual man'—to use St. Paul's expression—though not completely annihilated, is, notwithstanding, greatly weakened; while 'the spiritual man,'[2] who thinks of heavenly things, acquires fresh vigour and rises gloriously in proportion as he dies to self. Thus, to a great extent, the soul reconquers that calm, noble empire which it exercised over the body, when, as yet, sin had not overthrown the harmony of Creation, and the Divine plans of the Creator.

The sacred Scriptures, in numerous passages, and even the most famous pagan philosophers, teach that man's highest nobility consists in his conquest of self. Man is great, provided he keeps his desires under the control of temperance and moderation, and his actions under the sway of justice. Man is great when, with unfaltering perseverance, he follows the path of virtue. This is the ideal, and where shall we find its realisation upon earth more fully accomplished than in Religious Life? How grand and edifying it is to see a religious who, for long years, has faithfully

[1] Phil. iv. 8. [2] 1 Cor. ii. 14.

corresponded to all the graces of her high vocation! As far as it is possible upon earth she has overcome the natural life by the divine, and without destroying her nature has regulated its rebellious movements. She has, so to say, transfigured her nature; upon this wild plant, by God's assistance, she has engrafted the life of grace. Thus transformed, this religious brings forth abundant supernatural fruits of virtue, such as nature alone could never have produced. Unconscious of her virtue, she excels in humility. She is 'the captain' of her soul; with David she can say: 'My soul is continually in my hands,'[1] for with perfect self-possession she controls its impulses. Now and then nature revolts, but this religious, having so often gained victories over herself, quickly subdues the opposition of the flesh, and each attack provides her with fresh opportunities of gaining merit.

The fervent religious is, by her virtues, grand in the opinion of all who take the trouble to consider her conduct; she is great, too, before angels, and even in the sight of God. The world has its conventional standard of what constitutes greatness, but the tinsel of human glory is far surpassed by the lustre of the true grandeur of a saintly religious. The true dignity of her soul is revealed even by her demeanour and features; she lives and moves in an atmosphere of peace, which God Himself continually renews and nourishes. Truly, this soul is great!

Yes, but great and majestic also is the holy vocation which provides such means of holiness.

[1] Psalm cxviii. 109.

It is the place, *par excellence*, where the soul is moulded to holiness, it is the school for saints. There the tree of all virtue flourishes as a natural production of the fertile land; there, almost exclusively, is it indigenous; whereas, elsewhere, it is too often a rare exotic. Great and estimable, then, is the Religious Life—the mother, nurse, and educator of noble souls! As religious ponder over their advantages and privileges, surely they should rejoice that God has called them to such a blessed life, and pour forth their heartfelt gratitude to God for having done such great things for them.

Another element that characterises the Religious Life, and ennobles it, is devotedness. Self-sacrifice and devotedness ever forcibly attract men's esteem and command their admiration. They appreciate those who, ignoring their own interests, bestow the incomparable alms of devoted service upon each and all who need it, both in the measure and form required by varying circumstances. On the pages of history we find inscribed the names of those who have pre-eminently succoured some of their brethren —some children of Adam; we hear of those who, with true patriotic zeal, have contributed to the good of that great family, their own country; of those who have benefited humanity by their services. History records their glorious devotedness, their attachment to their fellows, their unselfish love. Even in our times, so characterised by egoism, men instinctively reverence such noble deeds when they witness them.

[Have you not frequently experienced this, my dear Sisters, in the fulfilment of your labour of love? Do you not witness it daily? You nurse the sick with laudable devotedness which, however, we dare not praise too much lest human applause cause the perfume of your virtue to evaporate, and lessen the purity of your desire to work which is done for God alone. While you are thus occupied in dressing the wounds of your patients, how is it that you win their confidence and love? How comes it that even those who were formerly blinded by prejudice and deceived by calumnies concerning religious have the greatest respect and veneration for your holy habit? Whence springs this reverence, if not from the mysterious and irresistible devotedness, of which you appear to be the personification? The majority of your patients would be incapable of appreciating such mystical grounds for esteem as those previously set forth, namely, the grandeur of the Religious Life from the point of view of union with God or of opportunities for self-conquest. But they are impressed by your devoted self-sacrifice. They admire you when they see you tending them with the charity of a sister or mother; when they witness your constant, persevering, undaunted charity, and see you ever amiable, patient, and sympathetic. This is the secret of the ascendancy which you exercise over your patients, to which, in a lesser degree, your care for their afflicted bodies contributes. Your examples of devotedness—hitherto, perhaps, unknown—reveal to them the greatness and nobility of the Religious

Life, since it inspires and sustains such self-sacrifice. Their esteem is well founded, and, for many, your loving, devoted services implant the seed of a future conversion or strengthen souls in the practice of virtue.]

Self-sacrifice is, in very truth, a grand and admirable virtue; and Religious Life is estimable and sublime because those who follow it unweariedly devote themselves in manifold ways, each of which has a claim to our reverence. It is far from my thoughts to limit devotedness to Religious Life. Thanks be to God there is a great deal of self-sacrifice practised by the laity. We justly respect the devotedness of the mother, who thinks only of her children and husband; of the father, who shortens his life by hard work that his children may be happy; of the soldier, who falls on the battle-field in defence of altar and hearth. Many like examples might be adduced, nevertheless the self-sacrifice of the religious is higher than these forms of devotedness because it is more voluntary, more disinterested, and more complete.

The soul that feels the call to a conventual life, and desires to respond fittingly to it, must perforce entirely and constantly practise self-renunciation. The nun has to break those ties which so often enchain, or at least hold back in a certain measure, those who strive to lead a Christian life in the world. Yes, the nun gives herself entirely to the service of God and of her neighbour. She can never forget that her calling exacts the holocaust of self, because He who practised self-sacrifice in so

sublime a degree is ever before her eyes. Meditating on His examples she is reminded that self-annihilation is the fundamental law of her consecrated life, and that should she no longer, in one way or another, devote herself to the welfare of souls, she would cease to merit the name of 'religious.' The total exclusion of egoism constitutes the true grandeur of her life: upon the ruined edifice of self-love she builds up a temple of charity that extends to all times and places, to all the needs of suffering humanity.

You, my dear Sisters, have your place in this admirable temple, you are the living stones that form the walls, no matter how insignificant your place may be in itself. How grateful you should be to God when you consider the sublimity of the devotedness which is yours by profession. As the horizon extends before you, let your souls proclaim once more the goodness of God who for you—as for Mary—has done such great things.

I will now resume briefly the four points of this conference—points which, in reality, might be discussed at far greater length; still, you will not forget these four truths and, in your private meditations, I trust you will seek to sound their depths, that you may more fully realise their sweetness.

Say often to yourselves: In truth, Religious Life, my own consecrated life, is great because it brings me more effectually than any other so near to God, who is the unique source of all greatness. It is great, because it offers me so many means of grace. It is great, because it enables me to control

my lower nature more easily than in any other career. It is great, because it is the appointed arena of self-sacrifice, which is one of earth's most precious jewels.

May your love and esteem for Religious Life, nourished by these holy thoughts, ever increase. As you dwell upon them, you will be drawn to pursue the work of your perfection with greater ardour. By your docility to the inspirations of grace you will respond to the demands of your high calling. In the midst of the intrinsic grandeur of your calling you will be truly and personally great. Thus, whatever be your particular life, whatever duties you are called to discharge, you will be penetrated with humble gratitude and, like our Blessed Lady, you will pour forth your soul in thanksgiving and humility to Him who has done, and will continue to do, great things for you, His chosen spouse.

FIFTH CONFERENCE

HAPPINESS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

His place is in peace and his abode upon Mount Sion.—Psalm lxxv. 3.

In order to strengthen and augment your esteem for the Religious Life, in the preceding conference I treated of its nobility and grandeur. My object was to set before you the constituent elements of true grandeur, as distinct from what the world calls grandeur, which is as hollow as it is bombastic and dazzling. As I have pointed out, true greatness consists in the union of the soul with God; in the glorious dominion of the soul over her lower nature; in the continual and supernatural exercise of self-sacrifice.

Taking up the same line of thought again, I propose setting before you the truth that your holy vocation is equally estimable, looked at from the point of view of its happiness.

Let us begin by asking a question: Is it possible that those who lead a life of continual self-sacrifice and renunciation, in which nature is crucified, can really be happy? The world replies in the

negative and scoffs at those who assert that happiness is an inseparable characteristic of conventual life. From the world's point of view this mode of life lacks every condition which men consider essential for happiness, since there is nothing in Religious Life which favours the reign of pride, riches, and pleasure. On the contrary, it imposes humility, poverty, and mortification. Hence the world concludes that, instead of being the happiest of human beings, all religious are necessarily the most unhappy.

Is such a line of argument based on a sound foundation? Undoubtedly it is not. Even those who deny the fact that true happiness consists solely in possessing God and not in the enjoyment of any earthly good, are forced by their daily experience to admit the truth of this statement, which St. Thomas Aquinas thus expresses: 'The whole good of man is in God,' and 'all happiness in life consists in the prescribed relations of the soul with Him.'[1]

Happiness consists, as our Lord tells us, 'in the kingdom of God' being established, developed, and strengthened within us: 'The kingdom of God is within you.'[2] Now from St. Paul we learn that: 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but justice and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost';[3] therefore, happiness does not consist in the satisfaction of any of the more or less coarse pleasures of the senses. This is

[1] *Summ. theolog.*, 2^a, 2^{ae}, q. xxvi., art. xiii., ad 3^{us}.
[2] St. Luke xvii. 21. [3] Rom. xiv. 17.

irrefutable, however much the world may deny it. The possession of God eternally in Heaven as our glorious reward, constitutes full, certain happiness, and we have a foretaste of this happiness even upon earth by our intercourse with God and the interior peace we enjoy. Though subject to fluctuations and influenced by earthly affairs, this peace is nevertheless real. St. Paul rightly places it between justice and joy, since it proceeds from the former and gives birth to the latter. A man who does not possess peace, even were he master of the world, boasts in vain of his happiness. He deceives himself and his fellows; only those who are dupes of some illusion believe this vaunted happiness to be real. If a human being is to be truly happy, he must be able to say to God with the Royal Prophet that his 'place is in peace, and his abode upon Mount Sion'—in Jerusalem, the city of peace.

If we admit this, where shall we find means more certain, more abundant, and easier to acquire and maintain peace of soul than in the Religious Life? Assuredly, peace is promised to all 'men of good will'; it is not excluded from any lawful calling upon earth. Yet, we must admit that, within the fold of the Catholic Church, there are certain spots more favourable than others for cultivating peace; these are privileged gardens in which this plant springs up, blooms and flourishes more spontaneously; and of these favoured spots Religious Life easily holds the first rank. Who can deny this? Is not the whole routine of life

in a convent or monastery directed to give true peace, and to assure its permanent possession, by the removal of all that might compromise or even trouble this peace? Therefore, since peace leads to happiness, is not Religious Life pre-eminently the home of happiness? Let us now examine this question more closely in detail and consider what are the conditions and characteristics of this peace, by what path religious must walk if they would enjoy this blessed peace.

The first and indispensable condition of peace is that the soul should be at peace with God. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, 'Happiness exists in God as its common and primordial source. Thither must all go to obtain their share.'[1] God will hereafter allow all His elect to approach and drink freely of this source. They will be, as it were, joint proprietors of the waters of life. Meanwhile, we poor pilgrims of earth, though unable to satiate our thirst at this fountain, can however always draw thence sufficient water to allay its pangs, and enable us to cross the desert of our terrestrial life without fainting by the way. When Eliezer asked Rebecca for a draught of water, she answered: 'Drink, my lord; and quickly she let down the pitcher upon her arm and gave him drink.'[2] Our God goes farther: He does not wait for us to ask for a draught; more liberal than Rebecca, He presses us to drink; never does He repulse the thirsty soul.

[1] *Summ. theolog.*, 2^a, 2^{ae}, q. xxvi., art. iii.
[2] Genesis xxiv. 18

When speaking with the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well, our Lord said: 'The water that I will give him shall become in him a fountain of water, springing up into life everlasting.'[1] Meanwhile, it suffices here below to quench our thirst for happiness. If God thus condescends to invite men to be happy, He must perforce exact one condition, namely, that the soul remain in His friendship by the life of grace. Surely this is a reasonable and necessary condition! Those who revolt against God, who refuse to submit to His authority, and disobey His laws, by the very fact, are excluded from drinking of this source of happiness. This explains why, in the world, there are so few who are really happy, so few who are at peace with God.

Now, my dear Sisters, the grand and essential aim of your holy vocation is to carefully preserve and daily increase in your souls the precious gift of peace. Did you not enter religion urged by the thought and animated with the hope that there your peace would flow as a river? You came because you understood the prophetic words: 'The work of justice shall be peace, and the service of justice quietness and security for ever.'[2] Peace, without justice, is but a name for an unreal thing, a form without the substance. Your experience also had convinced you that, in the midst of worldly callings, there was but little 'service of justice.' You knew that many refused God this service; that many gave but a partial, half-hearted one. Therefore, peace could not truly and really exist

[1] St. John iv. 14. [2] Isaias xxxii. 17.

in the midst of such weakness, cowardice, and faltering in the presence of duty. Also, you saw how few could hope to possess this peace while struggling against the prejudices, false maxims, attractions, and seductive examples of worldlings. Rightly, then, you deemed it expedient to seek elsewhere for firm, abiding peace; you renounced the world, you went 'far off, flying away' that you might take up your abode 'in the wilderness.'[1]

Peace is indeed the privilege of Religious Life. There, above all others, is the centre where the peace of God reigns in souls, because the cloister is the dwelling-place of light and purity, which draw souls nearer to Him. In its blessed seclusion the lustre of the Christian virtues is not tarnished, as it is so often in the world where men speak to their neighbours 'with a double heart.' There, virtues shine in all their splendour; there, they maintain their power and sovereignty over conscience, and religious are not exposed to the danger signalled by the prophet: 'Woe to you that call evil good and good evil.'[2] In religion the sacred code of the Gospel is upheld in its entirety, and no false interpretation, as a justification for criminal abuses, is tolerated. Religious are preserved from those specious, false interpretations that delude weak, worldly Christians, and lead them from the path of duty; these brave the remorse which ever follows and torments them, in spite of their efforts to pluck out its sting; but as often as they think they have killed it, they find it reviving with fresh strength.

[1] Psalm liv. 8. [2] Isaias v. 20.

In religion, in the focus of such supernatural light, sin can with difficulty do its deadly work. You, my dear Sisters, are no longer like worldly Christians, whose passions cause their judgment to err, and who are seduced by exterior pomp. The divine light of faith shows you sin in all its hideousness. Your ears are attuned to the heavenly canticles, and thus your souls are closed to the flattering, enticing voice of sin. The land upon which you tread is holy; virtue, like a perfume, rises from it; and thus sin is removed far from you, and consequently its contagious effect is lessened. A deep gulf separates Religious Life from this sinful world, which it needs an effort of the will to pass over. Whereas those who live in the midst of sinners are easily led away from God, the religious is upheld on the fatal slope by the barrier of her rule, the charitable admonitions of her superiors, and the grace of the sacraments, whence she obtains the strength necessary to hold her back and enable her to fight against temptations.

Count, if you can, my dear Sisters, all the helps your holy calling provides in order to keep you from sin. Consider the good examples of your sisters, the powerful interior solicitations to holiness, your frequent Communions, in which Jesus, the Lamb of God, gives you His peace precisely because He has taken away the sins of the world. Examine your defensive and your offensive weapons. Then, perforce, you must confess that if Religious Life is the abode of peace it is due to the high standard of innocence and holiness which is maintained in

our convents and monasteries. Job teaches an incontrovertible truth when he tells us that none can resist God and be at peace.[1] Now, the converse obtains: no soul obeys God, lives in His presence, practises justice, and holds the truths of faith, without necessarily enjoying perfect peace all his days, as far as this is compatible with our condition of pilgrims upon earth.

Try to have a high esteem for this fundamental principle of happiness. You trust that you are at peace with God. Consider the blessed grounds of this hope. When you examine yourselves seriously you are consoled by the assurance that, though you must plead guilty to certain inevitable faults of human frailty, yet conscience bears witness that you have not offended God mortally. Daily, your good will is strengthened and your culpability lessened. You trust that you would not be overcome by fear were you, at this moment, summoned before the tribunal of God, since you have a well-grounded hope of hearing the consoling words: 'Well done, good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will place thee over many. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'[2] All these considerations are so many sources of happiness—sources which nothing else can cause to spring up. Now look at the lives of those whose lot, in the opinion of the world, 'is cast in pleasant places.' Are they truly happy? Most emphatically 'No.' They are victims of sadness, bitterness, and melancholy, which are

[1] Job ix. 4. [2] St. Matt. xxv. 23.

inexplicable to those who forget the warning of Holy Scripture: 'There is no peace to the wicked, saith the Lord.' [1]

Pure souls who enjoy this peace continually long for greater purity. Because they lean upon the most High they can, without presumption, repeat St. Paul's challenge, and defy any creature to separate them from the love of Jesus Christ [2]—from that love which is the foundation of their peace. Wherever the fervent religious is sent to work in the name of obedience, she dwells in peace; it is her complete suit of defensive armour, her incomparable and priceless treasure.

He who has peace with God is at peace with himself. The reason why souls are troubled and uneasy, agitated by inordinate desires which allow them no rest wherever they may be placed, is because they live without God. They never invoke His assistance: if God has any part in their thoughts and motives, it is certainly not the first. Yet, as St. Augustine tells us: 'God created us for Himself, and our soul can find no rest except in Him.' [3] It will ever be thus. The soul without God is ill at ease; it may be compared to a dislocated limb, a branch that is no longer nourished by the trunk, a stream that dries up because it has been cut off from its source. Thus the soul pines away whithersoever it turns, if it be not towards God: like a sick man on a bed of pain, it finds suffering each time it makes an effort to obtain

[1] Isaias xlviii. 22. [2] Rom. viii. 35.
[3] Confess., Book i. c. i.

relief. Contrast its sad state with that of a man who is at peace because he places his confidence in God. It is well with him because he has found the true place of repose. You see at once, from this point of view alone, what happiness Religious Life confers on those who consecrate themselves to it, since they are under the blessed obligation of turning towards God and uniting themselves with Him.

If it be true that the total rupture, or the weakening of the bonds that unite the soul to God, give rise generally to misery and agitation of soul, we must not overlook the fact that this restlessness may spring from other causes.

There are good Christians who do not enjoy peace in all its fulness, nor even in a lesser measure, and yet they are united to God by the indwelling of grace; in their case the essential condition of peace exists. Why are they troubled? It needs no argus-eyed expert to discover that peace cannot reign fully in their souls because they are too cowardly to break the bonds of self-love and self-interests. They are victorious when it is a question of mortal sin which kills the souls, on this point they will remain firm; but they do not strive to overcome their minor defects and imperfections, and, above all, they do not wage war upon a certain secret egoism which rules their life. It is not the great passions which—in the words of the Spouse in the Canticle—'destroy the vines,'[1] but the little imperfections, that is, daily shortcomings. These Christians seek inordinately all that flatters their

[1] Cant. ii. 15.

self-love: they are spiritually too thin-skinned—to use a homely expression. Laxity of conscience as regards voluntary faults and imperfections, and lack of watchfulness also banish peace from the soul. With some, the opposite defect—rigidity and scrupulosity, by holding the soul in painful bondage, rob it of peace.

I do not claim exemption for religious from these spiritual infirmities, which work such havoc as regards peace in the souls of ordinary Christians. In religion, as in the world, there are some who do not sacrifice themselves as generously, nor as completely, as grace would have them obey its promptings. Under the specious pretext of an ideal perfection—the fruit of their imagination—they follow their own ideas, and are victims of their pride which thus disguises itself. If, however, we are forced to admit that Religious Life does not, once and for ever, deliver its adherents from the miseries proper to humanity, at least this calling provides means to overcome them, and it would be an injustice to depreciate these excellent and efficient succours. In short, the weaknesses we have signalled may be due to lack of intelligence regarding the laws of the Christian life, or feebleness of love in bearing that yoke which, in spite of the apparent contradiction of terms, is not grievous; for Christ our Master has said that His yoke is sweet, and His burden is light, and that they give rest to the souls [1] of those who prepare themselves by detachment to bear that yoke.

[1] St. Matt. xi. 30.

Now, in Religious Life, detachment is held in high esteem as the base and aim of a supernatural life. All fervent religious deem it an integral part of their holy calling—as the *sine qua non* of conventual life. Detachment delivers the soul from the countless preoccupations of exterior things, which so often are an obstacle to interior peace; moreover, it helps the soul to wage war against even a greater and more prolific source of agitation and storms, that is to say, against inordinate self-love. Again, detachment is pre-eminently a source of peace, since it leads the religious to renounce her views and opinions; to judge of all human concerns from the standpoint of the supernatural, rather than of the natural life; to sacrifice her personal inclinations joyfully; to turn a deaf ear to the suggestions of self-love; to make the law of the Gospel the rule of her life; in a word, to live by faith.

The religious who is faithful to her vocation may be compared to a traveller journeying along a narrow path bordered by brambles. He takes off his outer garment if its ample folds or fine texture is likely to catch in the thorns and hinder his progress. In like manner, those who are detached from earthly things hasten along life's path, untrammelled by hindrances; above all, preserved from the greatest, namely, overweening self-love which, catching up the brambles by life's highway, wounds the soul and hinders its advancement. Who or what can disquiet the religious who has, once for all, made the sacrifice of her own will, and is firmly resolved to sacrifice all her passions, great or small, upon

the altar of mortification? How can disquietude and worries hold this religious in their grip?

They can have no hold upon her, consequently her peace is unalterable and independent of good or bad fortune. In the events which pass in their course, even in those which touch her personally, as in all she sees around her, the religious recognises the manifestations of God's Will; her one desire is that, now and in the future, God's Will alone may be done. Therefore, just as the surface of the water in a narrow creek bordered by rocky walls is protected from sudden squalls and the rough billows of the ocean, so the soul of the fervent religious ever enjoys peace. Humility, mortification, patience—in short, all the manifold forms of detachment raise up an insurmountable dyke over which neither sadness nor any disquieting, desolating preoccupation can flow. Under this clear sky and in this safe harbour of detachment, peace ever reigns in all the transparency and purity of its accompanying joys.

It is clear that even in Religious Life the members have to keep up some relations with the world; also they come in daily contact with one another but without detriment to their peace of soul. No promise, however, is made to the aspirant that in the convent she will find none but sympathetic natures—sisters with whom she cannot do otherwise than live in perfect harmony. If such characters are to be found, undoubtedly they are more numerous in religion than elsewhere. Intercourse with those who have given up all in order to live

in God's presence and work out their sanctification, must naturally be easier and pleasanter than with worldlings. But suppose your experience has revealed to you that, even in the ranks of your sisters in religion, there are some whose characters and behaviour jar upon you, and that daily intercourse with them calls for frequent and meritorious acts of self-sacrifice, it is nevertheless true that breaches of the peace can never be lasting or serious. The very atmosphere in which you live, your common aspirations after holiness, the motives upon which your vocation is founded, and the frequent exhortations to practise virtue, are so many guarantees for the stability of peace, notwithstanding the presence of human frailties. When David in admiration exclaimed: 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity,'[1] he set before himself the union of the just upon earth as the grand ideal which is only fully realised in the blessed union of the elect in Heaven. That union of the saints in Sion, which David saw in prophetic vision, is foreshadowed in our religious communities more than elsewhere, thanks to the principles which guide their mode of life.

In religion you call one another 'sister'; and you are bound mutually to accomplish the duties and fulfil the promises which this beautiful relationship entails. Yet, at times, intercourse with one or the other may be painful. There may likewise be difficulties—coolness or friction—in your dealings with

[1] Psalm cxxxii. 1.

seculars; but neither strained interior nor exterior relations with others can rob you of peace, provided you are resolutely determined to 'follow peace with all men,' and even with the perverse, in accordance with St. Paul's counsel. Charity is the great means of living in peace with our fellows. All Christians are called upon to practise this virtue, but religious are even more imperatively bound to do so, on account of their holy vocation. If this be no easier for them than for seculars, the obligation to be charitable is certainly more generally fulfilled in conventual life than in the world; it becomes almost a second nature to religious.

How little true charity there is in the world! There, the absence or weakness of this virtue is a prolific source of trouble and discord. Men are unhappy because they cannot bear with their fellows; they will neither excuse nor forgive them. Nor do they realise the intimate union that exists between peace and charity.

When do men cease to live in peace with their neighbours? It is when they neglect to practise charity and all those numerous minor virtues which follow in its train. St. Paul enumerates these in his Epistle to the Corinthians: 'Charity is patient, is kind; charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely; is not puffed up; is not ambitious, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger; thinketh no evil.'[1] Without this ready, disinterested, supernatural charity, all intercourse with others becomes strained, difficult and painful, while peace

[1] 1 Cor. xiii. 4, 5.

is imperilled by violent shocks and terrible upheavals. Consider the state of a soul that is at enmity with its neighbour; it is more violently agitated than the waves that break over a vessel in the midst of a tempest. Whence comes the moral upheaval? From some trifling cause, such as a word; a suspicion—true or false—as to a person's intentions; a lack of courtesy; an undesired and unexpected meeting with someone—these will suffice to cause an irruption if charity does not rule in the soul. These are the causes which so often ruin the peace of worldlings.

Can I assert that these troubles never exist in the Religious Life? Alas, experience proves the contrary. Yes, sometimes, we do find these human miseries even in convents. Even there, petty jealousies, rivalry, and foolish susceptibilities are a cause of discord and trouble. But we must not exaggerate—these disturbances are far less frequent, far less violent than in the world, nor do they last as long. In the conventual life, the grand principle of fraternal charity ever maintains its ascendancy, which is always admitted and esteemed. There the virtue of charity claims its rights; it softens, calms, and pacifies these human passions; its action tends to reconcile different views, and to lead men to have but 'one heart and one soul' like the early Christians. In the cloister, charity speaks authoritatively; and when it utters the words, 'Peace be with you,' all obey its behest.

We must therefore conclude, my dear Sisters, that the Religious Life offers to souls the most

efficacious and abundant means of living in peace. In it, they live in peace with God, with their neighbours and with themselves; and this is effected by the numerous opportunities of obtaining purity of soul, a generous abnegation of self, and the continual practice of charity in all its perfection. Each of these paths leads to peace, and, as peace is a synonym for happiness, we may with certainty conclude that the conventual life is for all who have a true vocation—a land of promise and a 'paradise of delights.'

Strive to appreciate, more and more, the happiness of your holy vocation; ever try to strengthen and deepen peace within you. As of old, in the Cenacle of Jerusalem, Jesus said to His Apostles 'Peace be with you,' so to-day from the Tabernacle He addresses these words especially to you. Endeavour, therefore, to meditate upon them, and to grasp their full meaning.

Centre your happiness in peace, leaving worldlings to seek theirs in those 'broken cisterns'—as Jeremias calls them—which can hold nothing. Your true, unfailing happiness springs from this peace, which is the dawn of that eternal heavenly peace of which God is the Author and Perfecter. This peace will keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, until that day when in Heaven it shall attain to the noonday of its splendour. There at last, my dear Sisters, you will enjoy full and lasting peace, and, in consequence, enter into possession of unmingled and eternal happiness.

SIXTH CONFERENCE

PHILANTHROPY OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Use our service as it shall please thee.—Judith iii. 6.

We have seen, my dear Sisters, that the Religious Life merits your esteem, on account of the dignity to which it raises you, and the ample means of happiness that it offers you. In order to complete this subject, I must discuss the grandeur of your vocation from the point of view of the eminent services it renders to humanity.

Many people will grasp this third source of merit better than the other grounds. There are two reasons for this: first, because egoism characterises our times. Men appreciate whatever is to their own advantage, whereas they have little or no respect for whatever simply benefits their fellows. Secondly, prejudice dies hard, and the ill will and ignorance of men have handed down the ages various calumnies against the Religious Life, stigmatising it as useless, and even a loss to the world. These opponents of your vocation go so far as to compare it to the dead branch of a tree which, because the sap has dried up, is incapable of bearing fruit.

Such is the conception formed of religious by those who are content to examine it solely through the prism of the various human passions. They decide, in consequence, that all Religious Orders should be suppressed, since they are such useless institutions. Because religious do not enter the married state and rear families, because they take no part in commerce, and shun the brilliant fêtes and soirées of society, they are condemned by those prejudiced worldlings who cannot imagine that a life may be useful, even when those who follow it do not devote their energies to these ordinary duties of a citizen. 'Religious lead useless lives!' such is the cry in our days. Men, who nourish a deadly hatred of our holy Faith, have no tolerance for a vocation whose followers sacrifice all for it; nor are these the only enemies of the Religious Life. There are even some professing Christians who think little of it or despise it, though they may refrain from active hostilities.

Those who depreciate Religious Life thus prove themselves to be both stupid and unjust; for, far from being of no profit to society, these institutions render the most eminent services to it. Religious, more than the followers of any other profession, can truthfully proclaim their utility to the world. They serve their neighbour out of charity. What the Jewish people, overcome by fear, said to Holofernes when they accepted his dominion, religious can say from a higher motive: 'Both we and our children are thy servants'—i.e. all

those whom Religious Life engenders to the perfect acceptation of the Evangelical Counsels—and, since 'we are thy servants,' instead of attacking us, of ignoring us and paralysing our good will, rather 'Come to us as a peaceable lord, and use our service as it shall please thee.'[1]

Daily we hear bombastic protestations of devotedness to the cause of humanity that sadden us by their sterility—never are they reduced to action. Religious, on the contrary, keep their promises; the pages of history bear witness that they respond to every call made upon their time and services. Even in our days, when they so often meet with base ingratitude, they continue their labour of love in the shadow and silence of humility. This is the third reason—and a weighty one—why you should esteem your vocation, since, above all others, it enables you to pay the debt of fraternal charity which every human being owes his neighbour.

We will now examine more in detail the service which Religious Life procures for the world. The first, and one of the greatest, is prayer. From the standpoint of faith this is an inestimable favour, though, too often, those whose attention is absorbed by all kinds of worldly preoccupations, ignore or despise this form of devotedness. True Christians, however, looking at the supernatural side of human affairs, esteem this service. They know that 'Not in bread alone doth man live,'[2] necessary as food is to renew and maintain bodily strength.

[1] Judith iii. 5, 6.

[2] St. Matt. iv. 4.

Realising that virtue and truth far excel all material gifts, and knowing that prayer alone can obtain these supernatural gifts, these Christians believe firmly in the greatness and fruitfulness of Religious Life, since its followers pray unceasingly for souls. They approve of and admire the many grand contemplative Orders which, in the course of centuries, have been founded in the Catholic Church, though their sole aim is the uninterrupted service of prayer and praise. Nor do they join the ranks of the carping critics who contemptuously speak of contemplatives as 'sluggards.' Sluggards and useless! Can these words be justly used of those whose lives are one long prayer? What would the world be like without prayer? What would become of it? May we not liken it to a vessel without masts or rudder, at the mercy of the waves in mid-ocean? the wind dashes it against some reef and the *débris* are scattered over the billows. Thus would it be with the world; when prayer decreases upon the earth, some great calamity is at hand.

'The son honoureth the father, and the servant his master: if then I be a father, where is My honour? If I be a master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of Hosts.'[1] Where, indeed, is the proof of men's fear and reverence, if prayer be silent when its voice should rise to the throne of God? St. Augustine tells us[2] that when prayer ceases to ascend in order to draw down upon men the mercy of God, then the clouds of Divine justice

[1] Mala. i. 6. [2] *Serm.* 1ª *dominici in octav. Paschae.*

gather menacingly over the heads of careless, ungrateful men. The moment comes when these clouds burst; the storm is let loose—torrents of tribulation overwhelm the earth and call forth bitter tears. In the midst of their anguish, mortals look on all sides for the cause, and often fail to see that it is close at hand, for sorrows overtake those who do not endeavour by prayer to draw down upon themselves the clemency of their God. Even in our own days, do not terrible examples prove the truth of this statement?

In view of the neglect of prayer which prevails in our times, when so many Catholics are spiritually dead or at least are sleeping, is it not fitting that communities should exist whose one occupation is prayer? Does not this world—in which so few pray well and some not at all—sadly need zealous, devout souls who, by the fervour and continuity of their supplications, atone for the absence or sterility of prayer on the part of worldlings?

This is precisely what contemplative religious have in view. With them, prayer is the principal occupation, the chief end of their institution. Even in congregations which are devoted to exterior works of charity, prayer ever holds the first rank. It constitutes your highest office, and is the greatest service you can render to your neighbour. No act of devotedness has greater merit than intercession for the unhappy prodigals, who, lost in the darkness of error, so often sink hopelessly into the slough of depraved human passions.

In the numerous monastic houses—those blessed

temples of prayer—thousands seek to shelter themselves from the world's seductions, and their lives of purity and heroism render their worship particularly acceptable to God. How few know what benefits these consecrated souls draw down daily upon the world! How few pay any attention to these blessings obtained by their impetration! Yet how many favours obtained, how many punishments averted are the result of the prayers of religious! Again and again, in moments of peril and crisis, the efficacy of their intercessions has been proved. Monks and nuns prayed, and there was an outpouring of blessings, or a renewal of prosperity, which contributed to raise society from the depth of its decadence and ruin. The world willingly and gladly sets up statues to perpetuate the memory of eminent men; it would give immortality—as far as lies in its power—to those who have been deliverers, benefactors, or pioneers; to those who have headed any onward movement. Alas, but too often, the world honours men who only merit contempt: it praises those who, far from conferring benefits on humanity, have but laboured for its misfortune and ruin; and all the time it lives in ignorance of the blessings which religious procure for society, even though their work is strictly confined to prayer.

The little appreciation which the world has for prayer is to you of little moment, since its ignorance has no power to change the nature or value of your services, nay, it even increases your merits.

Therefore, my dear Sisters, continue to devote yourselves heartily to this most important ministry of your holy vocation. Endeavour to appreciate more and more the opportunities it gives you of praying without ceasing. Pray with all the energy of your soul; and, that your prayer may have its full efficacy, remember that your supplications rise to Heaven, not only in union with those of your sisters in religion, but also in union with the thousands of devout religious scattered over the whole face of the earth. St. Bernard, in a sermon on the Circumcision, says that 'our Lord gave Himself up entirely to serve us'; and in truth you, too, devote yourselves wholly to the service of humanity by the very fact of your consecrated lives. Now, the first service the world claims of you is prayer—a claim you would do well to forestall, since men are often either too morally sick or too ignorant of their own forlorn condition to take the initiative and ask your prayers. Make your intention to pray for all men. In the numerous spiritual exercises of each day, keep the needs of your neighbours in view. Pray in union with them, that they may benefit by your intercessions, or that, should their co-operation be wanting, God may hear your petitions on their behalf and give them graces suited to their needs.

We now pass on to another service which religious, by their holy vocation, are called to render to the world—they must suffer for it. It is true that worldlings cannot exempt themselves from suffering, as they do from prayer, which is a spontaneous act

of the will. Though in their folly and ingratitude they dispense themselves from prayer, they cannot escape the universal law of suffering. Worldlings suffer therefore, but what are their sentiments? Are they penitent and humble? Do they suffer with resignation, thus making reparation for the past, and acquiring fresh merits? On the contrary, does it not often happen that, on account of their impatience, murmuring, rebellion, and even blasphemy against the hand of Him, who thus punishes them, they commit more crimes and deserve greater chastisements? How few persons in the world have a true conception of suffering; how few endure it meritoriously! What the author of the 'Imitation' says of sickness we may apply to suffering in general: 'There are few whom it makes better,'[1] because, generally speaking, worldlings do not accept, with the proper dispositions, the tribulations which God sends them. Consequently, their sufferings are sterile—to say the least they do not bear fruits of purification, reconciliation, and sanctification.

Religious make up this deficiency. Jesus is the Divine Founder and Exemplar of the life of self-consecration, and by His works and deeds He has united prayer and suffering. Those who profess to follow Him are expected to do likewise. They must suffer for the world in union with their Lord; they, too, must immolate themselves for the salvation of souls. They are specially charged to fill up in themselves 'those things that are wanting of

[1] Book i. c. xxiii.

the sufferings of Christ,'[1] that their merits may be applied to the members of 'His Body which is the Church.'

What a grand vocation, my dear Sisters! If you would realise its sublimity, think of Him who passed through the crucible of suffering voluntarily and who, by the lips of His prophet, puts this question to all generations of men: 'O all ye that pass by the way, attend and see if there be any sorrow like to My sorrow!'[2] Was there ever such a benefactor of humanity as Jesus? Even those who deny His Divinity are forced to admit that He holds the first place in this respect. But what did He do for men? What did He do in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, on Calvary? He prayed and suffered: suffering pre-eminently characterised His whole life. It was thus that He redeemed the world: from Calvary and the cross set up on its summit flows the stream of graces which we receive daily; and all those graces which God reserves for us in the future, even to the end of our lives, will come from that blessed source.

The world cannot understand the part which the sufferings of our Saviour had in its redemption. Like those who, passing by the cross when Jesus hung there in His agony, shook their heads and mocked at Him, worldlings still treat the sorrowful life of Christ with contempt and mockery; they speak of it with blasphemy. In truth, the world has not changed. It still shows itself either hostile or indifferent, when it comes in contact with those

[1] Coloss. i. 24. [2] Lamenta. i. 12.

privileged followers of Jesus, with those members of His mystical Body, who practise abnegation and self-renunciation; who wage an implacable war against their fallen nature, and all its exactions —in a word, who live up to all that their calling requires of them. Worldlings cannot see that such self-sacrifice in any way benefits them: the most we can hope to obtain is that they will content themselves with blaming those whom they call 'victims of blind folly,' because, instead of avoiding or rejecting the cross, these religious welcome and embrace it.

My dear Sisters, you know well that your vocation bids you suffer for others. Whatever be the form your trials may assume, whether they come to you personally from the hand of God, or from the simple observance of the common rule—framed to crucify and conquer your lower nature—you will always have the treasury of suffering at your disposal. You will always find therein an abundant supply of spiritual alms for the world, in which, although men have such need to expiate their sins, they trouble so little to appease Divine justice. Worldlings daily multiply their opposition to grace. St. Paul's energetic words exactly describe their conduct. He exclaims: 'Thou treasurest up to thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God.' [1]

Therefore, is it an inestimable service that the world's debts should be paid or diminished, even while they are being contracted? Now this is

[1] Rom. ii. 5.

precisely what is being done daily, thanks to Religious Life. In the seclusion of the cloister there are many communities where prayers, vigils, and corporal penances are offered up daily for sinners. In those religious houses where great austerities are not practised, there is the daily renouncement of self which is required to fulfil onerous duties—the penitent, humble life, that is hidden 'with Christ in God.'[1] The sufferings of fervent religious help to counterbalance the sins of pride, sensuality, and ambition, committed by sinners who, when they are called to stand before the tribunal of God, will see in the light of eternity the multitude and magnitude of their crimes. Then, too, they will understand that those religious, whom they treated as 'the refuse of this world, the off-scouring of all,'[2] and as parasites, were their greatest benefactors. They will confess that it is indeed a great service to suffer voluntarily in order to obtain the grace of conversion which saves souls from the eternal torments of hell, or to diminish in length and intensity the dreaded expiations of purgatory. Worldlings will see then that the services rendered by religious to the world, put all mere human acts of benevolence in the shade, even those which men praise so highly, though in reality they are little or nothing.

Take this thought now, my dear Sisters, as another motive for esteeming your sacred calling. Some religious estimate the service rendered to the cause of religion, or the good of souls, by the

[1] Coloss. iii. 3. [2] 1 Cor. iv. 13.

amount of exterior works accomplished or the material success obtained. Their great idea of apostolic work centres in teaching children or nursing the sick: they imagine themselves to be utterly useless when they are not doing some active work of this kind. The aged, sick, and prematurely infirm religious are sometimes inclined to take up the world's preference for the active life, and, seeing themselves reduced to inaction as regards exterior works, they give way to sadness. They are despondent because, having entered religion in view of doing good to their fellows, they find themselves so incapable of activity. These religious do not understand how greatly they can serve their neighbours by accepting, supporting, and loving suffering as an effectual act of zeal.

Yes, my dear Sisters, you can render great services, even when you can no longer devote yourselves to exterior works of mercy; even when your lives are spent in the infirmary on a bed of sickness. Never yield to the temptation to think yourselves useless when suffering thus. No position could be more favourable for paying the debt of fraternal charity—a debt which you contracted with the world by the very fact of your religious profession. You can say in truth: 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross.'[1] In union with His Passion and in imitation of His example, you can and should offer the merits of your sufferings for souls. Never can you better co-operate in saving souls than when suffering reduces you to inactivity.

[1] Gal. ii. 19.

Do not misunderstand me, my dear Sisters. While I proclaim the excellence of prayer and suffering as means of zeal, and an ample justification for the existence of religious Orders—even were there no others—it is not my purpose to pass over or lessen those services which the active life renders. In the Catholic Church a far greater number of communities devote their energies to the corporal, than to the spiritual, works of mercy. The contemplative Orders greatly benefit their fellows, though, in truth, the means they take to accomplish this end are incomprehensible to the world, that either cannot or will not grasp whatever is supernatural. The active Orders, while they, too, pray and suffer, likewise labour. Their devotedness is visible, tangible, incontestable, even to worldlings. When the religious addresses the world in the words of Holy Scripture: 'Use our service as it shall please thee'; when she offers it her labours, she has mainly active works of mercy in view. She reduces to deeds the offer made in words. Ever since religious have existed they have placed themselves at the service of humanity: they have offered themselves as vessels 'unto honour, sanctified and profitable unto the Lord, prepared unto every good work.'[1] They have devoted their lives, with invincible courage, to every form of charity, even to the most repulsive. They have taught children—not only of the rich, but preferably of the poor; they have nursed the sick, the aged, and those in prisons, ransomed captives and tended the insane. Their

[1] 2 Tim. ii. 21.

devotedness and zeal have risen to every occasion, even to undertaking to render service to those afflicted with the most revolting infirmities. In all countries, even among savage tribes, religious have planted and tended civilising and sanctifying works of charity to which God has given the increase. It would be almost impossible now to enumerate all that religious have done in past times for the relief, comfort, and even for the material prosperity of the world. Communities of religious have multiplied on all sides, adapting themselves to the needs of their times; they have even coped with pressing wants by new inventions of which they have kept the secret.

Even in our own century, to whom does the world appeal for willing hands when a difficult work has to be accomplished? Who are asked to take care of lepers, of the plague-stricken, of foundlings, of the wounded on the battle-field? When missionaries are needed in some distant island—thousands of miles from their country perhaps—to plant the good seed, even at the risk of having to shed their blood for the regeneration of a few poor souls, to whom does the world appeal? To those who boast of their humanity and philanthropy? No. These men, ready enough with high-sounding words, always promptly draw back when asked to realise their professions of zeal. The world knows whom to ask. It turns to the members of the different religious communities, and, from their ranks, legions of brave men and women step forth. Unhesitatingly they reply: 'We are here,

willing to be your servants and even your slaves, for the charity of Christ presseth us.'[1] 'Love is strong as death;[2] and it urges us to offer ourselves to you wholly and for all our lives. Make use of us—our health, our liberty, our strength, and even our lives, for they are yours.'

In this glorious phalanx of the greatest benefactors of the human race, you, my dear Sisters, have your place. In the great work of Catholic associations of charity, your humble furrow has been marked out; there, you each respectively do your part; for Religious Life may be compared to an ocean which, vast as it is, consists only of drops of water. Thus each congregation, each religious, contributes a part, however small and imperceptible, to the great ocean of charitable enterprise. You work in union with all the devoted self-sacrificing labourers in God's Vineyard, with those who gladly spend their strength and lives, if only they can further the bodily and spiritual interests of their fellows, and thus contribute to the glory of God.

You cannot too often meditate upon this great and consoling truth. It will encourage you to persevere in the accomplishment of the monotonous daily round of duties, and help you to work energetically, and consequently profitably. If you remember that you belong to a body, in which all have a joint liability, you will not wish to be a straggler in the rear. Moreover, you will endeavour daily to become more capable, in order to render more efficient services to your own congregation

[1] 2 Cor. v. 14. [2] Cant. viii. 6.

and to the credit of Religious Life, for both alike are honoured by your faithful service.

Above all, this consideration will increase your esteem for the life of self-consecration, since it opens out such a vast sphere of labour and prevents your falling into an isolated and sterile egoism. How this prospect dwarfs all lower views! How insignificant our petty, personal success appears in this light! How little will it weigh in the balance at the last day! In very truth, we shall see then how much preferable it would have been to have contributed to the salvation of souls—by prayer, by the silence of humility, by sufferings generously endured, by the hidden devotedness of daily toil, than to have accomplished brilliant actions, of which pride, self-seeking, and self-aggrandisement were the principal motives.

Finally, the religious who has ever performed the daily task—assigned to her by obedience—with humility and gladness, who has ever striven to procure the happiness of her brethren for time and for eternity, will be ready to stand with confidence before God, whenever He shall call her to her eternal home.

SEVENTH CONFERENCE

THE OBLIGATION OF NUNS TO STRIVE AFTER PERFECTION

I beseech you, that you walk worthy of the vocation in which you are called.—Ephes. iv. 1.

It is unquestionable that, when God calls man to render an account of his stewardship here below, He will exact a return in proportion to the gifts He has bestowed. We find this truth inculcated in numerous passages of Holy Writ. God, who is infinite in all His perfections, must act in accordance with them. Hence, He cannot pass over the claims of justice: it must necessarily preside over His judgments.

Another truth, equally certain, is that Religious Life is a specially privileged state upon earth; not indeed for the satisfaction of our fallen nature and its senses, but from the higher standpoint of faith. Religious Life requires and facilitates a close union with God: it obliges us to have frequent intercourse with Him. Are not these truly great privileges? Again, it procures peace that is not liable to be wrecked by storms or destroyed by illusions, like the false peace of worldlings; surely,

this is another privilege. To these we may add a rule of life that binds religious to the service of their neighbour, and to a life of self-consecration to God, for which a glorious recompense is promised here and hereafter.

God has made Religious Life so grand; He gives, to those called to it, such continual and powerful helps; therefore, in all justice, He has a right to expect from them more devoted service than from ordinary Christians, and to judge them accordingly. Those who have received five talents would not be justified in bringing back but one to their Lord. Religious dwell in the vineyard which God has Himself planted, over which He watches with such infinite love lest the enemy should devastate it. Is it not reasonable that from this cherished vineyard He should gather an abundance of luscious fruit?

Never lose sight of this great truth, my dear Sisters. The realisation of your responsibility, as religious, will preserve you from the dangerous illusions of pride which may assail you. When you examine your daily life, and ponder over the sacrifices it exacts, the various exercises it imposes, the daily round of duties which succeed one another uninterruptedly, and which wage war against your natural inclinations, you might be tempted to imagine that, in definitive, you are doing a great deal for God. This would inevitably lead you to think that you might, without scruple, allow yourself certain satisfactions, be less particular about the observance of rules, and still maintain,

as religious, a position far superior to any secular career.

It is true, my dear Sisters, you do a great deal for God: none can deny this. But on the other hand, are you not bound to admit that you receive great favours? If your life has such merit, it is because you receive abundant graces from God; and, at the last day, what He exacts from you will be in direct proportion to His gifts. Therefore, that you may avoid a terrible deception on the threshold of eternity, suffer me to address you in the words of St. Paul: 'I beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation in which you are called.' Let me exhort you to practise the evangelical virtues constantly and generously, for you are under the obligation to attain to a higher degree and greater maturity in these virtues than seculars.

Have you ever meditated seriously upon the name you bear? I exhort you earnestly to do so; and I wish you to ponder over its signification, because those who grasp its true meaning have found a precious mine of instruction.

You are known as *religious*: the world said that you *entered religion* when you sought and obtained admittance into the cloister. You sacrificed the joys and hopes of the home circle and —like a bird that had escaped from the snare which momentarily held it captive—you escaped from the dangers and snares of the world; you did all this in order to become religious.

But, after all, are not those faithful Christians

—who follow an honest calling in the world, striving therein to keep God's commandments—likewise deserving of the name of religious? There are many such in the midst of the world. They follow secular callings, and are not members of a community. Yet, since they live piously, may we not say that they, too, are *in religion*?

No: the terms '*religious*' and '*in religion*' are exclusively reserved for you; they do not apply to seculars. We may say of a given person in the world that she is religious, that she practises her religion. Or, if we compare her conduct with that of other seculars, we may say that she lives like a religious. It was thus that Clotaire's courtiers sarcastically said of his saintly queen Radegonde: 'She is a real religious.' Notwithstanding, the title of 'religious,' in its true and full sense, can only be applied to you. When applied to you it is not simply an adjective, denoting a quality, but a substantive. You are not only *religious persons*, but you are *religious*. Not only do you love and practise your religion, but you are '*in religion*.' It is the atmosphere in which you breathe; the sphere in which you pass your whole lives; the principle that influences all your actions.

We will examine this truth, since it resumes all your obligations. St. Augustine tells us that 'religion is the bond that unites us to God.'[1] Again, looking at the word from another point of view, its etymological meaning, he writes: 'Religion is a protestation, proved by definite actions, that we again choose the service of God, and unite ourselves

[1] *De vera religione.*

to Him anew after having lost Him by our negligence.'[1] From these two definitions it is clear that all human beings need religion. As the tree must remain united to the root whence it sprang, and whence it draws its nourishment; as the rivulet must remain united with the parent stream or it will dry up, so every human soul must live by God. For all 'religion is the bond that unites man to God.' Again, we know that original sin and personal sins, due to man's inherent weakness on account of the Fall, have estranged souls from their Creator. Consequently, men should feel urged to tell God that, in spite of their failing, they desire to belong to Him, and to renew the bond of union broken by sin; that they long to recover their heritage lost by sin. In this sense, the second definition applies to all Christians.

Unfortunately, the great misfortune of the world is that it no longer troubles about religion; if religion exists at all, its influence over families and society is extremely feeble. Human passions and incredulity continually try to cut off the source of living waters, i.e. the union of the soul with God. Left to the promptings of their nature, souls give themselves up to their desires and sink to the lowest depths of degradation. Without religion, all crimes are possible to men. Cut off from God, all sense of justice, morality, and charity disappear; all good sentiments and virtues—which God alone can inspire—cease to exist. When you lived in the midst of the world you certainly often saw the evils which result from neglect of religion.

[1] *De civit. Dei*, L. x. c. iv.

But, if religion is necessary for all, it does not follow that all are called to practise it in the same degree. Strictly speaking, since 'Religion is the virtue by which the creature does something for the service and worship of God,'[1] all men should be bound by the same obligations. God made all men: they belong to Him; therefore it seems reasonable that they should, without exception, all live solely for Him, think and speak only of Him; seek and love Him alone. Yes, when the end of Creation shall be fully attained, when mankind enters Heaven, it will be thus. The elect will live in and by God; they will be incapable of any other occupation than that of loving and praising their God throughout eternity. Even here upon earth God might have exacted of His creatures, as a part of their trial as exiles, that life of complete service which He will grant as a reward in the glory of our celestial home. But God is a generous, liberal Sovereign; He does not exercise His rights rigorously, but is content to exact a small tribute, a minimum service of adoration, gratitude, and love from every reasonable being. What does God ask of people of the world, of ordinary Christians? A few prayers daily; a few acts of public worship on Sundays; the observance of His commandments, which are so simple and easy to keep, and this is all. Within certain limits, they may retain their liberty and affections; they may keep their habits, their relations with their fellows, and their mode of life.

[1] St. Thom., 2^a, 2^{ae}, q. cxxxvii., art. 1.

God allows them the free use of many things which He might claim, since they themselves, and all they look upon as theirs, are His by right. But there are some whom God calls in a special manner to come nearer, to be more wholly His; and although the invitation is, under certain aspects, formidable to nature—though in reality it is pre-eminently advantageous and glorious—these privileged souls consecrate themselves, without reserve and without regret, to His service. As St. Gregory well says: 'They retain nothing for themselves, but offer, as a holocaust, their senses, their tongue, their life—all that they have received from His power.'[1] Such souls go far beyond what is strictly required of simple Christians, and therefore they are called '*religious*,' they are said to be '*in religion*,' and both these epithets recall the different kinds of service which the creature renders to God.

Now, my dear Sisters, you understand why you are called religious; why you have entered religion. By entering a religious community you have made a public declaration that you desire to belong to God, to be united to Him by a closer tie than that which joins the simple faithful to their God: you have proved your resolution to abandon yourself entirely to Him, to offer yourself as a perpetual, living holocaust, instead of simply yielding Him the minimum service, which He requires of all Christians, and with which He is content, as far as they are concerned.

You know what was meant by a holocaust

[1] St. Greg., *hom.* xx., *in Ezech.*

under the Old Law. It was a sacrifice, in which the victim was wholly consumed by fire upon the altar of the Lord. Nothing was reserved for the priest or the people, as when the ordinary sacrifices were offered. Now, your religious life is the holocaust; it is a vocation proper to those who have the courage to generously immolate to the divine service *all they are and all they possess.*

Never lose sight of this grand thought; keep continually before your minds all that the name of religious connotes, all the obligations it entails. Remind yourself frequently that you are religious. Say to your soul: I am consecrated entirely and for ever to God; my whole life must be steeped in religion, nay, one continuous act of religion, in virtue of my dedication to God. All I am and have, all my faculties, are His by right, not only of creation, but also by the voluntary oblation which I have made to Him. Even those things which He allowed me to reserve for myself, I offered as a holocaust on the blessed day of my profession, when I said to Him: Dear Lord, take all—my time, my intelligence, my liberty, my labours, my health, my life. I freely give Thee all, reserving nothing for myself.

These were your words, my dear Sisters, and you said them to Him of whom it is written: 'I am the Lord that love judgment and hate robbery in a holocaust.'[1] God never forces a soul to give up all for His sake; He has given no general commandment or absolute law on this matter;

[1] Isaias lxi. 8.

but when a soul, pressed by the wondrous grace of a religious vocation, has consented to make this total sacrifice, God exacts its fulfilment absolutely and rigorously. Even as, at the last day, God's justice will oblige Him to reward magnificently those who have generously made Him the sacrifice of all, so during the earthly life of the religious this justice claims all that this holocaust presupposes. Those who voluntarily break their solemn vows, or endeavour to shirk their obligations, expose themselves to the danger of having addressed to them the stern words of St. Peter to Ananias and Saphira. These two Christians of the primitive Church were guilty of a breach of faith, inasmuch as they professed to give up the whole value of their field to God, whereas they had retained a part. St. Peter said to Ananias: 'Why hath Satan tempted thy heart, that thou shouldst lie to the Holy Ghost, and by fraud keep part of the price of the land? Whilst it remained, did it not remain to thee? and after it was sold, was it not in thy power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thy heart? Thou hast not lied to men, but to God!'[1]

In this case, it was only a sum of money that was withheld, and yet St. Peter made this declaration in God's Name. The severity of his words were followed by an even more rigorous judgment, for the two who had sinned thus were struck with sudden death. What, then, would be the chastisement of the religious who should deliberately hold

[1] Acts v. 3, 4.

back for herself some part of those affections which she solemnly promised to sacrifice unreservedly to God? Would she not gravely expose herself to the reproaches and chastisements of God?

Will you run this risk, my dear Sisters? Examine yourselves as to whether you are always faithful to the inspirations of grace. While you offer the greater sacrifices, inseparable from the Religious Life, do you ever refuse to make the lesser ones? Does not conscience reproach you with keeping back some sacrifice for which grace asks?

You ask me to what I am referring. I am speaking of small, trifling sacrifices, such as repressing curiosity by the custody of the eyes, holding back a word during the time of silence, refraining from some thoughtless action, practising mortification, mutual support and charity, renouncing your personal tastes, combating your moods, and reforming your defects of character. Taken singly, each is of little moment. They are trifles which, in a person of the world, would pass unnoticed; but, in a religious, these trifles become important, because they are those robberies in the holocaust which God hates and which He punishes by withdrawing His grace from those who commit them. St. Francis of Sales used to say: 'If I knew that there was but a fibre of my heart which was not steeped in the love of God, I would instantly pluck it out.'[1]

Bear these words in mind; make them the rule

[1] *Vie de St. François de Sales*, par M. Hamon, L. vii. c. v.

of your actions. Never tolerate willingly and consciously that any portion of your life be for self or the world; let it all be for God. Renew your solemn consecration daily and hourly, offer yourselves to Him again and again, and thus you confirm and renew your oblation and, at the same time, add to your merits. If you offer God your recollection, your gentleness, your modesty, your little sufferings, you will have already partially complied with the exhortation of the Apostle who, through my ministry, bids you walk 'worthy of the vocation in which you are called.'

When you entered religion, my dear Sisters, you consecrated yourselves wholly to God; you wished to immolate yourselves, that you might die to self, the world, and the petty satisfactions which nature ever seeks. You longed to put off the old man and to walk in that newness of life of which St. Paul writes: 'Christ died for all; and they also who live may not now live to themselves, but unto Him who died for them and rose again.'[1] Therefore, life in religion is not simply a state of death to nature and its evil instincts; it is likewise a continual and generous effort of the soul to rise spiritually. As St. Dionysius the Areopagite expresses it, 'this life seeks to unite itself to the most pleasing perfection by an entire dedication of self to the service and Will of God?'[2]

Perfection, then, is the object of Religious Life. It is a state of perfection according to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers and Doctors of the

[1] 2 Cor. v. 15. [2] *Eccles. hierarch.* vi.

Church and of all masters in the spiritual life. It is, therefore, important for us to understand the true significance of this statement.

Does it mean that all who enter religion have already attained to perfection, or that, on entering, they acquire it instantaneously? No, the call is not reserved for those who are perfect. Were it so, none would dare respond to an invitation which is always addressed to sinful, imperfect mortals. Never would you have presumed to present yourselves for admission under this condition, my dear Sisters. Nor does Religious Life, in the twinkling of an eye, render all who enter it perfect. The soul of the aspirant is not freed from its clothing of inherent human failings and weakness by a sudden miracle, and then invested with a resplendent mantle of perfection.

No, it does not come to pass thus; but this is what happens. The fervent aspirant—a soul of good will—asks for admission into the convent of her choice. She is prepared to fulfil all the obligations, and to profit by the many means of grace—who would come without these two dispositions? She is accepted, and then the intimate relations with God, proper to the conventual life, lead her to practise all the virtues, which—as Origen remarks—'in their entirety constitute perfection.'[1]

You are under the obligation of striving to acquire all the virtues, and consequently of aiming at perfection. It is in the Religious Life that the desire to grow in holiness is more urgently felt,

[1] *Tract.* 8 *in Matth.*

and more effectually seconded. You are bound to strive after perfection, whatever may be the present state of your spiritual life—whether you are beginners, or have already made some progress, and even if you rank with those whose exterior conduct is blameless. You know well that you have not yet reached the goal; never will you reach it on this side of the river of death, and still you must never relax your efforts to get there. This is an absolute necessity, otherwise you are not walking 'worthy of your vocation.' Notice the Apostle's words: they indicate the movement of an onward march; the unceasing transport of a soul that is decided ever to advance and never to seek rest upon earth. St. Francis of Sales has an excellent passage on this subject; he writes[1]: 'Lucifer alone will dare to say: "I will sit in the sides of the north wind."[2] How hateful! What, do you not know that you are on the road and therefore in the place for walking, not for sitting down.' The idea of walking is so intimately connected with a road, that we speak of pedestrians who tread it as being 'on the road,' i.e. going forward. Also we read that God said to Abraham, one of His greatest servants: 'Walk before Me, and be perfect.'[3]

Thus, my dear Sisters, you must ever go forward, ever rise to the calm, pure atmosphere of perfection, ever establish and strengthen the reign of God in your soul. In your holy rule and consecrated life there are abundant interior and exterior means

[1] *Treatise on the Love of God*, book iii. c. i.
[2] Isaias xiv. 13. [3] Genesis xvii. 1.

which will help you in your combat with your imperfect nature. Never lose sight of the object of these spiritual aids: 'These are so many steps by which you can ascend to the perfection of charity, inasmuch as they remove the obstacles which lay on your upward path.' How pitiable and wretched is the state of a religious, whom Satan deludes into fixing a given limit to her perfection, and deciding not to overstep it. Such a one resists the promptings and impetus of the Holy Spirit when she determines to halt on the road to holiness. And yet all the time that she thus stands still, from within and from without the warning voice sounds clearly: 'Excelsior! Excelsior!' Had the Jews, on their road to the land of promise, settled down at any of the various halting places, they would never have reached Canaan: they would have lived and died in poverty and misery. Thus is it with the religious who refuses to go forward. As for you, my dear Sisters, advance continually on the path of perfection, thus will you be happy in life and death.

Each day, amend and perfect your lives. To do this it is not necessary to change your work or office, to modify the daily routine which, hitherto, you have followed. It suffices to perform these daily duties with more care, with greater purity of intention, i.e. with a more intense desire to please God, and with greater peace and gladness of soul. In this way, you will find abundance of that spiritual food which is so necessary for the spiritual life. By the continual practice of real, active charity, this virtue—

which, in definitive, is the essence of perfection—increases in the soul.

St. Leo the Great, when preaching on the Nativity of our Lord and referring to the manger, wherein the Word of God deigned to lie for love of us, was deeply moved by the consideration of the dignity of our human nature, since the God-Man has thus honoured and glorified it. He exclaimed: 'Know, O Christian, the height of thy dignity. In virtue of the Incarnation thou hast been made a participator in the Divine Nature. Never degenerate from thy high place; never go back—by unworthy conduct—to thy former low estate.'[1]

Consider this beautiful exhortation as addressed to you, my dear Sisters. Rightly can you take it thus, since, by your religious profession, you are raised far above the plane on which seculars live; therefore excel them in the practice of virtue. Do not look regretfully upon the world you have renounced; do not lower yourself to its miseries and passions. Never admit them into your soul, under any pretext, however specious. As the spouses of Jesus Christ, you are greatly exalted; do not descend from this elevation by thought or desire. Live up to your holy vocation, so that, when Jesus shall come to visit the field of your soul, which He has Himself so carefully sown with good seed, He may reap an abundant harvest for the eternal granaries.

[1] St. Leo. Serm. i. *De Nativit.*

EIGHTH CONFERENCE

NUNS ARE BOUND TO SANCTIFY THEMSELVES ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR INTIMATE INTERCOURSE WITH GOD

Sanctify yourselves and be ye holy, because I am the Lord your God.—Levit. xx. 7.

THESE words were spoken by Moses, in the Name of God, to the children of Israel. Is it not fitting and necessary that they should frequently be addressed to you, my dear Sisters? In a spiritual sense, are you not 'a chosen generation, a holy nation, a purchased people; that you may declare His virtues, who hath called you out of darkness, into His marvellous light'? [1]

It is true the Prince of the Apostles applies these titles to all Christians, but the effects, which baptism produces in their souls, are immeasurably surpassed in yours, in virtue of your holy vocation. Hence these titles apply to you in an especial manner. Undoubtedly God rules all men; no creature is beyond the pale of His Providence, none can withdraw from His dominion. He must reign over

[1] 1 Peter ii. 9.

mankind here or in eternity, either in mercy here below or in justice hereafter, if men obstinately reject His authority upon earth. But from among the millions of creatures who depend upon God, He has chosen a people for Himself, i.e. all who practise the Christian Faith. These are, by special rights, His own people; He is their Lord and Saviour. Of old, God, with authority and infinite tenderness, said to the tribe of Levi: 'I am your God.' He chose it in preference to all others as the most privileged portion of the great sheepfold of Israel; He ever looked upon it with complacency.

In like manner He has reserved especially to Himself a portion of the one, true Fold. I need not tell you that I refer to the holy state of life to which you have been called. Your religious profession has separated you from the world in order to consecrate you completely to God. Thus He has a claim upon you, as His special possession; and, for your part, you can appropriate to yourselves the words of the Royal Prophet: 'What have I in Heaven, and besides Thee, what do I desire upon earth? Thou art the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion for ever and ever.' [1]

In very truth, He is your God, my dear Sisters. He has authorised you to claim this sweet and precious title. It is, however, but just that since you profit by the advantages attached to the title, you should likewise bear the accompanying burdens. They are summed up in a few words: Be ye sanctified; be ye holy.

[1] Psalm lxxii. 25.

Now, sanctification is precisely the subject of which, under the term 'perfection,' we treated in the preceding conference. Sanctification, therefore, like perfection, consists in complete supernatural detachment from earthly things. The religious, who is in earnest about her sanctification, keeps her resolutions with fidelity and constancy and strives to live up to her ideal. Spurred on by her ardour, she never halts by the way, but undiscouraged, humble, and glad of heart, forgetting what lies behind her, she hastens towards the goal. Such, my dear Sisters, is the practice of holiness to which you must unceasingly aspire.

The motives upon which this obligation is founded are as numerous as they are incontrovertible. We must not pass rapidly over them. They merit deep reflection, on the contrary, because the subject is of the greatest importance, since it determines the whole career of a religious. She will advance in perfection in proportion as this conviction deepens in her soul: If I would be a true religious, I must be a saint.

In this conference we will dwell upon the most important of these motives, on the one which underlies and supports all the others. A religious must be holy; she must strive daily to increase in holiness, because she is God's 'special possession' and because her vocation places her in such intimate intercourse with God. This is the first and the greatest motive.

God is holy. The sacred Scriptures dwelt more particularly on this attribute than upon any other. Not content to state this truth in general

terms, the inspired writers delight in descending to details and to attributing holiness not only to God Himself but to all that is immediately connected with Him. Thus, we are told: 'Holy and terrible is His name.'[1] Sion is 'His holy mountain.'[2] His footstool[3] is holy, and likewise His arm.[4] God is represented as dwelling in holiness, which presupposes and includes all His other attributes—as Moses so exquisitely expressed it: 'God is glorious in holiness.'[5]

The choirs of angels—prostrate before His face—likewise consecrate their most glorious and sublime canticle to the grand confession of His infinite holiness. Isaias, in one of his memorable visions, exclaimed: 'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and elevated, and His train filled the temple. Upon it stood the Seraphims . . . and they cried one to another and said: Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of Hosts; all the earth is full of His glory.'[6] St. John the Evangelist, the prophet of the New Law, praises God's holiness almost in the same words as Isaias. The Catholic Church has caught up the sublime canticle of both the Old and the New Testament. As a prelude to the grand act of consecration in the Holy Mass, she bids her ministers incline reverently before the altar—in imitation of the angelic choirs in the heavenly Jerusalem—and, in union with the faithful, recite the seraphic hymn: 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God of Hosts.'

God has confirmed and sanctioned the exalted

[1] Psalm cx. 9. [2] Psalm ii. 6. [3] Psalm xcviii. 5.
[4] Psalm xcvii. 1. [5] Exod. xv. 11. [6] Isaias vi. 1.

conception of His holiness inculcated by the prophets. None are admitted to His celestial court except those who are holy.

Who stand around His throne in Heaven? What does our Faith reveal on this subject? It shows us, first of all, the angels, those pure spirits who are exempt from our passions and weakness, and all these ministering spirits are confirmed in grace. In ages long past, before the creation of the world, God called His angels around Him. He subjected them to a trial—that of humility, according to the teaching of the Fathers—and only those who came forth victorious were allowed to retain their posts in His guard of honour. Those in whom God's piercing eye saw the sin of pride, in all its hideousness, were instantly banished from His Presence, even though they retained many excellent qualities proper to their exalted nature; from pure angels they became demons.

Who are standing there close to the seraphic choirs, close to the throne of God? The saints, that is to say human beings, who, by triumphing over the temptations of earth, have become like unto the angels. All the human beings who have obtained admittance into Heaven are saints. On earth they gained great merits by their fidelity, and, although they committed some faults of human frailty, yet by passing through the expiating crucible of purgatory, they were freed from dross, even as gold in the furnace. Now 'they are without spot before the throne of God';[1] and this is equally

[1] Apoc. xiv. 5.

true of all, whether they have always preserved their baptismal innocence or whether, having forfeited it by sin, they have regained it by contrition and penance. Without purity, God would never have allowed them to enter Heaven. In spite of His Infinite Goodness and His great desire to render His creatures happy, He cannot dispense them from holiness. 'Sanctity' is the password for Heaven; none whose souls are soiled, even with lesser sins, can enter Heaven.

This law of holiness obtains on earth, as it does in Heaven. God has said to all Christians—as to the Jews—'I will be sanctified in them that approach to Me.'[1] To all, He speaks by His Apostle: 'This is the will of God, your sanctification;'[2] though these exhortations apply before all to priests and religious, who, under the New Law, constitute the chosen and well-beloved tribe of the Lord.

God has never allowed you to lose sight of the truth that in His mercy your sanctification is His unalterable will. Frequently you have heard a still small voice within you, and it ever repeated the words 'Be ye holy.' Are you not firmly convinced that your sanctification is your great work? —I do not hesitate to call it your unique work, since in reality all the others are so intimately connected with it. Even those occupations, which are apparently alien to sanctification, may nevertheless become powerful auxiliaries to this end, if accepted courageously. Do you not perceive that when

[1] Levit. x. 3. [2] 1 Thess. iv. 3.

God—by granting you such vivid interior lights—reveals to you the nothingness of all human concerns and inflames your will with ardour for spiritual realities, that He is again reminding you that He wills your sanctification?

Undoubtedly, all religious, by the very fact of their vocation, are called to an eminent degree of holiness. God wills that you should be saints; He has the right to require this of you, because He is *your God* by such special claims, and you are *His chosen people*. St. Paul tells us that 'He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit'[1] with Him. If, therefore, you have no trait of resemblance with God, how can you claim to be wholly His? Above all, how can you apply to yourselves those virile expressions which the Scriptures employ to express the close union between God and the soul that is consecrated to Him—expressions, for example, like the one quoted above? As we have seen, holiness belongs essentially to God. Now, suppose that a religious has no ardent desire, no generous will to become a saint, and, further, that she neglects the means of sanctity which her vocation offers, does she not force God to disown her? It is said that the eagle holds her fledgelings in her claws and obliges them to look at the sun's rays: those that cannot support its brilliancy are rejected. The parent bird lets them fall to the ground; she only recognises as her offspring those that can face the sun. In like manner, God rejects those from whom He has the right to expect great things, if

[1] 1 Cor. vi. 17.

they do not live up to their high estate but are content with a lower degree of holiness. He acts towards them like the parents of a degenerate child, in whom they see no likeness to themselves either in soul or body. They turn away, ashamed to acknowledge that unworthy child.

To these degenerate, lukewarm, imperfect religious, God speaks thus: No, you are not My child, for I am holy and you are not, nor have you even any aspirations after sanctity. I abhor the smallest iniquity, while you continually sin voluntarily; on the pretext that your faults are not grievous, you make no effort and take no precaution not to fall again. No, you are not My child, for 'I am meek and humble of heart,' [1] whereas the greater number of your actions are prompted by vain self-seeking and pride. Self-love rules your thoughts; in your intercourse with your neighbour you are impatient, abrupt, and ever prompt to take offence. No, you are not My child, for I am the temple of purity, and you are not sufficiently careful to keep your soul pure. You do not strive to increase in purity; nor do you, by prayer, vigilance, and mortification combat all that might desecrate it. No, you are not My child, for I am the God of peace, and your soul is not at peace, because you have not the courage to sacrifice your ideas, opinions, and tastes: you do not bear with, and excuse, the defects of your companions in order to preserve peace.

Have you sufficient proofs now, my dear Sisters,

[1] St. Matt. xi. 29.

of the connection between the two parts of this exhortation: 'Be ye holy: because I am the Lord your God'? It is even more clearly set forth in another passage: 'Be ye holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'[1] Holiness is the distinctive characteristic of those who have, in an especial manner, consecrated their lives wholly to God. If those who are His by profession do not aspire to sanctity, God lessens or withdraws those graces by which He desired to unite them more closely to Himself. This is but the prelude to the final declaration, by which God will exclude the unfaithful religious from the raptures of the Beatific Vision: 'I know you not; in vain do I look for My image in your soul. Call Me no longer your God, for henceforth I am forced to treat you with severity as your Judge.'

Therefore, my dear Sisters, endeavour to progress constantly in sanctity. 'Be ye holy,' that these terrible words of condemnation may never be said to you. 'Be ye holy,' that you may be the worthy children of our thrice-holy God; that you may deserve the title of 'children of God' in all its glorious comprehensiveness, and with all its priceless privileges. 'Be ye holy' that, in time and in eternity, you may have the sweet consolation of knowing that you are His and He is yours.

As the children are always permitted to enjoy the society of their parents, even during those times when friends and strangers are excluded, so

[1] Levit. xix. 2.

you, my dear Sisters, are permitted to hold more frequent intercourse with God, in virtue of your status as His special people, His chosen portion of the Church. You always enjoy a sweet familiarity and close union with your God. The words which the Lord addressed to His servant Moses may be applied to the Religious Life: 'If there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision, or I will speak to him in a dream. But it is not so with my servant Moses . . . for I speak to him, mouth to mouth, and plainly, and not by riddles and figures doth he see the Lord.' [1]

Religious Life enjoys this same privilege: its followers are called to 'enter into the powers of the Lord,' [2] according to the words of the Royal Prophet. While ordinary Christians, who remain in the plain of the world, are exposed to all the seductions of sin, religious ascend to the summit of the mountain. There, daily and even hourly, they hold sweet converse with God, and this is a powerful means of keeping them from evil.

This privilege is yours, and assuredly it is sufficiently great to justify God in exacting a fitting return of service, and this reversion is holiness. God expects those who are so frequently and nearly united to Him to be holy. The more abundant graces call for greater sanctity, and the converse ever obtains—greater holiness draws down fresh graces.

Call to mind another remarkable incident in the life of Moses. Before he was called to be the

[1] Num. xii. 6. [2] Psalm lxx. 16.

leader of the people of God, Moses kept the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law. His life was spent in solitude; so often, by a life of retirement, God prepares His servants for some great charge. While thus occupied 'the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush, and he saw that the bush was on fire, and was not burnt.' God appeared thus to Moses, and the fire was a symbol of His glory. Then, Moses said, I will go and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt . . . but the Lord called to him . . . and said: 'Moses, come not nigh hither; put off the shoes from thy feet; for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'[1]

You live a life of solitude, my dear Sisters, like Moses. God has led you away from the world. He has accomplished His promise: 'I will allure her into the wilderness, and I will speak to her heart.'[2] From the heavenly heights; from the tabernacle—that burning bush of Divine love manifested under the New Law—God calls you by name, even as He called Moses. Is there one here who does not gladly reply as Moses did: 'Lord, here am I'? Is there one who does not wish to profit by the divine offer, that she may arrive at a closer union with her God, that she may the better meditate upon the wonders of His love and delectate her soul in the joys of heavenly contemplation? But what are the conditions upon which the realisation of her desires depend? They are clearly laid down: She must take off her shoes, i.e. she must

[1] Exod. iii. 4 *et seq.* [2] Osee ii. 14.

renounce all that is mean and earthly; and, rejecting the support of human motives, be ready to keep aloof from the ideas, judgments, and appreciations of the world. To put these conditions concisely, the religious—in all times and places—must bear in mind that Religious Life, the land on which she dwells, is indeed 'holy ground,' where only those may remain who are daily striving after holiness by mortification of the flesh, and detachment from all terrestrial enjoyments.

A religious, who has no desire to advance in virtue, is not only rejected by God, but is conscious of a disinclination to approach near to Him. Either she no longer yearns after God, or she no longer has the strength necessary to enkindle the dying embers of her ardour. She resembles a boat that is drawn in the direction of the current and, at the same time, held back by a chain or cable. If the current bears it out to sea for a given distance, the chain quickly draws it back to the shore. The boat thus tied, is not able to follow the impulsion of current.

Thus it is with a religious who has not the sanctity proper to her calling. The immense ocean of God's perfections and attractions stretches out before her. Now and then, under the influence of some generous emotion, she is borne onward, like a bark upon the crest of a wave. She feels then a desire to launch out into the deep, mysterious sea of grace and love. But the cable holds her to the shore, i.e. she is prevented from advancing by her imperfections and weakness, by those minor

faults to which she yields, because she lacks courage to combat them. As sails that are not sufficiently spread give no hold to the wind, so grace has little hold upon the feeble desires of this imperfect religious, and it is consequently unable to break her self-riveted chains, and to help her to advance. Instead of progressing farther and farther in the practice of virtue, she rests on her oars or hugs the coast of her defects. Her life is sterilised—at least partially—because she fails to co-operate generously with the means of grace which her calling offers.

That you may understand this truth concerning the necessity for religious to aim at perfection, I will now apply it to the two chief actions of your lives.

Religious Life is pre-eminently a life of prayer, which takes up the major part of your time. I do not mean simply the recitation of the prayers prescribed by rule at stated times, but, over and above all, of that continual prayer which accompanies all actions that are faithfully accomplished with a supernatural intention. What a sure, easy, and consoling way of conversing with God, of uniting oneself to Him! But who profits by it? Who, rising to the celestial heights, enjoys upon earth a foretaste of that union with God, of which the fulness is reserved for eternity? Who, profiting by this transforming, uplifting force, rises—like the eagle in its flight—to a plane far above earth's miseries? Who truly profits by this means of grace? I ask.

The fervent religious, who daily obeys the Divine behest: 'Sanctify your souls; be ye holy.' Like clouds of sweetly perfumed incense, prayer ascends from her pure lips and soul direct to the throne of God. This grand means of prayer admits the soul to the peace and happiness of God Himself, even in the midst of earth's upheavals and tribulations.

But what if the soul be not pure: if the censer sends forth but a faint flickering flame? In other words, what happens when a religious is unmortified, habitually dissipated, negligent in hearing and obeying the inspirations of grace, and—indifferent as regards her spiritual welfare—gives herself up to the promptings of nature?

Then it will come to pass that, instead of rising above the things of earth, she will cling to them even as the mists lie in the depths of a valley. For the tepid religious, the glorious privilege of prayer—destined by God to raise her to Himself and to open out new horizons of holiness—remains either partially or wholly sterile.

Therefore, my dear Sisters, considering the grand, majestic office of prayer inherent to your calling, 'Be ye holy and sanctify yourselves,' for if you have no desire to strive after perfection, prayer will be sterile and burdensome. But, above all, sanctify yourselves as a preparation for that union, far, far more intimate, into which you enter with your Lord at the Eucharistic Banquet.

Does not the frequent reception of Holy Communion oblige you to be holy, since He, who is

holiness itself, nourishes your soul with His true Body and Blood? Is it to be justly expected that the oftener you sit at His table, the greater should be your purity? Isaias thus addressed the priests of the Old Law: 'Be ye clean, you that carry the vessels of the Lord.'[1] Again, when David, fleeing from the wrath of Saul, went to Nobe and asked food of Ahimelech the priest, this was the answer he received: 'I have no common bread at hand, but only holy bread,'[2] and the priest went on to explain how this could only be eaten by those who were ceremonially pure.

These vases and loaves had been set apart for the service of God by a simple benediction; they were but symbols of our sacred mysteries. But you, my dear Sisters, receive the Living Bread, which came down from Heaven, the Bread of which the Infallible Truth has said: 'This is my Body.' How frequently you receive that Bread of Life, which includes and realises all the symbols of the Old Law! You receive It not in fragile vessels, but in your soul.

You have other precious and honourable means of intercourse with your Lord—your frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the various spiritual exercises which constantly recall His presence. Leaving these on one side for the moment, and considering only your frequent Communions, I have a sufficiently powerful motive for reiterating the exhortation which Moses, by the express command of God, repeated so often:

[1] Isaias lii. 11. [2] 1 Kings xxi. 4.

'Sanctify yourselves, and be ye holy.' Do not rest contented with an inferior degree of perfection, because 'the Lord your God is holy'; and when He comes to souls in the Holy Eucharist, He delights to dwell with the pure of heart. In their souls, as in a magnificent tabernacle, He finds a place of repose.

Correspond generously with God's designs, my dear Sisters. He wills your sanctification, and you must strive to fulfil His Will. Say to yourselves, each one of you: I have made a firm resolution to become holy. I will daily increase in sanctity, that God may see in me some faint reflection of His infinite Holiness; that He may accept me as His child, and deign to admit me to His intimacy. I will be holy, that I may profit by the means of grace He has given to this end. Above all, I will be holy that, when He shall call me hence, I may appear before Him with humble confidence.

My dear Sisters, if you keep this resolution, then at the hour of death you will be greatly consoled and encouraged, in spite of your insignificance and demerits, for conscience will testify that you have striven to rise to the degree of holiness which, with justice, God claims of you, and which alone obtains admission to those blessed realms reserved for God's saints.

NINTH CONFERENCE

SANCTITY IS ESSENTIAL TO THE HAPPINESS OF NUNS

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.—Psalm cxviii. 1.

As we saw in the preceding conference, all religious are bound to advance continually in perfection, to overcome their inherent imperfections and defects, that by their generous efforts in combating their passions, they may revive in their souls those traits of resemblance to God which sin has almost effaced. On this condition only, my dear Sisters, will He recognise you here upon earth as His well-beloved children, and when the time comes recompense your spiritual maturity with His eternal rewards. Like the gardener who, in autumn, admires and gathers the beautiful fruit which he has so sedulously cultivated and places it carefully in his storehouse, so God will pluck you from the tree of this present life and take you to Heaven.

This was the first motive I put before you when urging you to labour daily, courageously, and unweariedly at your advancement in perfection. Were this the only motive it would more than

suffice to determine you to action, for it scarcely seems possible that the religious who, by entering religion, has offered the greatest and most complete sacrifice—that of herself—should deliberately halt half-way on the road, by refusing to make those daily sacrifices, which alone can confirm her initial oblation and enable her to respond to her high calling.

However, improbable as this may seem, let us for the time being accept it as an accomplished fact. I will grant, then, that we could find a religious who so little grasps her own truest interests as not to realise the importance of progressing in virtue, if she would please God; or who—having faced this necessity—has not the generosity to accept the practical consequences.

In this case, I have a second motive to put forward, one which can hardly fail to appeal even to such a religious, because it concerns her personal interests. Waiving the question, for the moment, that the frequent relations of the religious with God oblige her to aspire to sanctity, I would now point out that if a religious desires to be happy, she must be holy. For her, sanctity is the indispensable condition of happiness.

Happiness! Like all other mortals you desire it, my dear Sisters. This longing for happiness brought you to the convent. Perhaps your friends and relatives trembled for you and sought to prevent your entering religion. The world—ever superficial and wrong in its judgment as to what constitutes true happiness—pitied you, when you

took leave of it, and prophesied your future unhappiness. These forebodings had no power to hold you back. In the bright light of faith you were convinced that, for you personally, true happiness was to be found in a convent; not indeed the happiness of which the world dreams, but that which is nevertheless true happiness. You were right: for though I do not wish to depreciate any earthly vocation, nor to underestimate all the joys that each respectively offers, I, notwithstanding, unhesitatingly repeat my former assertion: Religious Life, because it is *par excellence* the land of peace, is by the very fact and *per se* the land of happiness.

Having developed this thought previously, I merely touch on it in passing, because it is the foundation of the truth which I now desire to place before you, namely that the happiness, which has its source in peace, can only be enjoyed by a holy religious, or one who strives after holiness. All who find entrance to the garden of Religious Life have a right to eat of the delicious fruits of the tree of happiness, which there occupies the central place. This fruit, however, hangs high up. Those who would pluck it freely must, therefore, have attained to a certain degree in sanctity. Otherwise, like a little child who, because the branch is high above its head, cannot reach to pick the apple that looks so tempting, the religious will be exposed to the risk of looking and longing for that which is above her grasp—i.e. for the fruit of happiness.

I affirm confidently that the words of David

'Blessed are the undefiled in the way,' though applying to all Christians, have a very special signification for those who are wholly consecrated to God—for fervent religious, since they are indeed *beati*, i.e. happy in the vocation to which God has, in His mercy, called them. You should be firmly convinced of the truth of this statement.

It is not necessary to have had much experience of the world in order to perceive that, under its more or less hollow counterfeits, there is very little real happiness. We see men laden with all the good things which are deemed the *sine qua non* of happiness, and yet they are miserable. Their accumulated riches, the fame and flattery which wealth secures, the pleasures it enables men to purchase—all these things, so vaunted as essential to perfect happiness, fail to deliver worldlings from an undefined uneasiness, which robs them of happiness. Why is this? Because they lack the one grand, universal source of happiness, namely peace; because they are at enmity, and in rebellion against God, they cannot enjoy true peace. Probably they are ignorant as to the cause of their disquietude, and yet, if only they would reflect a little, they would quickly perceive that lack of peace is the real cause to which may be traced all their unhappiness and ennui, as well as the restlessness and discontent which overwhelm them, even in the midst of the maelstrom of worldly pleasures in which they live. Truly does St. Augustine exclaim: 'Thou hast so ordained it, O Lord, and daily Thy order is executed; all who lead a life of

disorder find their punishment in themselves.'[1] Peace cannot exist in these souls, because, as this same holy doctor teaches, 'Peace is the tranquillity of order,' and that, for every human creature, order is the fruit of the observance of God's commandments and submission to His Will. But this is precisely where worldlings fail, since they trample on His laws, laugh at his threats, and despise His promises.

Let us now, leaving the world on one side, apply these principles to Religious Life and inquire under what conditions can a religious enjoy peace, which is ever a synonym for happiness? On the condition that she places and maintains herself in the tranquillity of order with regard to God. Will it not suffice for her to live up to what is required of the rank and file? By no means, for Religious Life forms a world apart, a world that, by a special privilege of God, has its own special code of laws and its own constitution. The religious, who would live in the true order of her vocation, adds to the obligatory observance of the commandments—common to all men—the voluntary observance of the Evangelical Counsels. These are not binding on all Christians, but only on the few who are specially called by God to embrace them. The religious solemnly promised, on the day of her profession, to follow the counsels, and she is bound to obey them with complete submission of mind, will, and heart. For her, then, 'the tranquillity of order' consists in docility to the voice of God; in fidelity to the inspirations and invitations of

[1] Confess. book i. c. xii.

grace; in promptly combating her rebellious nature, and in promptly and joyfully responding to every call upon her services: 'Here am I.' This is the degree of order required of a religious; if she fails to attain to it, her life is in disorder.

Therefore, it is never permissible for a religious to say—nor even to think—that all is well because she does not commit mortal sin, but, on the contrary, practises certain virtues and leads an exemplary life; or that, were a person of the world to do what she does for God, men would call that person a saint. We might reply that she is not in the world, but in religion, and what suffices to make a saint in the world will not be accepted in a religious. God gives her more, therefore He expects a greater return. The religious who refuses to go as far as God calls her, is no longer in the tranquillity of order, and therefore she is not in the way of peace. Job asks: 'Who hath resisted Him and had peace?'[1] The interrogation here used does not express a doubt, but makes an incontestable statement that those who resist God can never be at peace, and, consequently, they cannot be happy.

It is impossible for a religious to be happy who is not firmly resolved to enter on the path of perfection; or who, having commenced well in the first days of fervour, hesitates, stands still, and finally retraces her steps. She is not happy; nor can she be happy. I would even say that her state is more lamentable than that of worldlings, who live in open conflict with God and their conscience,

[1] Job ix. 4.

for in the very excess of their folly they enjoy a kind of peace, since they stifle the voice of conscience. It is true this peace is false, superficial, and terrible, since one day it will give place to furious tempests; still, in the meantime, these souls do not suffer from the violence of the struggle.

The religious, however, who is voluntarily unfaithful to her engagements, who neither lives nor strives to live up to the height of her holy calling, cannot escape from the reproaches and remorse of conscience. Habitual tepidity may deaden the sense of her dignity and obligations as a religious—that sense formerly so keen. She may sometimes deceive herself, and silence her conscience by some pleasing illusion, but her success will only be partial. She cannot escape from her environment where, exteriorly and interiorly, she is ever reminded of her obligation to strive after perfection. The habit she wears, the convent in which she dwells, the exterior duties of her charge, the frequent instructions, the good examples of her companions and, above all, the authoritative voice of conscience, all with one accord proclaim that God wills her sanctification. She can have no doubt about that. If she resists these warnings, there must necessarily be a long and painful conflict, as is ever the case when the creature enters the lists with God. When St. Paul was on the road to Damascus he fell upon his face on hearing the mysterious voice saying to him: 'It is hard for thee to kick against the goad.'[1] How admirably

[1] Acts xxvi. 14.

these words apply to the religious who voluntarily remains the captive of her imperfections! God wills that she should go forward; she decides to remain stationary. God makes her feel the sharp pricks of conscience, just as a horseman goads on his plunging steed, but she refuses to go ahead. He shows her the degree of perfection to which He calls her, but instead of correcting the defects which God has signalled, or amending her life, she deliberately closes her eyes and refuses to see that which she is resolved not to change. Such a religious cannot but suffer, and suffer greatly at times.

We can now understand the full meaning and truth of those words of the 'Imitation,' in which the author lays down this principle: 'The negligent and lukewarm religious hath trouble upon trouble, and endureth anguish on every side; for he has no consolation within, and is forbidden to seek it without.' [1] Such a religious is justly discontented with herself, when she compares what she is with what she ought to be. Two contradictory principles struggle for the mastery in her soul, and she has not the courage to secure the victory of right over wrong. Therefore, she is not in the path of peace; on the contrary, the more she refuses to advance in virtue in response to God's invitation, the farther she wanders from these paths.

How different is the state of the fervent religious! She neither knows, nor ever will know, anything of the trouble and sufferings caused by this inward

[1] Book i. c. xxv.

struggle. Her conscience does not reproach her with voluntary infidelities; she obeys with docility the voice of God, and is determined to persevere in making progress. When God asks for some proof of her love—however trifling—instead of hardening her heart she hastens to comply with His request. What could prevent her from being happy? Is she not walking 'undefiled in the way' and therefore among those of whom the Psalmist speaks of as *beati*, i.e. blessed and happy?

Now, in order to enjoy happiness, it is not sufficient that all should be in order with regard to God: order must also reign in our relations with our neighbour. Just as holiness alone makes the soul at peace with God and gives the joy of a good conscience, so it is holiness which, by the gentleness and patience it inspires, enables the religious to live in peace with her fellows and to support their defects. If this intercourse is at times a cause of suffering, at least there is both merit and compensation for what we are called upon to endure.

In truth, mutual support is necessary for all here upon earth, but how much more for religious! They live in community, and although this common life has its beauty and consolations, it nevertheless has its own peculiar trials. St. John Berchmans used to say: 'The common life is my greatest penance.' There is nothing strange in this, for, as the author of the 'Imitation' remarks: 'It is no small thing to dwell in monasteries, or in a

congregation, to live there without complaint, and to persevere faithfully even unto death.' [1]

To live in community involves always being in the society of the same people; always coming in contact with them in the different exercises of the day. Religious may have to do with difficult characters, with odd and eccentric people, or with those for whom they have naturally no sympathy. This daily intercourse is, we must frankly confess, a fruitful source of difficulties, it bristles with thorns.

It is thus, even in the world, in the intimacy of the family, especially in the present time, to which the words of St. Ambrose apply fittingly: 'In the privacy of the home there is no lack of secret martyrs.' [2]

Certainly, in Religious Life, there are various circumstances which render the friction of this daily intercourse with one another less painful, but, notwithstanding, there will always be sufficient tension to make the common life a real trial, and to offer certain obstacles at times to the happiness of the individual. Generally speaking, these obstacles are inevitable and permanent, hence the trial is heavier and more crucifying. A religious is cut off, by her vocation, from taking refuge in the distractions and change of scene to which Christians in the world can resort as a means of distraction. Hence, it frequently happens that being thus circumscribed in so small a circle, some religious even manifest a lamentable facility for

[1] Book i. c. xvii. [2] St. Ambrose in Psalm cxviii.

exaggerating and imagining evils which, though non-existent, are still often an acute cause of suffering.

In some cases this trial becomes very onerous—it may be a real torture; and how can a religious prevent this friction of characters from saddening her life? How can she support these difficulties—from which none have an immunity—and still be joyful of heart, and wear a smile? As in violent squalls the rolling and pitching of a vessel produce nausea, so these frequent moral upheavals may engender ennui and distaste in the mind of a religious. How can she overcome these so as to keep calm at least in 'the fine point of the soul,' to use St. Francis of Sales' expression? A religious may have to deal in community with troublesome characters, narrow prejudices; how can she accept this difficulty cheerfully, always remaining calm and self-possessed, so that even the keenest of these trials of the common life are never able to diminish her peace of soul?

We shall find the answer in the 'Imitation': 'Thou must learn to overcome self in many things, if thou wouldst live in peace and concord with others.'[1] This condition is the one which will enable her to maintain her soul in peace, and she should ever bear it in mind.

What religious can control her will, humour, and character, by adapting herself to unpleasant circumstances, looking at the bright side of things, excusing, forgiving, and forgetting the numerous causes

[1] Book i. c. xvii.

of irritation which are inevitable in daily life? What religious will have the courage to be amiable and generous in face of provocation, of unjust cutting words, and in spite of all this, even forestall her Sisters' requests by offering her kindly services? Who can always avoid heated discussions, wranglings, and incriminations, which are so disedifying both for those who cause and take part in them and for the spectators?

Who, I ask, can rise to this degree of virtue? Only the religious who is enrolled under the flag of sanctity, and who, convinced of the necessity of holiness, is determined to reach the goal. Such a one is on the path of happiness.

The fervent religious either finds no stumbling blocks, or, if they lie on her path, her holiness renders them innoxious: she does not stumble over them, nor do they wound her. She is truly *beati*, and blessed likewise is the community of which she is a member. On the other hand, the imperfect religious, who makes little or no effort to amend, suffers herself and makes her Sisters suffer.

Blessed indeed are the convents which shelter many fervent souls who, convinced of their obligation to attain to perfection, endeavour to fulfil

These religious have a beneficial effect by the atmosphere of holiness in which they live. The happiness they enjoy is diffused over all who come in touch with them. Not that in them nature always keeps silence and never upholds her claims, for were this so, earth would become Heaven. But, as clouds hide the sun for a brief moment, after

which it shines forth with fresh splendour, so the passing human frailties, which conceal for a moment the rays of holiness, cannot obscure them for long. In the serene atmosphere of sanctity, human defects die away, and over the rugged bed of human imperfections, charity pours forth its levelling influence.

We may sum up the subject of this conference thus: What is holiness? What is happiness? If we compare and analyse these terms, we shall see clearly that only the fervent religious can be happy here upon earth in 'the tranquillity of order.'

What is holiness but the ascension of the soul towards God—the Holy of Holies, the infinitely Holy One. The closer the union, the greater the sanctity of the creature. Upon earth, in varying degrees, human beings are, in a sense, perforce 'absent from the Lord';[1] while their souls are united to mortal bodies they cannot attain to perfection. This can only be realised for man when—the bonds of mortality having burst—his soul will be united to God in glory. Then, as St. Paul tells us, God will be 'all in all,' and in each of His elect.

This is so true that the very term 'saints' raises our thoughts to those who, having gained the final victory, are crowned in Heaven: we do not apply it to Christians upon earth, however holy and pure they may be. In the fullest acceptation of the term, the saints are those who are with God,

[1] 2 Cor. v. 6.

who see Him face to face, and are immersed in the ocean of His perfections and infinite lovableness.

But these saints are likewise *beati*; they are supremely happy. This—as I have remarked above—is true happiness; all other is counterfeit and conventional. True happiness consists in possessing God, in living by Him, in Him and for Him.

Now who are most favourably placed for participating in the blessedness of the Church Triumphant? Manifestly, the saints of the Church Militant.

See then, my dear Sisters, the privileges of your vocation. You can, in virtue of your call to a more eminent degree of sanctity, attain to greater happiness than the simple faithful.

But this happiness is inseparable from the fulfilment of the conditions. You will draw near to God in proportion as you are docile to the invitations of grace, and faithful and ready to make all the sacrifices it asks of you—or briefly, in proportion as you increase in holiness. As St. Thomas tells us: 'If we draw near to a human being by means of our feet, it is by the affections of the soul that we draw near to God.'[1]

The soul approaches God by the virtues of purity of intention, self-abnegation, humble, courageous obedience, and the joy of renunciation and sacrifice. The nearer the soul comes to God by these acts, the more it shares the happiness of the saints who are crowned in Heaven, the more they verify the truth of the Psalmist's words that those, who are undefiled in the way of the Lord, are truly blessed.

[1] *Summ. theolog.*, p. 1, q. iii., ad. 5^{um}.

Take courage then, my dear Sisters, and strive after holiness. I am the more encouraged to exhort you to this, since I plead the cause of your personal happiness. Do not seek it in those petty satisfactions which you could permit yourselves to take without any breach of your rule; do not make to yourself 'a little nest' in religion by skilfully combining your plans and yielding to the temptation to place your happiness in human things, in the absence of worries, or in the semi-slumber of tepidity. This lukewarmness has its charms, but inevitably a rude awakening follows. Others may find some happiness in these things, but you never can. Your happiness lies in a holy life, in the absence of human motives, of self-seeking, and in the purity of your soul, which should be white as driven snow.

We will sum up briefly, my dear Sisters: You will be happy in your consecrated lives as long and in the same degree as you strive to be holy.

TENTH CONFERENCE

NUNS MUST BE HOLY, IN VIEW OF THEIR APOSTOLIC WORKS

If the root be holy, so are the branches.—Rom. xi. 16.

THESE words express an experimental truth, well known to all vine cultivators. They are extremely careful to uproot old plants that have degenerated, knowing that these would only produce leaves. The vine dresser replaces them by new shoots full of vigour, that his vineyard may be fruitful. He knows that the vigorous rootlets of the young plants will furnish abundance of sap to the branches, and he joyfully anticipates an excellent vintage.

You can easily apply to yourselves, my dear Sisters, this elementary principle of vine cultivation. For you are 'the planting of the Lord to glorify Him.'[1] I have already pointed out His increasing care for you, and your experience confirms and surpasses my testimony. Is it not natural that God should expect you to bring forth fruit in abundance? Is not the touching exhortation of

[1] Isaias lxi. 3.

the Divine Wisdom particularly applicable to you? Listen to the invitation: 'Hear Me, ye divine offspring, and bud forth as the rose planted by the brooks of waters. Give ye a sweet odour as frankincense. Send forth sweet flowers, as the lily, and yield a smell, and bring forth leaves in grace, and praise with canticles and bless the Lord in His Works.'[1] Jesus Christ Himself has deigned to remind you of this exhortation and to confirm it, when, addressing the Apostles present before Him, and looking down the ages upon those to come—among whom you are surely included—He said: 'I have chosen you . . . that you should go, and should bring forth fruit, and your fruit should remain.'[2]

This was certainly your desire, my dear Sisters, when you entered the convent and enrolled yourselves under the flag of Religious Life. The world gratuitously credits religious with egoism as the determining factor in their choice of life, but no such low motive urged you to give yourself to God. Nor did you enter in order to find continual occasions for mortification. Certainly, this motive is legitimate, and it influenced you considerably, notwithstanding there was another determining cause. You meditated on the apostolic life of toil which, moved by love, Jesus accomplished for men; the desire formed in your soul to co-operate with Him in your feeble measure, and, because you could the more effectually give yourselves to works of zeal in a convent, you freely chose this vocation.

[1] Eccles. xxxix. 17. [2] St. John xv. 16.

Certainly, Religious Life withdraws Catholics from the world with its occupations and pleasures, but it is in order to open out a wider area for zeal. Religious give up home and parents, they renounce their right of founding a family, because they wish to adopt the great family of humanity—yes, every true nun places herself in the hands of God, by holy obedience, that she may be a more fitting instrument for the good of souls. She longs to co-operate in communicating the life of grace to the souls she so truly loves: to those whom her Lord has ransomed by His Precious Blood; and, to this end, she is prepared to give up her own family, to lead a life of self-sacrifice, to die daily by the faithful observance of the rules, to rise to the high standard of her vocation.

How are you to attain to the end which you had in view? You desired to be—in your lowly sphere—'the light of the world,' 'the salt of the earth.' How can you fertilise the sacrifices which you have made, that they may bear fruit?

The condition is ever the same, because it is the only one; and since God never ceases to ask it of you, I must not cease to remind you of it. Already I have said that you can neither please God nor enjoy happiness unless you strive after holiness, and this is likewise the one condition of your fruitful apostleship. As you journey along the road of life, there are souls waiting for your loving ministrations —*souls to whom you must make God known*—and the measure of your sanctity will be the gauge of your harvest of souls.

[I am not here referring to the exterior, material good which is effected by all religious who discharge their daily duties promptly and well. Not that I would depreciate these exterior works of zeal. Your patience in teaching children is very meritorious. Those who are thus engaged know how much sacrifice is exacted in teaching the various branches of knowledge to those children of good family, who are thus enabled to take their high position in the world and to accomplish honourably the duties assigned to them by Divine Providence. It is meritorious to give constant, loving services to the poor, the sick and the aged; to lessen those sufferings which you are powerless to remove. It is meritorious to contribute, in any measure, to the grand works of instruction and charity. All these are certainly great and praiseworthy, even though looked at simply from their exterior, temporal results.

We may not forget nor deny this truth, for did not Jesus give us an example of assiduity in performing corporal works of mercy? How many services He rendered to men's bodies while He dwelt upon earth! He tended the sick, He gave little children special proofs of His tender love for them. He confirmed His works of charity by miracles, and thus gave His Divine sanction to the ministry of loving service, which He bequeathed to those who, animated with His spirit, should continue and develop this ministry with the blessing of the Church, and under her loving guidance.]

Still, we can render greater and more lasting services to our neighbours than those of a purely

material, lower order. I refer to the greatest service which, strictly speaking, is unique—since, that He might render it to humanity, Jesus became Incarnate. He tells us that: 'The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost';[1] and these words alone suffice to resume the whole life of Jesus upon earth.

Let this thought inspire you with a great esteem for your apostolic office, my dear Sisters. You became a religious, you persevere in your vocation, that you, too, may seek and save the lost. To all, with whom you come in contact, you are bound to give that spiritual nourishment of which our Divine Master has said: 'Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that which endureth unto life everlasting.'[2] Ever bear in mind that you are not simply called to nurse the sick or prepare your pupils to follow their earthly career; but, above all, your duty is to preserve souls from evil, to help on their sanctification by sowing the good seed, and by gradually leading them to rise to the supernatural life, in which, some day, they may excel, thanks to your persevering efforts.

For you 'to do good,' therefore, means a great deal more than merely being an efficient mistress, a devoted nurse ever alleviating sufferings by care and remedies. It means striving to win souls for Christ by your gentle influence, to open the way for Him by making yourselves 'all things to all men'[3]—like the great Apostle of the Gentiles—that you

[1] St. Luke xix. 10. [2] St. John vi. 27.
[3] 1 Cor. ix. 22.

may save all. If you would succeed in this sublime mission, in all times and places, then, once more I repeat 'Be ye holy'; for God accords to those who progress in sanctity a vivid realisation of the value of an immortal soul, and this is the base upon which supernatural love of souls, and zeal for their salvation are founded.

Why did Christ our Lord come down to this earth? Why did He set Himself the laborious task of seeking and saving souls? It was because He knew so well both their grandeur and their needs. Were they not the offspring of the in-breathing of God, called to live by Him, and destined to reign with Him in eternal glory and happiness? He knew of their glorious predestination and, contrasting it with the unspeakably saddening fact of their fall, their condemnation and chastisement in hell—that had 'opened her mouth without any bounds,'[1] as Isaias expresses it—seeing all these evils, the Son of God was touched with that profound compassion which was the determining motive of His Incarnation and our Redemption.

All apostleship—whatever be its form—is based upon pity. Never would apostolic workers understand something of the value of a soul, were they not intimately convinced of the dangers to which men expose their eternal interests, and the merit and happiness of delivering them from eternal ruin. Now, sanctity alone can give this deep conviction. The religious, who is not thus enlightened from on high, will live in daily contact with her

[1] Isaias v. 14.

fellows, and yet know nothing of the burning zeal which inflamed the soul of the great St. Paul on seeing Athens wholly given up to idolatry.[1] Worldlings, who are completely absorbed by material things, have no conception of the worth of a human soul; they no more trouble about the soul than if it were non-existent. Doubtless a religious could never descend to this degree of indifference; but if her union with God decreases, it is certain that, in direct ratio, the distinct, clear conception which she had at first will be dimmed, consequently her love and devotedness for souls would grow cold, she could no longer be a spiritual mother in Israel.

Let us, for a moment, suppose that a religious is not walking worthy of her calling. What will be the effects upon her office as a sick nurse or teacher? Will her capabilities suffer exteriorly? Not necessarily: she may still succeed and even excel in her work. She may still win the confidence, admiration, and esteem of the sick; still teach secular subjects perfectly—such as history, arithmetic, and grammar, and continue to merit praise for her skill, and to procure a reputation for her convent calculated to increase its temporal prosperity. But alas, all ends here! The supernatural sense fails her, because she is not a fervent religious, and only the fervent possess this sense. Charity, that 'more excellent way,' alone reveals the value of souls and arouses zeal for their salvation. It vivifies all exterior apostolic works, and renders them efficacious, because the religious, who works with

[1] Acts xvi. 16.

supernatural ends in view, addresses herself to that which is the grandest, noblest, and most divine in man—namely, the soul.

The fervent religious constantly keeps the flame of zeal burning brightly by meditating on the great truths of our Faith, and living in close union with her God. How different is her appreciation of things from that of the tepid religious! She applies all her energies to accomplish her exterior duties perfectly; she knows diligence to be necessary, and her devotedness is all the greater because it has 'a purpose beyond the grave.' Therefore she is an excellent worker, even in the smallest details, but she ever places first, as the aim of all her efforts, 'the one thing necessary' of which our Lord speaks, that is, the sanctification and salvation of the soul. This religious certainly strives to instruct her pupils well in earthly sciences, which have their utility for a time, and within given limits, but her chief aim is to lead her pupils to practise that 'godliness' which is 'profitable to all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.'[1]

The fervent religious is more anxious to save the soul of her patient from eternal damnation, than to alleviate those sufferings of the body here below which are transient and expiatory. In all with whom Providence brings her in communication, she looks to their chief interests—those of the soul. Not content to be pleasant and sympathising with them she strives to do

[1] 1 Tim. iv. 8.

them some real good. Her great desire is to help on the work of their sanctification; to see the grace of God bearing in them fruit meet for the Master's granaries; therefore, while she wins the affection of others, she has no thought of self—no vain, dangerous ambition, no foolish pleasure or joy in her ascendancy, since she acts purely for God.

In order to be true apostles, we not only need a great esteem for souls, but also great courage; this is necessary, because the moment we undertake any work of zeal we meet with all kinds of difficulties and trials. In order to succeed, we must give our constant toil, our tears, and in some cases even our blood.

Do you doubt this assertion? Are you inclined to think that I am exaggerating, and that works of zeal can be carried through without so much tribulation? If so, I reply: Look at your Model—Jesus Christ, the great Redeemer of souls. His example is an incontrovertible proof of the truth of my statement. How did He carry through the work which was the object of His Incarnation? Did He find joy, consolations, easy victories? His life proves the contrary. Countless obstacles, contradictions, opposition, and persecutions ever formed the cortège of Him 'who went about doing good.'[1] Consider Him ministering to men: every grace was purchased, so to say, with His sweat or blood. Call to mind the Garden of Gethsemani, the blood-stained cross of Calvary, on which He

[1] Acts x. 38.

offered the price of our ransom. Because He was to be our Redeemer, His life was one prolonged act of suffering.

Thus it has likewise been for His disciples; it was, and is, inevitable that they should suffer, since they are not greater than their loved Master. The part of the field assigned to them to cultivate required weeding and digging. Only after toiling unweariedly in sowing the good seed, and spending generously both time and strength, have they seen their labours bring forth fruit for Heaven. If they were able to present rich sheaves to the Lord—at whose bidding they had toiled—they knew well how much cultivation, how many sacrifices, it had cost to reap such a harvest.

Ponder over these examples, recall them frequently. Thus you will realise that it would be presumption to think that works of zeal can be accomplished without suffering, and that good-will suffices to realise all our pious desires. No, my dear Sisters, for you, as for the Apostles, as for our Lord Himself, there will be opposition, deception, and combats the moment you take up apostolic labours. You then enter the arena that you may wrest, from the devil and the world, those souls purchased with the Precious Blood. Therefore be prepared to fight; and, provided you advance in virtue, you may count upon the final victory.

A religious who is not fervent may have moments of passing enthusiasm. At times she feels an ardent desire to do good. She plans out her campaign, and appears disposed to face the difficulties and to

make the necessary sacrifices with invincible courage. So far, so good; but, alas, when the time comes for action, her glowing ardour has died out—a clear proof that her purpose was reared up on the shifting sands of emotions and imagination.

How grand it is to save souls! All my life would not have been spent in vain if I can save but one single soul! Thus this religious speaks in her moments of fervour, and already she imagines that success is certain. By anticipation she rejoices in offering the fruits of her zeal to God. She goes to her lesson; but, alas, in presence of the reality, all her fond hopes vanish in thin air; they were but the pious dreams of a character that is too ardent. In the class-room, she has to combat ennui, distaste, and repugnance; her children are difficult to keep in hand, she can make no impression upon them. She realises the truth of the inspired words: 'The thoughts of man's heart are prone to evil from his youth.' [1] The impetus of her first fervour yields before apparently unsurmountable obstacles. Results are neither as quickly obtained nor as satisfactory as she had expected. Her illusions give place, one by one, to discouragement. Yielding to weariness, she decides that it is useless to prolong the conflict, since the case is hopeless, and this paralysing thought leads her to relax her efforts and to confine herself strictly within the limits of duty. Instead of realising her apostolic desires, she settles down as a professional teacher, with little love for her pupils or good influence over them.

[1] Genesis viii. 21.

Whence comes this defection? Why is she 'not of the seed by whom salvation is brought to Israel'? [1] Because she lacks that persevering courage which overcomes all difficulties and obstacles. She is not fervent and, consequently, has not the courage which is required of all apostolic workers.

It is characteristic of saints never to relax their fervour in works of zeal, never to yield to discouragement. Just as the stream dashes onward with greater impetuosity and carries all before it, after having burst through the dyke, so the saints transform all obstacles into stimuli. No fervent religious —who always receives abundance of grace—ever allows herself to be disconcerted by the apparent uselessness of her labours. Jesus toiled for more than twenty years in the carpenter's workshop at Nazareth; He did not disdain a lowly trade, which brought Him no renown. The true religious is glad to follow in His footsteps; she continues her work in spite of the trials that lie in her path—fatigue, opposition, and humiliation, which not infrequently are the only visible results of her enterprises. Happy in the service of her Lord, she faithfully discharges her office; it suffices that God sees and knows all, and that He crowns the labourer's purity of intention, rather than his success; and, in truth, failure, borne with humility and resignation, is preferable to a victory that engenders pride. She maintains her peace of soul and continues to sow the good seed daily in the

[1] 1 Mach. v. 62.

souls of those confided to her care, and waits patiently—maybe for long years—until God gives the increase. Ultimately her work is crowned with success. For all who toil diligently in the Lord's vineyard, the inspired words are sooner or later accomplished. 'The blast of the mighty is like a whirlwind beating against a wall.' [1] Yes, God's saints—the mighty ones—triumph over all difficulties and over apparently impregnable human obstacles.

Whence comes this courage, my dear Sisters? From the sanctity of the worker, for this gives spiritual intelligence as to what is truly good, courage to pursue it, and ample grace to exercise the Christian apostleship easily and fruitfully. Are those who accomplish these grand things the great or learned men of the world, those who for some reason have gained renown or applause? No, in general, good works are done quietly; the results obtained are often in inverse ratio to the exterior manifestation. Those who convert souls are the men who are content to be unknown to the world, and known only to God; and this definition points out the saints who continue the work of Redemption accomplished by our Lord. It is written that 'virtue went out' from Jesus, and He healed all,[2] and this is confirmed by every page of the Gospels. In a certain measure, the saints enjoy this privilege; virtue goes forth from their lives by which men are moved, attracted, and, not infrequently, finally converted to God.

[1] Isaias xxv. 4. [2] St. Luke vi. 19.

St. Paul calls this mysterious ascendancy of virtue 'the good odour of Christ,'[1] and, willingly or unwillingly, all who come in contact with the saints proclaim the power of their virtues.

Hence only those religious who aim at sanctity can exercise this subtle influence for good on all they meet. Imperfect religious may have a certain reputation, based on their knowledge, skill or natural gifts, but they will never attain to the sovereignty of souls, which should be the aim of true Christian labourers. All results that do not extend beyond this earth are of little or no value. Those who are the objects of the services of religious—children, and the sick—at once recognise solid virtue. They know which of the sisters who minister to their needs excel in sanctity; they pierce the veil of humility, no matter how much holy souls strive to conceal their virtues or how little they trouble about human applause.

What betrays the presence of virtue? It is difficult to explain. We can but compare it to the perfume of the violet, by which—though modestly hidden by the taller plants—its presence is revealed. Eyes and hearts are attracted to the saint, though none can exactly define in what this mysterious attraction consists. Also, those who are holy are those who edify, whereas mere cleverness and capabilities fail to touch men's souls.

A great deal has already been accomplished in the souls of the children or the sick by the mere

[1] 2 Cor. ii. 15.

fact that they have a high esteem for the nun who ministers to their wants. The exhortations of this religious on prayer, confession and communion will be respectfully accepted by the sick; children will readily listen to her reprimands and warnings, they will accept even punishments from her with docility. The influence exercised over souls by a saintly religious lasts through long years, absence and separation do not annihilate its effect. The children she has educated grow up, they pass through their teens, attain to womanhood, become mothers; often they are exposed to great dangers, and God frequently permits that the recollection of their saintly mistress, the remembrance of her teaching projects a ray of light, which reveals to these souls their danger, and is instrumental in securing their preservation from evil, or their repentance, if they have fallen into the abyss of sin.

Is not this a touching thought, well fitted to arouse your desire of perfection, even more effectually than the other motives I have put before you? Look forward to the close of your life. Think of the moment when those whose souls you have helped to save, will surround you and plead for you before God. Then, too, they will be your crown of rejoicing, one of your greatest consolations.

Your vocation provides you amply with means of exercising zeal: it requires you to be zealous. Profit then by these opportunities. Never neglect an occasion of doing good, and remember that

sanctity alone fructifies your labours. Make the words of your Divine Exemplar your own: 'For them do I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.' [1] As you increase in holiness your influence for good will be greater, because you will be more intimately united to Jesus, the Living Vine, His Divine life will nourish your souls.

Then, like a fruitful vine, you will communicate to others the precious sap you receive so abundantly. 'If the root be holy, so are the branches.' Then will you pour forth your heartfelt gratitude to Jesus, who has done such great things for you and, in all humility, can you apply to yourselves the words of Wisdom: 'As a vine, I have brought forth a pleasant odour; and my flowers are the fruit of honour and riches.' [2]

[1] St. John xvii. 19. [2] Eccles. xxiv. 23.

ELEVENTH CONFERENCE

IN WHAT PERFECTION CONSISTS

But above all things, have charity, which is the bond of perfection.—Coloss. iii. 14.

THE preceding Conferences have dealt with the obligation for religious to continue to advance in sanctity, in accordance with their holy and blessed vocation.

However pressed and overwhelmed you may be with exterior occupations, my dear Sisters, you must never lose sight of the prior importance of making spiritual progress, for it will help you to overcome, one by one, those temptations to weariness and negligence, which will inevitably confront you. Remember the three motives I have repeatedly set before you: God, your personal interests, and your neighbour's welfare all call upon you to be saints. Let these considerations be your compass in life. Ask yourselves often if you are living up to your vocation, and profiting by the numerous graces offered to you by the mercy of God. Those who do not keep this truth as clearly before them as when they were in the

novitiate will never be anything but mediocre and imperfect religious.

Therefore, since your lives can only attain to their full fruition, in so far as you advance in holiness, it is necessary that you should know in what this consists, and how to attain to it. Otherwise, you might be exposed to take the wrong road, for 'There is a way, that seemeth to a man right, and the ends thereof lead to death.'[1] This probably explains why there are so few saints in the world; it is because so many Christians have not the courage to make the efforts for which sanctity calls. Another reason is that so many are the victims of lamentable illusions. In their ignorance as to the true nature of sanctity they are content with hollow counterfeits.

On this matter there should not be a shadow of doubt: it is just as important that religious should know exactly what constitutes perfection for them individually, as it is necessary for them to respond generously to the manifold graces of God by facing the sacrifices that holiness inevitably exacts. Like St. Paul, they will be able to say: 'I therefore so run, not as at an uncertainty. I so fight, not as one beating the air.'[2] They must know their goal and make straight for it, without pursuing vain phantoms of perfection. They must strive after real holiness, and this is centred in the practice of one virtue—the love of God. Not content with a mere theoretical knowledge, religious should be diligent in sounding all that it connotes,

[1] Prov. xvi. 25. [2] 1 Cor. ix. 26.

and prepared to accept the practical consequences. It is incontestable that the measure of the charity that dwells in the soul is also that of its sanctity. The Scriptures—especially the Gospels—bring this clearly into relief. Our Lord clearly and repeatedly stated that holiness did not consist—as the Jews erroneously imagined—in complying with certain legal prescriptions, such as ablutions, sacrifices, and paying their tithes. Not that our Divine Master condemned these observances: on the contrary, He approved and recommended these practices, but with certain modifications. Maintaining the principle of these rites, He even retained them in the more perfect code—that of the New Law—which He came upon earth to promulgate. But, above all, He sought to develop the adoration of God 'in spirit and in truth,'[1] that worship in which love is the moving principle of all the acts of the soul.

How energetically Jesus laid down the first and great commandment which, under the Old Law, men had subordinated to fear: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.'[2] Doubtless there are other virtues which you ought to practise, but they are all contained and resumed in charity, the mother of all virtues, the one which begets and preserves all others. Therefore, if you desire to advance in sanctity, grow in the love of God. St. Paul draws this conclusion from

[1] St. John iv. 23. [2] St. Matt. xxii. 38.

our Divine Master's teaching, when, addressing the Colossians, the Apostle writes: 'Above all things have charity, which is the bond of perfection.' This was the truth taught by our Lord on that memorable occasion when He made St. Peter the Shepherd of the whole Flock—of the sheep, as well as of the lambs, i.e. of the pastors and of the faithful.

Manifestly, he, to whom such a stupendous charge is given, must be holy, but what form will that holiness take? What will Jesus require of the visible Head of His Church upon earth? He does not ask him for brilliant exploits, for the courage to engage in great conflicts, endure hardships and then suffer martyrdom, in order to crown these heroic deeds. True, St. Peter will be ready for these proofs of virtue when the occasions are there, but Jesus specifies no such heroism when He desires a proof of Peter's fitness for the high office of Vicar of Christ. What Christ asks for is an assurance of St. Peter's love for Him, because from love all heroic deeds spring. As the stem grows up in its season from the root, so devotedness and self-sacrifice have their root in charity. This is evident from the triple interrogation addressed to the Prince of the Apostles by our Lord: 'Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me more than these?'[1] It is as though Jesus would give His Apostle to understand that love brings all the virtues in its train; that love makes generous disciples, apostles and martyrs, and that, in truth, love would

[1] St. John xxi. 15.

teach him, day by day, and give him courage to fulfil his exalted duties. In a word, the love of God would sanctify St. Peter and enable him to accomplish the sublime mission confided to him by his Lord.

For you also, my dear Sisters, charity must be the base of your sanctity. Dwell upon this truth that sanctity is not inseparably allied with any particular office or spiritual exercise. Our daily tasks, if conscientiously discharged, may serve, however, as fuel to enkindle or nourish the sacred fire of love. Therefore, do not cling inordinately to any special occupation or practice, as though it alone would sanctify you. Do not look with pharisaical complacency upon your work, but sound the depths of your conscience, and listen to the voice of Jesus within you, if you would form some idea as to your progress in virtue.

What will He ask you? Lovest thou Me? Do you, who are consecrated to My service, love Me more than these? All is well if quite truthfully, and in all simplicity, you can reply, like St. Peter: 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee.' Have confidence if this be your answer. But if this consoling assurance of love be non-existent for you, then remember that no exterior occupation, even though sacred in itself, and capable of conferring a reputation for holiness, can ever help you on the road to perfection.

On this subject, it suffices to quote St. Paul's energetic words and to call your attention to his

insistence. He writes: 'If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy, and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.' [1]

God forbid, my dear Sisters, that I should depreciate your exterior works of mercy, or your exercises of piety. Such a thought is far from me, even though I cite St. Paul's vigorous words. Exterior works have a grand part in your sanctification: they are very important, because God gives them as a powerful means of spiritual progress, as opportunities for you to grow in His love. Good works and devout exercises are intimately connected with holiness, but only as the road which leads to the goal; as means, not as the end *per se*.

The Pharisees fell into the error of confusing thus the means with the end, and Jesus reproved them with a severity which is all the more striking when compared to His customary mercy and goodness. They placed all their holiness in complying with exterior obligations. While scrupulously paying all the prescribed tithes, they neglected to obey certain commandments. They were careful about ceremonial purity but indifferent as to purity of soul; they desired to appear righteous before

[1] 1 Cor. xiii. 1–3.

men, but did not trouble about that interior justice, which is seen by God alone.

Unfortunately, there are Christians who walk in the steps of these Pharisees; even in religion, it is possible to find some who attach importance solely to exterior occupations. They are not, like the Pharisees, inspired by hypocrisy and malice, their error is due to a lamentable illusion as to the true nature of perfection. St. Francis of Sales furnishes an example of this confusion of thought. He writes: 'When I was a young student in Paris, I had a great desire to be a saint. I imagined that it was proper to take extraordinary postures in prayer, to bend my head down very low when saying my office. I did this because a very holy young student acted thus. For some time, I kept up this practice but without becoming one whit holier.'[1]

You smile at the illusion of this much-loved saint, and wonder how a youth of his intelligence could have thus erred. At least, it proves that others may be caught in the same pitfall. To convince you that religious are not immune from these illusions, I prefer to quote from that excellent book, 'The Spiritual Combat,' rather than press home some of my own proofs and arguments. In the first chapter of this work, we read: 'Some people, considering the spiritual life solely from the exterior side, make it consist in corporal penances such as hair-shirts, disciplines, fasting, vigils and other like acts of mortification. Others—more

[1] *Vie de St. François de Sales*, by M. Hamon, book ii. p. 360.

especially women—think they have reached the summit of perfection when they have recited many vocal prayers, heard mass frequently, said the divine office, received Holy Communion often, and passed long hours in the church. Even among those who have given themselves wholly to the service of God in the cloister, we find some who place all their perfection in performing all their choir exercises, loving seclusion and silence, and perfectly observing the exterior rules of their convent. Thus, these Christians all place perfection in one or other exercise of devotion and, by so doing, they deceive themselves—one and all. For all exterior works are simply helps to holiness or its fruits, they cannot possibly, in themselves, constitute Christian perfection nor the true spiritual life.'

Notice here, my dear Sisters, that the pious author does not depreciate nor condemn works of mercy, and I follow his teaching when telling you that exterior works are but the means or the fruit of sanctity. They attain their end when performed faithfully from a motive of love. The religious, who simply fulfils her daily duties punctually and diligently because they are congenial to her disposition and character, or because she has acquired a habit of regularity, but who does not act from the motive of the love of God, is not striving after perfection. Assiduity in spiritual exercises must be accompanied by the fundamental virtues of patience, gentleness, humility, amiability, and longanimity in dealing with our neighbours. The religious who restricts perfection to the material

performance of these duties, and dispenses herself from all other efforts will, to quote St. Francis of Sales, 'never advance in holiness even though she increases her exterior observances.' He remarks pithily elsewhere: 'It is possible to be very devout and very disagreeable.' Experience proves the truth of his assertion, for there are Christians who have a semblance of holiness without the reality. To make use of a simple though apt comparison, they resemble those mannequins which we see exquisitely gowned in the large costumiers' shops. One might almost take them for human beings—features, colour, and stature all encourage the delusion. They lack one thing however—a soul. This is precisely what is missing in the life of the Pharisee. All the exterior conditions of holiness are present—prayer, devout postures, and regularity, but the soul of holiness—i.e. the love of God—is absent. To quote St. Francis of Sales once more: 'I neither know of nor recognise any other perfection, than that of loving God with all our soul, and our neighbour as ourselves. All other forms of perfection are spurious, and those who invent them lead us astray.'

What does this love consist in; what are its qualities? Is it necessarily sensible? In order to be perfect upon earth, are we bound to experience the transports of joy, which filled our dear Lady's soul when she prostrated herself before her Divine Child in Bethlehem? Must we continually be in an ecstasy, like the three Apostles, who saw our Lord's Glory on Mount Thabor?

No, that would be another illusion, into which you must take care not to fall. For a religious is apt to imagine that, because she does not feel for God that passionate ardour of affection she experiences for creatures, therefore she cannot really love Him. On the contrary, illusion may deceive her. She may think that she loves God very much—and therefore be quite satisfied with herself—because she has great sentiments of love for God, and experiences sweet consolation in her exercises of devotion. The religious, who is deceived by either of these illusions, should recall the grand principle that true love does not consist of feelings of emotion. It is possible for the soul to walk 'in a desert land, where there is no way and no water'[1] —of which David speaks—and still be full of the love of God.

Jesus Christ, Himself, has deigned to teach us this by His example, and He is our Model. He teaches us, as none other can, how to love God perfectly. Did Jesus, even for one instant of His life upon earth, ever fail in love? An affirmative reply would be a blasphemy and who would dare utter it? Jesus ever loved the Eternal Father, in the Garden of Olives, as in all the rest of His life. Yet, in His hour of agony, He experienced no sensible consolation, no ardent passion of love. On the contrary, His all-holy soul was overwhelmed with bitterness. Fear, loathing and sadness rolled over Him like the fierce billows of the angry ocean. He passed through the deep waters of spiritual desolation.

[1] Psalm lxii. 1.

Fix your eyes upon the 'Mother most admirable,' upon Mary, the type of all perfection, whether Christian or religious—for was not she the first religious of the first community of the primitive Church? We know that, as far as it was possible for a creature upon earth, Mary loved her God. But did she always enjoy sensible spiritual consolation? No, and in this she resembled her Divine Son. True, she enjoyed more than any human being the joys of the love of God, but hours of darkness and acute suffering far outnumbered her hours of ecstatic bliss. I have referred to her transports of love when she gazed upon her Babe, but how quickly these joys gave place to sorrow. Contemplate our Lady on the road to Egypt, or seeking her Child in Jerusalem, or standing by the cross on Calvary. How true was her love on these occasions, and it increased with her sufferings. But far from being consoled she was enveloped, as with a shroud, in the dark night of desolation of soul.

The saints teach us the same lesson and they confirm it by their example, but we need go no further. From the lives of Jesus and His holy Mother, we have sufficient data to form a just judgment as to what constitutes true love for God. We may summarise the question thus, my dear Sisters: If God allows you to experience the joys of love, it is indeed a grace. Profit by these precious moments of benediction to run in the way of His commandments, since He has enlarged your heart.[1] But never *lean* on these consolations; do not build

[1] Psalm cxviii. 32.

up such an unreal conception of true love. As St. Francis of Sales recommends: 'Seek rather the God of consolation, than the consolations of God.' If you desire only the joys of divine love, you are simply amusing yourself on the road heavenward, when you should be hastening onward: you resemble a little child who, instead of going towards his home, amuses himself by the wayside picking flowers, and who, when night falls and he is far from home, is plunged in desolation. We all know some persons who act thus. They conceive some grand idea of a perfection, which shall consist in deep emotions and ardent transports, but they go no further. Because, now and then, they shed tears of devotion, and have sublime thoughts about God, they conclude that their love for God is very great. They forget that 'He rides pleasantly enough, who is carried by the grace of God.'[1]

Yes, it is easy to love God when spiritual consolations inundate the soul, but is this true love, is it sufficiently pure and disinterested to pass as love? Does true charity shine forth in the enjoyment of these rapturous transports, or is it not far more disinterested in reality when sorrow, trials, aridity, and desolation press in upon the soul like a torrent? Yes, tribulation does for love what the furnace effects in the gold cast into the crucible—it tests and purifies it.

St. Gregory the Great says, 'Deeds are the true proof of love,' and this is but a paraphrase of the words of St. John the Evangelist: 'My little

[1] *Imitation*, book ii. c. ix.

children, let us not love in word, nor in tongue, but in deed and in truth.'[1] It is this love which leads the soul to perfection—nay, which is perfection itself—this love which acts, combats, and immolates all to God.

In saying this, I do not contradict the statement previously made that perfection consists not in exterior works, but solely in the degree of love with which the soul acts, and that these degrees vary indefinitely. For if good works do not constitute charity, they undoubtedly reveal it, just as the fruit reveals the species of the tree upon which it grows. The size and beauty of the fruit are proofs of the vigour of the roots which provided the sap.

You may ask, my dear Sisters, how we can tell when exterior acts are the fruit of true charity. Your question gives me an opportunity of clearing up a point which often leads people into error, since they wrongly imagine that all perfect actions must be great *in themselves*. Some persons only think of great sanctity in connection with miracles, extraordinary austerities, and martyrdom. They are mistaken; perfection is not inherent to these acts—to repeat it once more, perfection is perfect love. Granted these works may constitute great perfection, but only in proportion as they spring from great love.

Why were the martyrs so holy? Not simply because they bravely endured terrible pains, tortures such as we shudder to think of, but because the fact

[1] 3 John iii. 18.

that they suffered such terrible bodily pains, and were ready to endure even greater torments, proves the reality and superiority of their love for God. Were it possible for a man to endure martyrdom without this love, his death would not be meritorious in the sight of God. Jesus inculcates this truth in that terrible scene related in the Gospels, in which He sets forth what will take place when, seated upon His throne of judgment, He will call all creatures before Him to give an account of the deeds done in the flesh. He tells us that then some will say: 'Lord, Lord, have not we prophesied in Thy Name, and cast out devils in Thy Name, and done many miracles in Thy Name?'[1] Notice the plea put forth—these 'many' who will speak thus have performed what men have agreed to call 'great works.' Notwithstanding, how does our Lord reply? 'Then I will profess unto them: I never knew you. Depart from me, you that work iniquity.' Why will the Judge speak thus? Why are they 'workers of iniquity'? Because their labours were not vivified by the love of God. There was little or no charity in their souls, therefore, great as their works appeared unto men, they were of no account in God's sight. Instead of labouring from a principle of charity and in dependence upon God, these 'workers of iniquity' had sought their own interests. On the other hand, many little deeds of love, which the world overlooks, ignores, or despises are of great value before the just Judge, because they were begun, continued, and ended for the love of God.

[1] St. Matt. vii. 22 *et seq.*

Suppose Jesus were to ask you this question: My child, lovest thou Me? I wish to hear thy profession of love. What will a faithful religious reply? Would she say, 'How can I know, Lord, I have no proofs of love to give Thee, since Thou hast never given me any great work to do for Thee.' Such a reply would show that this religious had not a true idea of the nature of love, since she so greatly under-estimates the merit of all the little details which compose her daily life. Is it not, in truth, a very great thing to persevere in the faithful performance of insignificant duties, to offer, daily and hourly, the sacrifices called for by the rule? St. Paconius thus addressed the monks of the early Church: 'My dear brothers, do not be over eager for martyrdom. The life which we lead here, if we are worthy of our profession, is one long, painful martyrdom.'

Let this conviction sink deeply into your souls, and when Jesus seems to ask you in the depths of your soul, 'Lovest thou Me?' do not trouble to examine yourselves upon the greater things of your life, but see how you stand as regards the little duties. See if you keep your rule to the last iota, if you are punctual, if you act with purity of intention. Ask yourselves how you practise obedience, meekness, forbearance, peace, and if you are self-possessed. Examine whether you bear with your miseries, infirmities, and imperfections humbly and patiently —for we are often more trying to ourselves than our neighbours are to us.

If conscience bears witness that you do your

level best, that you always have a good will to do right, in spite of the natural repugnance for suffering, which you cannot but feel, and, notwithstanding the hard struggles this fidelity requires, then you can confidently reply: 'Yea, Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee.' Yes, He knows that it is love which prompts you to check an indiscreet word or sarcasm, to reject unfavourable and rash judgments, to bear with your neighbours' faults and shortcomings. You can reply with assurance, for your love is strong, active and courageous; therefore you are on the road to perfection. You know in what perfection consists, for you act under the influence of that charity which is inseparable from sanctity.

Hence it is clear, my dear Sisters, that it is not impossible for you to attain to sanctity; it is even easy to reach to that degree, which is required of you in justice, by the calling you have chosen. When God promulgated the Old Law, He said to His people: 'This commandment, which I command thee this day, is not above thee, nor far off from thee.'[1] These words can be applied to you, my dear Sisters, who are the children of a more glorious Covenant, that of the New Law. God does not ask too much of you; the perfection He requires is not as far above your strength as the Heavens are above your head. It does not lie on the uttermost shores of some far ocean, it is well within your reach.

Who could plead that sanctity is unattainable?

[1] Deut xxx. 11.

Who can justly refuse to aspire to it? As St. Jerome explains, 'these excuses are admissible, as regards some exterior works and exercises. You may say with truth: I cannot fast, nor can I embrace virginity; I cannot renounce all I have in favour of the poor. But who will dare say: I have neither sufficient health nor intelligence to love God?'[1]

You have hearts, my dear Sisters, which you can open to the holy influence of divine love. You are free to allow it to penetrate into and to saturate your souls. Thus will you be able to take to yourselves St. Augustine's words: 'Love God, and do what thou wilt.' Love of God will render all your actions supernatural; each will bear the imprint of love and consequently of sanctity—whether prayers, confessions, communions or intercourse with your neighbour. Love is indeed 'the bond of perfection.' By it, all your actions are so many flowers with which you can form a sweetly perfumed nosegay for your Lord. Love will hallow all your life, and when death comes, love will console and strengthen you. Love will then form the bond of union between the relative and necessarily incomplete sanctity of earth, and the absolute and definite holiness of Heaven.

[1] S. Hieron, *Comment. in cap. v. St Matt.*

TWELFTH CONFERENCE

ON AVOIDING EVIL

Decline from evil.—Psalm xxxvi. 27.

How often, my dear Sisters, in the course of your lives, have you asked God to deliver you from all evils! You have asked Him to give you grace to avoid sin, to pursue what is good, to suffer patiently whatever trials He may please to send you. For you, as for the simple faithful, these petitions resume the whole code of perfection, to live up to them is to give God a most unequivocal proof of our love for Him.

Note these three points carefully: *abstain from sin*, whatever be the cost; *do good constantly*; *suffer generously*. Those Christians who live up to these principles, according to their vocation and the graces bestowed upon them, are certainly on the road to perfection. But in accomplishing these duties there are various degrees, for, as we have seen, God does not ask as much of some souls as of others, consequently all are not obliged to manifest in their daily lives those high degrees of virtue, which are proofs of a great interior perfec-

tion. Now, all nuns are expected to attain to a high degree of virtue, therefore they should avoid evil more carefully, practise virtue more diligently, suffer more courageously than the ordinary Christian. Every action, and every detail of their lives, should bear the imprint of a higher degree of sanctity. We will consider these three points briefly, commencing by abstention from evil.

The first impulse of a soul that loves God is to avoid evil; to refrain from whatever would displease Him. If we love a human being, we are careful not to do what would displease him. Now, sin is the act which, above all things, displeases God. St. Augustine calls it 'the poison of charity.' It is the greatest evil, or rather the only evil, since it is the source whence all other evils come. True, the world is not of this opinion. Worldlings deem poverty, humiliation, illness—briefly, all material sufferings—to be great evils. They trouble little about the moral evil of sin. They neither see nor understand, in their wilful blindness, that pestilences, wars, epidemics, and all other grievous trials are the fruit of sin. It is sin which opens the door to all these calamities, which prey upon humanity, and of which death is the last term and summary.

The religious must avoid this sovereign evil—sin—more carefully than those whose vocation lies in the world. But what sins is she bound to avoid? Manifestly, mortal sin, for this is the revolt of the creature against the Creator; it is practically renouncing Him for creatures—the deliberate turning away from the aim and end of our existence.

Mortal sin raises an insurmountable wall between the Creator and His creature, and if death surprises the soul in this state of revolt, that creature will be cut off from God for all eternity, and delivered over to everlasting punishment. It can have no part whatever in the rewards meted out to the just.

There is no need for me to dwell upon this truth, since you know well that all nuns should have an intense horror and hatred of mortal sin. How terrible is the lot of one who, after having consecrated herself to God so intimately, is separated from Him by mortal sin! Notwithstanding, we are forced to confess that religious have sinned grievously; there are some who have fallen so low. Listen to St. Francis of Sales' words on this subject:

'Those, who, by the favour of God, have been called to the special vocation in the cloister, have good reason to congratulate themselves that their lot has fallen to them with the good, and that they are cut off from the wicked. But are they, in consequence, free from all danger of sinning? Oh, no! "Why not?" you ask. Because it is not sufficient to be called by God and to associate with the just, if those so chosen do not persevere. Now, in religion, perseverance is all the more necessary, since those who fall from such a holy vocation are exposed to graver peril than those not so privileged. We may compare them to the angels who fell from Heaven, to Adam who sinned in Paradise, to Judas who lost his apostleship.'

St. Paul warns the Christian 'that thinketh himself to stand,' to 'take heed lest he fall,'[1] and God has willed that the inmates of religious houses should not be immune from the danger of sinning —even grievously—lest they should be proud: He desires them to work out their salvation 'with fear and trembling.'[2] Therefore we are amply justified in exhorting religious to be on their guard, to take precautions, lest they be taken by surprise and fall into the devil's snares.

Thanks be to God, it is very rare that mortal sin is committed in a convent, therefore, passing over this subject with these few remarks, I propose to speak of venial sin—of those imperfections and more or less voluntary faults, which some religious, far from correcting, love and caress. This state of imperfection is all the more blamable in religious, precisely because they are called to a life of holiness. God is content with seculars, when they arrive at the dead level of the observance of what is rigorously exacted by the commandments of God, and of the Church. But He has a right to expect, and He does expect, more of the religious; He wills she should serve Him with greater delicacy of conscience, and more perfect purity of soul, that He may address her in the words of the Spouse of the Canticle of Solomon: 'Thou art all fair, my love, and there is not a spot in thee.'[3]

Now, perfection is not of this earth, consequently this purity of soul does not consist in never committing the smallest sin, but, as St. Francis of Sales

[1] 1 Cor. x. 12. [2] Phil. ii. 12. [3] Cant. iv. 7.

explains, 'In cleansing the soul from all affection for venial sin, in the determination never to persevere in any bad habit of venial sin. It would indeed be a contemptible act to determine to continue in doing anything, knowing that it displeases God.' The religious must strive to attain to this purity of soul; she should take home to herself the Apostle's exhortation: 'From all appearance of evil, refrain yourselves.'[1]

Perhaps, my dear Sisters, you would ask why you are required to maintain your soul constantly in a state of virginal purity—as far as this is compatible with our human frailty; why you should avoid the least stain and ever promptly purify your souls from the dust that necessarily soils the soul of the Christian on life's highway. I reply: for the sake of God, or, better still, because He imposes this obligation upon you. He would have your soul as pure as a crystal of the purest water. He has the right to ask it, since He has given you such great means of attaining to this degree of holiness. If you would avoid sin, you have but to keep behind the strong, though not, indeed, insurmountable, barrier of Religious Life, which God has placed between you and sin.

Frequently compare your life with that of an ordinary Christian—even a pious one—who lives in the midst of the world. The comparison will be a source of strength and consolation, as well as a powerful motive of gratitude towards God. Consider how difficult it is for the young to practise

[1] 1 Thess. v. 22.

virtue in the world in the midst of perilous circumstances and dangerous attractions of all kinds. Think of the mother in her home, incessantly weighed down with domestic cares, ever occupied with her husband, her children, and other duties inherent to her state of life. How easy it is for her so to attach herself to earthly things as to forget those that are eternal.

In your cloistered life, it is true, my dear Sisters, you do not completely escape temptations. Religious Life has its own temptations—often very insidious—but still they are incomparably less than those which assail the rank and file of Christians. They resemble ships on the high seas, exposed to the tempests and reefs that lurk unseen beneath the billows. Your vessel is safely anchored in the harbour, and although it may be tossed on rough waters, it is hardly possible that it can be shipwrecked. We may also compare the life of a religious to the position of a traveller standing upon the coast while the billows are lashed into fury by the wind. God has confined these waters within given limits, He has said to them : ' Hitherto thou shalt come and go no further, and here thou shalt break thy swelling waves.' [1] The world's agitation, its hollow vaunting, its passions, and follies all expire on the shore; they cannot inundate the cloister which stands firmly so high above its impotent fury. The religious, who is faithful to her vocation, is little affected by the pomps and pleasures of the world. She dwells far from the influence

[1] Job xxxviii. 11.

of bad examples and of sin, in a home of innocence and holiness. All the details of her life are so many preservatives from sin, so many helps to virtue.

Consider your daily life from this point of view. Each morning, by your meditation, your soul receives fresh light and peace; your heart and intelligence are strengthened against the assaults of the devil. Daily you assist at Holy Mass. Jesus descends upon the altar; He deigns to visit you under the appearance of the sacred Host of which the whiteness is a symbol of the purity our Lord expects to find in your souls. Does not your sombre habit remind you that you are—or should be—dead to sin? You live in the constant companionship of your sisters and assist each other by mutual edification. Your frequently recurring spiritual exercises remind you of your dignity as nuns.

Your occupations in the sick-room or in the schools are so many precious means of grace. But at the same time they require an exceptional degree of purity of soul.

Of old, Jesus thus reproached the cities in which His teaching was rejected: 'Wo to thee, Chorozain; wo to thee, Bethsaida. For if in Tyre and Sidon had been wrought the mighty works that have been wrought in you, they would have done penance long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.'[1] Would it not be well to meditate on these words, applying them to Religious Life, if we desire to avoid the danger of hearing them one day addressed to us? Ought religious, the recipients

[1] St. Luke x. 13.

of so many graces, religious, who have received spiritual intelligence, still to be subject to so many imperfections and human weaknesses? Is it not strange that, even in communities, we find proofs of self-love, vanity, and susceptibility, such as would scandalise us in seculars, and which should never cross the convent threshold? How many good Christians would have profited far more than you have done, had they disposed of all the means of sanctification which you enjoy! There are many young girls, many Christian women, who, in the midst of our modern Babylon, have generously combated their passions and obtained almost a complete victory over them. I exhort you to think of these brave souls, lest in the day of judgment their fervour should condemn your negligence.

Who is it who exhorts you to decline from evil?

None other than Jesus Christ Himself. Because you are espoused to Him by your religious profession, He wills that your souls should attain to great purity. He is free from all stain of sin, and He desires that there should be some likeness to Him in your souls. Think of the way in which He challenged His foes and reduced them to silence: 'Which of you shall convince Me of sin?'[1] No imperfection could be found in Him because He was God. If, as our Victim, and moved by love for us, He assumed our human nature, and thus took upon Himself the appearance of sin, it was only that He might, by so doing, show His horror of evil. He was crucified, that He might overthrow

[1] St. John viii. 46.

the empire of sin, and with Him sin was nailed to the cross.

Thus Jesus, our Master, proved to man by His deeds what He thought of sin. Therefore, with justice, may we say to all religious: 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.'[1] You are the spouses of Him who knew no sin, who came on earth solely to combat and annihilate the sovereignty of sin; therefore, never let this cursed evil reign in your souls. As far as it is compatible with your condition of mortals, uproot it wholly from your lives. Let no rootlet escape your vigilance, destroy them the moment they show themselves, so that they may never bring forth their poisonous fruits.

Remember St. Paul's words: 'Know ye not that all we who are baptised in Christ Jesus, are baptised in His death?'[2] You, my dear Sisters, have had a twofold consecration—that of water in baptism, and your voluntary dedication of yourself to His Divine service. Therefore 'our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin may be destroyed, to the end that we may serve sin no longer. For he that is dead, is justified from sin. . . . So do you also reckon that you are dead to sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal bodies, so as to obey the lusts thereof.'

Therefore it is clear that a religious who yields to her evil passions—either by negligence in making use of the weapons of spiritual warfare, or by a

[1] Phil. ii. 5. [2] Rom. vi. 3–6.

deliberate act of the will, so as to commit venial sin—has not realised her obligation to die to sin, in virtue of her religious profession. The religious is far from being dead to sin, who does not trouble to correct her uncharitable disposition, her sulkiness, or any other defect by which she causes others to suffer, and that she has often been warned against. She is very much alive to sin, for she allows shoots to spring up which may, at any moment, bear a harvest of evil fruits and lead her to sin mortally. There is a real union between all forms of sin, and he who despises little sins, will, little by little, fall into greater ones. Even supposing the religious does not reach this fatal stage, still how many graces she loses, through her negligence in resisting evil!

Religious are sometimes astonished that they do not receive more spiritual consolations from God in their communions and other pious exercises. It is possible for them to be arid, without fault on their part. Still, when they perceive that desolation reigns in their souls, they would do well to examine whether this insensibility and apathy does not spring from some attachment to sin. Perhaps, if they were more recollected, they would hear the gentle reproach of our Lord, saying: 'My child, you long for the fulness of My joy, light and love, and I desire to grant you these favours. But, before I can do so, you must correct yourself of certain imperfections, such as bad temper. You must hate sin more, and make the sacrifice of that defect for which I have so often asked in vain. You shrink from fighting, you

have not the courage to make the necessary effort. You refuse Me this sacrifice and therefore I cannot inundate your soul with My graces. Remove the obstacle and the stream will flow freely.

'Decline from evil,' even the world expects this of you.

Are you astonished at my appealing to the world as regards this question? Well, yes, I am justified in so doing, for, although worldlings give full reins to their own evil passions and—to quote a scriptural expression—'drink iniquity like water'; [1] although they are proud of their sins, and boast of their malice, yet they are terribly exacting as regards religious. Their judgments concerning them are unjust and ridiculous. They expect all nuns to be absolutely perfect. They are scandalised at the sight of little imperfections, and astonished at trifling defects, which are nothing compared to their own numerous iniquities.

Like the hypocritical Pharisees, whom Jesus rebuked so sternly, they take scandal where none has been given. Inconsistent and strange as it is, the fact exists that worldlings are ever ready to 'bind heavy and insupportable burdens, and lay them on men's shoulders; but with a finger of their own, they will not move them.' [2] Yet the world's exigencies, however unseemly and unjust on its part, are in themselves just and reasonable. These expectations are an indirect homage to the greatness and sublimity of Religious Life. Therefore, religious should take them into account, by

[1] Job. xv. 16. [2] St. Matt. xxiii. 4.

living up to the ideal of perfection set before them by the world, in the midst of which their duty often places them.

St. Paul speaks of our blessed Lord as 'holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.' [1] This was literally true of Jesus, and since He is the Model of all religious, they must endeavour to imitate Him, as far as possible, by avoiding those defects which reveal the fallen child of Adam. They will strive to avoid anything which might give scandal to worldlings—such as indiscretion and curiosity; also uncharitableness and rash judgments in their conversation; for these savour of that spirit of detraction and calumny which characterises the world. They will avoid frivolity and dissipation in their gait and carriage; they will refrain from those puerile manifestations of self-seeking, which are the fruit of sensuality and pride. If a religious does not act thus, she is crippling her influence for good over those with whom her charge places her in touch.

Nay, I would go further and say that, not only will an imperfect religious fail to accomplish all the good we might expect of her, but she will be exposed to lead others astray. I will explain my meaning more at length. The world is only too glad to grasp at any specious pretext that may serve to justify its false principles, and when religious supply these, the world is overjoyed. Worldlings draw exaggerated conclusions from these imperfect

[1] Heb. vii. 26.

actions, and because there is a certain semblance of truth in these judgments, they establish themselves more firmly in their fond illusions.

Thus a worldly Christian chances to have relations with a nun who exhibits too great an interest in the news and frivolities of the world. Quite naturally she concludes that since this nun, who is called to such perfection, is so attached to earth's trifles, surely it can be no harm for her to go a little further—the more so that she does not aspire so high as regards virtue. The same line of argument applies to charity, obedience, humility, and every other detail of the Christian life, which ought to shine in all their beauty in the conduct of a religious. Seculars profit to lower their own standard of virtue, when a religious declines from hers, and this should spur the latter to live up to her high calling, since the scandal or edification they give, as the case may be, has its reflex action upon their neighbour.

'Decline from evil.' The world brings home this exhortation to the religious in another way—by the evils in which its votaries are plunged. You, my dear Sisters, live in constant intercourse with this evil world. You see its dissoluteness and scandals; you live in its tainted atmosphere to a certain extent. Hence, you run the risk of its contagion. If you are not careful, your intelligence may be overclouded, your affections warped, and gradually your clear perceptions of right and wrong may be dimmed, so that evil passes, in your estimation, for good.

Hence a novice, who was very fervent, may,

after her profession, become negligent and indifferent as regards the pursuit of virtue. Whence comes this? From closer contact with the world. Without committing grievous faults, she has suffered her hatred of sin to grow weaker and the baneful influence of the world has been detrimental to her spiritual life, since she no longer fears little sins. She compares her sins against charity with those which worldlings commit, and decides that her faults are but trifling. She sees the world plunged in luxury and pleasures and—in act, if not in word—she judges that her carelessness in keeping her rule, the little indulgences she allows herself are quite pardonable, since she is far more mortified than worldlings, or even than ordinary Christians.

Undoubtedly, my dear Sisters, the energy of your convictions and the vigour of your virtue are liable to deteriorate in the society of the world. Therefore, just as you habitually take precautions against contagious diseases, so you must take the necessary means, if you would react against the subtile influence of the world. The great means is vigilance, and this needs redoubling when, as at times, the peril is greater.

'Decline from evil;' conscience, too, speaks thus, and in a religious, conscience should be extremely sensitive. The very thought of sin ought to stir up a sentiment of repulsion and horror, for sin threatens to stifle, or, at least, lessen the love of God in the soul, and this is the nun's greatest treasure, nay, her only one.

It is unwise to exaggerate: we know that

mortal sin alone kills charity in the soul, venial sin only lessens it. But venial sin predisposes and leads the soul on to commit mortal sin, and thus deprives it of sanctifying grace. Undoubtedly, those who acquire the habit of deliberately committing venial sin, and conceive little or no sorrow for so doing, will gradually be led on to commit some deliberate mortal sin. Therefore, venial sin is a great evil for the religious who is not only under the obligation to persevere in the love of God, but also to attain to the perfection of love, as St. Francis of Sales teaches. Who can, moreover, fix the exact point where the sin ceases to be venial and becomes mortal? Who shall determine the degree of malice, in God's sight, of habitual infractions of the rule, of murmuring against authority repeatedly, of frequent acts of disobedience? St. Augustine declares that it is both difficult and very dangerous to try to fix this limit, and he adds: 'Perhaps God has willed that the exact boundary line should be concealed from us, for were it distinctly marked out, we might limit our desires for virtue to avoiding only greater sins.'[1]

Let your zeal for perfection, my dear Sisters, lead you to avoid all sin, 'Decline from evil,' i.e. from all evil, from each and every sin. When the temptation assails you, take refuge behind the rampart of a strong will, that is determined never to offend God deliberately, either in great or small matters. That your good-will may be efficacious and constant, be prepared for sacrifices. Resist

[1] *De civitate Dei*, l. xxi. c. 27.

temptations generously, whencesoever they come —from within or from without—from the world or from your environment. Uproot the evil germs pitilessly, by strict vigilance over your mind, imagination, and affections. If the work be hard and painful, at least it leads you to the enjoyment of interior peace.

This is the most convincing proof which you can give God of the reality of your love for Him, for He hates sin and punishes it terribly in the next world. For love of God, you too hate sin, you reject it with all the energy of your will, prepared to suffer anything, rather than make a truce with evil.

THIRTEENTH CONFERENCE

THE NECESSITY OF GOOD WORKS

Decline from evil and do good.—Psalm xxxvi. 27.

In the preceding conference, my dear Sisters, I dwelt upon the necessity of striving after holiness by purity of soul. To accomplish this duty, it is necessary, as we have seen, to fight against all temptations, to avoid not only mortal sins, but also venial faults. True, on account of the weakness of our poor human nature, you will sometimes fall, but, at least, you can always valiantly resist evil, never make a truce with the enemy, and, when his attacks seem almost overpowering, pray earnestly and constantly: 'Wash me yet more from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.'[1]

Although you live in continual contact with a perverse, evil world, that is wholly 'seated in wickedness,'[2] yet because you 'are of God,' as St. John says, you must strive to live holily, and also, in view of your frequent relations with God, by prayer and the Holy Eucharist. The Church requires that the ciborium, which contains the

[1] Psalm L. 4. [2] 1 St. John v. 19.

Body of Christ, should be of silver or gold, that it should be perfectly clean, and far superior to any ordinary household vessel, both in value and workmanship. The religious, realising all that her high calling involves, and looking upon her soul as a sacred vessel, endeavours to keep it clean and brilliant by the practice of virtue.

Perfection, however, does not simply consist in avoiding sin; this is only the negative side. God asks for something more positive, namely good works, of those whom He has called to the higher spiritual life by their pre-eminent vocation. The Royal Psalmist connects these two aspects of virtue; he bids us not only refrain from evil, but exhorts us likewise to do good. St. Gregory the Great also remarks that it profits little to avoid evil, if we do not likewise exert ourselves strenuously in doing good.[1]

Christ, our Master, has carefully taught us this same lesson in the parable of the barren fig-tree. It runs thus: 'A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the dresser of the vineyard: Behold, for three years, I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and I find none. Cut it down, therefore, why cumbereth it the ground?'[2] The barren fig-tree was condemned; but for the pleading of the vine-dresser, who asked for a further trial, it would have been cast into the fire. Was the tree poisonous? No, it was simply sterile, and therefore useless to its master. Like this owner

[1] *Homil.* 13 in Evang. [2] St. Luke xiii 6.

of the fig-tree, Jesus visits those whom He has planted in the most fertile land of His vineyard—the Church. He has a right to expect a rich harvest of good works. This is but just, for all nuns have such ample means of grace. Now, precisely as the fig-tree was condemned for its uselessness, and not because it was harmful to men, so the religious, who does not perform good works, will plead in vain that she does no harm, that she always avoids grievous sins. God expects her to bring forth excellent fruits of good works, since her environment is so exceptionally favourable for doing good.

Let us now examine, my dear Sisters, in what these good works really consist, which your vocation rigorously requires of you.

If we seek goodness in its primordial source, we must turn to God. He is the eternal sovereign, infinite, unfailing, unchangeable source of all goodness. From Him all goodness proceeds, even that of the creature. Therefore, to do good is to act in concert with one of God's perfections, it is to perform an action, of which the inception comes from God, and the result returns to Him. The least good action done by the creature—since it is the result of that creature's co-operating with God and of God working withal—becomes, in a certain sense, a divine action, since it is a feeble reflection of God's goodness. Now what kind of actions fulfil the twofold condition of coming from God and returning to Him? All actions that are accomplished in conformity with the Will of God—this is

the characteristic mark of all true goodness, whether on earth or in Heaven. God can only will what is good, and He wills all the good possible, therefore to do good must connote doing God's holy Will. The creature who strives to know and do His adorable Will, does what is good.

You see at once, my dear Sisters, the practical and far-reaching consequences of this principle, which applies to all conditions and situations of life. It authorises us to address every human being in the words of the Royal Prophet, and to exhort each to do good. None can justly refuse to obey or put forward the plea that want of leisure, means, or circumstances are insuperable obstacles.

People might find it impossible to do good, if, in order to obey this precept, some particular sphere of action, of society, or of employment were required. But the goodness God expects of men, that which pleases Him, and merits an eternal reward, consists simply in doing God's Will. All good deeds accomplished by human beings in obedience to the Divine Will constitute true goodness. Whether God sees these good actions performed by a secular or a religious, in peace or in war, in joy or in sorrow, they are well-pleasing to Him, because the essential condition is fulfilled.

In the first chapter of the Bible, we read that after each stage of Creation, God paused and decided that it was good. Yet each act of God's creative Power differed in character. Some were wrought in the heavens, some in the water, and others on the dry land. Sun, moon, and stars, birds, animals,

and plants, so different in their nature, sprang into existence, as the expression of the Creator's Will. He willed this diversity of creatures and considering with complacency the work of His hands, 'God saw that it was good'; He 'saw all the things which He had made, and they were very good.' Then God created man, but over the highest of His creatures God pronounced no such verdict.

How do we explain this omission? Very simply. Inanimate creatures, and those deprived of reason, are perforce subject to the Will of their Creator. Their co-operation is not possible; it is therefore neither asked nor expected. These creatures are good, because they respond to the designs of God, they are materially and unconsciously good, and cannot thwart His plans. With man it is otherwise, for, as the Scriptures tell us, 'God made man from the beginning and left him in the hand of his own counsel.'[1] God has given man the glorious, though formidable privilege of free will, with which he can do good or evil. Therefore, God waits till the close of a human being's life before He gives His verdict, then He blesses a good life; He rejects an evil one.

We have two representatives of these two different issues of free will in Adam and our blessed Lord. The first Adam, by his disobedience, drew down upon himself the curse of God. Jesus Christ, 'the second Adam,' merited to hear the Eternal Father proclaim Him as His beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased. The human race is, and has ever been, composed of these two classes—those

[1] Eccles. xv. 14.

who do God's Will in imitation of Jesus, the second Adam, who obeyed even unto death, and those who revolt against God, ignore His existence, and thus show themselves to be the true sons of the first Adam.

Religious follow in the steps of Jesus Christ. They bring forth good fruits in abundance. In the conventual life, because the Will of God is respected and accomplished there, goodness is more real and more perfect. Jesus once said: 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, that I may perfect His work,'[1] and the great aim of Religious Life is to train souls, that shall be able in the fullest sense to appropriate these words. In the cloister, religious are taught to substitute the Will of God for their own; to accept it as the guiding principle of every detail of their whole lives.

Much is exacted of a religious, so much that often those who are but novices in virtue yield to discouragement and fear. They hear of the multiform obligations, of the various virtues required, of the high degree of holiness their calling presupposes. Astonished and dismayed they exclaim: 'How can I possibly accomplish such numerous and sublime duties?' Do not be uneasy, all these multifarious obligations can be reduced to one simple practice—to doing the Will of God. It is precisely because, in religion, monks and nuns take the Divine Will as the constant rule of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and strive to accomplish it more perfectly than seculars, that Religious Life is such a perfect

[1] St. John iv. 34.

state. All religious should always bear this in mind, if they would truly understand in what goodness consists for them personally.

There are two illusions against which it is necessary for religious to be on their guard. Under the influence of depression, they may be tempted to think that, owing to their limited intelligence, their mental and physical weakness, they do not, and cannot, accomplish all the good works expected of them. Such a religious takes only a narrow view of goodness; looking at it from one aspect only, and because she is unable to devote herself to that particular kind of good work, she foolishly imagines herself to be incapable of doing any good works.

A second illusion, which may ensnare a religious, is that of founding her judgment solely on the exterior execution of what is commanded, and being contented with this without troubling any further. She complies exteriorly with all orders of obedience, 'What more can be required?' this expresses her attitude.

Now the true base of a sound judgment—for religious as for seculars—is the *manner* in which duty is performed. Is it done for God, in compliance with His Will?—this is the crucial point. It is perfectly possible for a nun incapable of rendering any active service, to do far more real good than one who is overwhelmed with those exterior works, that, in some people's opinion, exclusively merit the epithet 'good' works. Why should this astonish us? If this sick religious suffers with greater perfection, in accordance with the Will of God,

than her companion toils for the same blessed Will, clearly the former excels in holiness.

Apply this fundamental principle, now and always, my dear Sisters. Wherever you may be placed, whatever may be your occupations, you will find it most consoling. If the charge be uncongenial, if your labours appear sterile, if you seem useless, do not let yourself be troubled. Do not lose courage and imagine that there is nothing for you to do in God's Vineyard, or that you are excluded from it. You can do even more, because you are forced to exercise greater abnegation. In your work, nature finds no satisfaction, and the great principle that upholds you under these trying circumstances, is the performance of the holy Will of God.

It is precisely one of the great advantages of Religious Life, that those called to it are, so to say, plunged in the atmosphere of the Will of God, as in an ocean. This is one of the reasons why God has a right to expect, of them, such an abundant harvest of good works. It is true that devout souls accomplish God's Will in the world; otherwise they could not lead a Christian life, but their obedience follows the main line, and, in countless details, they are free to do as they please.

In religion, on the contrary, there is no such liberty. Religious are happily enclosed completely in the net of the Divine Will. It rules their daily life in detail and, by doing each moment the work He has marked out for them, by their rule, they have ample facility for doing good in the highest sense.

Each hour calls you to a given occupation,

because you are religious. This occupation may be grand or ignoble, flattering for your nature or humiliating; but since for you it is the expression of the Will of God, made known to you through your rule, you can do nothing more perfect than to accomplish it to the best of your powers, because at that precise moment of your life it is what God asks of you. He asks that and nothing else.

We will now examine what conditions and dispositions are required in order to accomplish God's Will supernaturally, and therefore profitably for your progress in sanctity.

A meritorious good action can only be performed by a creature that has free will and intelligence. God is the sovereign good, because He is the sovereign intelligence and the sovereign liberty or free will, and all actions, if they are to be acceptable to His Divine Majesty, must bear the twofold impress of liberty or free service, and knowledge.

Inanimate creatures, animals without reason, may be said to do good in a limited sense, but their service is obligatory. They cannot dispense themselves from the laws which govern their existence and action. Looked at from the point of view of the harmony of Creation, these creatures obey the laws of Nature, but, inasmuch as they have no reason, they cannot do good works, worthy of a reward and pleasing to God, since they lack knowledge and free will. Nature glorifies God in a way: thus the earth gives its fruits in due season; the planets move in their respective orbits traced out for them by the Creator, and by their continual obedience to the laws of Nature, these inanimate planets

and these brute creatures give praise to the wisdom and power of God.

But this passive obedience of Nature—animate or inanimate—is far surpassed by the conscious active obedience of those creatures whom God has endowed with free will and intelligence. For the human creature 'could have transgressed,' and 'could do evil things and hath not done them.'[1] Instead of transgressing, this creature has sought to honour and please God. He has taken for his rule of conduct the words of Jesus Christ: 'I seek not My own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.'[2]

In order, therefore, for an action to be truly good, it must be supernatural and, in consequence, worthy of an eternal reward. Every deed, performed in conformity with the Will of God, fulfils this first condition. If an action have not the love of God and the desire to do His will for its base, or as we commonly say, if it be done without purity of intention, it is not 'good' in the highest sense of the word. It is the motive which determines the true value of an act. The important thing is not so much *what* we do, as *why* we do it.

This is the all-important point, since the value of our actions depends upon the intention. Considered in themselves, our actions—even those the world considers grand—are little or nothing, mere child's play. They become bad, good or excellent, in direct ratio to the intention of the doer.

Suppose we take work as an illustration: since God Himself has imposed the law of labour, it

[1] Ecclus. xxxi. 10. [2] St. John v. 30.

would seem as though all who toil are doing good. But if a man does work which God does not mean him to do, or if the doer acts deliberately against the Will of God in what he performs, manifestly that man's deed is bad. Thus, people may labour strenuously for personal interests—for wealth or fame—without any other end in view. Manifestly their labour is not good, in the supernatural sense. It was not done for God, and He is not under any obligation to reward such actions. Upon all self-centred and purely human labours, God will justly pass this sentence: 'Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.' [1]

Now take an example of work performed with purity of intention. A religious passes her day teaching the elements of knowledge to a class of young children. In such an occupation there is nothing that pleases her naturally, but she keeps on bravely, upheld by the thought of God, who has assigned her this post and blesses her work. This intention enables her to fulfil her monotonous and distasteful duties, without any mere human motive of gain or self-pleasing. She even loves her work, in spite of her natural repugnance, and perseveres bravely, day by day. This work fulfils all the required conditions for doing good, and the purer her intention, the greater will be the merit of her work before God. This holds good of any action, however insignificant in itself.

I have selected this illustration from the mistress in her class-room, but I might have chosen any one

[1] St. Matt. vi. 2.

of the various charges fulfilled by religious. Your occupations are the elementary matter of your good works—the canvas, that you have to embroider. And as it is the embroidery which decides the value of the piece of work, so it is the more or less perfection you bring to bear upon your daily duties which constitutes their merit.

Exteriorly, all religious lead much the same life of prayer and labour. Yet between two nuns who live and work, side by side, in the same office and pray in the same chapel at stated hours, God—who looks at the motives—may see an immense difference. Both build on the same foundation, the one with gold or silver, the other with wood, and God grant she may not use those commoner materials of which St. Paul speaks—'hay and stubble' that, at the Day of Judgment, will be reduced to ashes, of which nothing will remain for eternity.

All good works performed from the love of God, the desire to please Him, are of gold, for these high motives annihilate those imperfect desires of self-love, which lessen the merit of an action. If some imperfect motives mingle with the higher one, then the work is of silver. As to those religious who work mechanically, like the planets in their orbits, by routine and without a pure intention, they build with wood or clay.

This explains why all the masters of the spiritual life insist so strongly on the practice of making each morning an act of purity of intention on awaking, and also advise Christians to renew

it during the day. This act of self-oblation to the Divine Majesty runs, like a golden thread, through our day's work: it permeates our thoughts, words, and deeds, renders our lives supernatural and meet to be inscribed in golden letters in the Lamb's book of life.

If the first condition of doing good works, pleasing to God, is to act with purity of intention, the second is to discharge our office with energy and joy. This completes and perfects the first condition. There must be no indifference, no distaste, no reluctance in the performance of duty. It becomes a religious, who desires to do all for God, to serve Him ardently and joyfully.

Naturally, we cannot always feel joyful, nor is this necessary; often it would be impossible, because in striving to do good, we shall inevitably meet with difficulties and trials. It matters little that our lower nature suffers and is sad, provided the soul rejoices. The Scriptures tell us that 'God loveth a cheerful giver,' [1] that is to say those who give what He asks of them freely and spontaneously. Is not this precisely what we like to see in those of whom we ask some service? We have little gratitude for a service rendered grudgingly; we feel hurt when this unwillingness is betrayed by the tone of voice, the expression of the features, or a constrained manner, which proves that the service is rendered merely out of etiquette, or worldly decorum, a mere lip or hand service without heart. On the other hand, when people

[1] 2 Cor. ix. 7.

render us a service joyously, the value is doubled or tripled. A simple action may thus give real pleasure, which far exceeds the joy of procuring some coveted treasure.

We must go to our God thus. Our good works are presents laid at His feet. Let us, therefore, offer them in the joy of our souls. We are called to work for God, and our portion of His vineyard may need hard labour and prolonged cultivation, but if we are full of joy, even under these circumstances, it will be an unequivocal proof that we are working for our Heavenly Father, and our happiness in His service will be visible to all. Joy enables a religious to accept, calmly and willingly, any work assigned to her. She is content, even in a life of self-immolation, knowing that her repeated offering of all she is and has, will certainly draw down upon her God's choicest blessings and assure her an abundant harvest of merit for eternity.

We now come to the third condition for doing good. We must render services *wherever* they are required. The Holy Spirit gives us a general precept to do good, and this covers *all forms of good*. Thanks be to God, there is a great deal of good done in the world, in one or the other special branch. There are few lives which can justly be compared to a field so overgrown with weeds that not a single ear of wheat can take root therein. There are some ears of corn, i.e. some particular good works in their lives. But look at that field of wheat ripe for the sickle. The ears of corn

stand closely pressed together. There are no barren spots, the whole field is fertile. This is what God asks of a religious. All her life and—what is far more difficult and, therefore, more rare—*every detail of it* should be full before God. In so far as human frailty permits, all her work ought to be good, and this can only come to pass when she rises above all those petty considerations of self-interest and self-will, which so often corrupt the good works of imperfect Christians.

'Do good;' do all the good you can. Let this thought stimulate you, my dear Sisters, whether you labour or pray, and even in performing those actions, such as rest, sleep, and recreation, which appear to be pure concessions to your nature. Commonplace as these may seem, they can become worthy of God and obtain His eternal rewards. This is what St. Paul teaches when, addressing all Christians, he writes: 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do; do all to the glory of God.'[1]

Such is the plenitude of good which should be your aim, my dear Sisters. In your lives, good work must not be accomplished only intermittently, like an engine that goes by fits and starts. Continuously endeavour to do all the good that Providence sets before you.

How are you to do good always, everywhere, and perfectly? I will conclude our conference by answering this question.

It is written, 'He hath done all things well,'[2]

[1] 1 Cor. x. 31. [2] St. Mark vii. 37.

and these words are a concise summary of the life of our blessed Lord. How much they contain! By His Incarnation, Jesus made Himself like unto men. He worked, prayed, and suffered, and who ever did more good than He? How did He accomplish it? St. Mark tells us, *He did all things well.*

Strive to do good thus. 'In all thy works keep the pre-eminence.'[1] Each morning, place yourself in presence of your Divine Exemplar. Tell Him that, throughout the day, you are firmly resolved to offer all your actions in union with those which animated His labours when He dwelt upon earth. Offer yourself to do His will when you pray, read, converse, or labour. Let your joys and sorrows, all your actions be so many acts of conformity to His blessed Will. Tell Him that, in spite of your inherent weakness, you do wish to give Him your best service; that your nourishment, like His, is to do God's Will. Acting thus generously and constantly, you will merit to hear one day the blessed welcome: 'Well done, good and faithful servant; because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will place thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'[2]

[1] Eccles. xxxiii. 23. [2] St. Matt. xxv. 23.

FOURTEENTH CONFERENCE

THE ACCEPTATION OF SUFFERING

I will show him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake.—Acts ix. 16.

WE will continue to examine the constituent elements of religious perfection. We asked a grave question: 'What is required of a religious in order that she may attain to perfection in her vocation?' The reply was, that she must avoid all sin, even the smallest voluntary imperfection, and, further, devote all her energies to perform her actions with a view to pleasing God. In these two exercises, she will find abundant means of sanctity and spiritual progress.

But in order to be perfect, will it suffice to avoid evil and do good? Is there not another condition of perfection, which we cannot pass over in silence?

Yes, my dear Sisters, there is one more condition which is indispensable for leading a Christian life, and still more for those who aspire to holiness. God Himself has revealed this condition when, speaking to Ananias concerning Saul of Tarsus, He said: 'This man is to Me a vessel of election, to carry My Name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him

how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake.' If Saul was to do great things for God, it was to be at the price of many and great sufferings. This would make him a worthy ' vessel of election.' Therefore, suffering is the third means of attaining to holiness.

You have so often meditated upon the consoling promises which our Divine Master has made to those who leave all for love of Him. If we had only these promises, we might imagine that immunity from suffering formed part of the promised hundredfold. But it is not so. Perfection and suffering are inseparable: without trials of some sort, there can be no real perfection. It is necessary to remind all aspirants to Religious Life of this fundamental truth. As God's messengers, we must warn them that if they enter the convent, and aspire to become the spouses of Christ, if they desire to attain to sanctity, then each and all must be told what great things they must suffer for their Lord.

We will begin by developing the general principle that sanctity and suffering go hand in hand, and then proceed to discuss the sufferings peculiar to the Religious Life, and to point out the dispositions required, if suffering is to be a source of sanctity.

It is easy enough to prove this statement; it suffices to consider in what holiness essentially consists. Undoubtedly, in imitating our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the type, the model, the incomparable ideal of sanctity. He is the living, substantial, eternal Perfection itself. From the heights of

Heaven, He came down that, as Man, He might place perfection within our reach, and thereby convince us that we can, and ought to attain to it. What do we see, then, in our Saviour? What are the characteristic traits of His adorable Person? In Him, we see an example of horror of sin, and of the pursuit of all virtues. Yes, and, in addition, we note His voluntary acceptation of suffering.

You know well, my dear Sisters, that Jesus Christ was not only 'the just Man' *par excellence*, not only did He do all things well, but, as the prophet tells us, He was also 'the Man of sorrows.' The most striking feature of the life of Jesus upon earth is His acceptation of all kinds of suffering. How is our Lord generally represented? Under what form do we see Him portrayed? Is it not as the Crucified Saviour? What thoughts are suggested by the sight of Jesus on the cross? Do not the open wounds, caused by the nails which hold Him to it, the thorn-crowned head, the riven side, the distorted, bleeding Body all suggest suffering? Jesus endured suffering in all its intensity. The crucifix takes us back to Calvary. We see the image of our crucified Saviour so often that we grow accustomed to it and, therefore, often pass it by, heedless of the touching message it should give to all who gaze upon it. If we would but listen we might hear a still small voice addressing us from the crucifix and saying to us: 'See how I have hated iniquity, loved virtue, and above all, suffered.'

Again, if we have the happiness of contemplating

the sacred image of our Lord, we can also look upon the consecrated species of the Holy Eucharist which conceal His Divinity and His Humanity. We believe that He is there really and truly present, glorious and impassible. Yet, as we fix our eyes upon the Blessed Sacrament, we are not overwhelmed by His grandeur and glory. We note rather the state of apparent humiliation, the lowliness of the sacramental species that conceal His Body and Blood; we are struck by the solitude and lowliness of the Tabernacle, in which He dwells, the impotence to which exteriorly He submits—impotence which exposes Him to the indifference, outrages or profanations of whoever chooses to insult Him thus. However much sinners outrage Him in the Holy Eucharist, they do so with impunity. For the time being, He neither complains nor avenges Himself. All this suggests the same thought—suffering.

The eloquence of these examples is strengthened by the words of the Holy Gospels, and these instructions are our Lord's own living commentary on His Life. What has our Saviour told us concerning suffering? He says: 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.' Surely these words have a double force for all who desire to climb to the summit of perfection! Whither must they follow? In His footsteps, and we find the blessed prints of His feet in Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth. We trace them along the roads He travelled, when He evangelised in Palestine, in the Garden of Olives,

in the Praetorium, in the court where He was scourged, and on the Hill of Calvary. Each of these places points to some special suffering, endured by our Lord and Master.

It is not possible to meditate on the whole course of the Life of Jesus—from the manger to the cross—without being convinced that, if we would attain to sanctity, we must suffer. None, here below, can separate these two things—perfection and suffering, since Jesus, in His life, has so indissolubly united them. The author of the 'Imitation' so eloquently and concisely puts this truth before us, when he exclaims: 'The whole life of Christ was a cross and a martyrdom; and dost thou seek for thyself rest and joy? Thou errest, thou errest.'[1] Therefore, my dear Sisters, it behoves you to avoid this error, or, if you have fallen into it, to rectify your judgment.

But there are some here who have not long entered religion: postulants who ardently look forward to receiving the holy habit; novices who aspire after the day of their solemn profession. So far, these tyros have had nothing but consolation and joy in the House of the Lord; so far they have had no crown of thorns: all has been peace and happiness. They would fain ask me: 'What of us, who have not yet suffered? Can we, too, aspire to perfection?'

In truth, Christ our Lord has given many consoling promises to those who, renouncing all things, follow Him generously, and we must not forget them.

[1] Book ii. c. xii.

Saints of old, and those of our days, alike testify that our Lord has magnificently fulfilled His promises. David gives his experience in these words: 'Better is one day in Thy courts above thousands.'[1] I have frequently told you—and willingly I repeat the statement—that all who are truly called to religion and who lead a fervent life therein are indeed blessed. They can rejoice that, by the mercy of God, they have entered the haven of happiness, whereas worldlings in the open ocean are tossed by innumerable cares and deceptions and, therefore, cannot be happy. Still the happiness, which religious enjoy upon earth, can never be other than relative. It can only be in the higher regions of the soul, not in the lower sensitive part. This partial happiness can always be enjoyed by religious; Christ has assured them of this. But, as regards absolute happiness, free from all suffering, He has made no such promise. If any religious believes otherwise, it would suffice to dispel this illusion, were she to take, as addressed to her personally, the words of our Lord to Saint Paul: 'I will show him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake.'

These words are unequivocal: the religious must not only suffer, but she must endure far more than ordinary Christians. Let us now see in what these sufferings consist.

Religious are exposed to suffer more, and also with more fruits of holiness, precisely because they are holier, in general, than seculars. This is the

[1] Psalm lxxxiii. 11.

doctrine laid down by Thomas à Kempis. 'The greater the progress a soul has made in perfection, the heavier the cross presses, because love makes earth's exile appear more grievous.'

Shall I enter into details, my dear Sisters, and set before you those tribulations, which at some time or another, and in different degrees, you will be called upon to endure? To do this, I need only follow our Lord Jesus Christ through the various phases of His life of sorrow, of which I spoke a moment ago.

Bethlehem was the first stage. There, He endured the most rigorous poverty, together with its usual cortège—privations and humiliations. Do you imagine that these sufferings will be spared you? It follows naturally that you must pass through this phase, by the very fact that you have made a vow of poverty. You cannot resist all the specious pretexts and temptations, which your lower nature will suggest as just causes for infringing your vow of poverty, you cannot practise likewise the virtue of poverty without having to suffer. It is not possible always to live frugally, to be content to be housed and clad like the poor—especially when you are so constantly thrown in contact with the luxuries and satisfactions which the world offers—and yet never experience some subtle, dangerous temptations against holy poverty.

Jesus, in Egypt, endured the sadness of the exile, and are not religious often called to pass through this ordeal? Does not persecution often drive them from their native land? Even supposing

you are never exiled by the State, you may have to leave one house for another. In one convent all was agreeable, you got on well with the sisters; in the one to which obedience assigns you, all is so different—habits, occupations, intercourse, and even the country. Again, you may always remain in the same house, and yet know the pangs of exile. With the Psalmist your soul—contemplating Heaven—exclaims: 'Wo is me, that my sojourning is prolonged.'

Jesus suffered at Nazareth where He worked at an unprofitable, insignificant, monotonous trade; from His childhood, and throughout thirty years, He bore this yoke without a murmur. Does not the task of monotonous labour often fall to the lot of a religious, who devotes herself to the active life in religion? She must needs be content to fulfil her daily work, to do at each hour what obedience assigns to her, yet surely to toil thus in some humble office, year in and year out, to fulfil this office devotedly, generously, and joyfully, calls for endurance in suffering. Our human nature loves change, movement, an eventful career, the approbation of men, consequently to accept humble tasks and to resist indolence, discouragement, and murmuring inevitably spells suffering.

Jesus Christ suffered likewise during His public life. The greater number of His hearers treated Him with contempt and indifference. In their blind folly, men refused His proffered graces, therefore He experienced all the bitterness of

[1] Psalm cxix. 5.

apparently fruitless toil. Listen to His plaintive reproach to Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered together thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not.'[1] And, as our Lord uttered these mournful words, He wept over Jerusalem in the excess of His sorrow. Religious are called to be apostles, but, like their Divine Master, they will have bitter deceptions and sadness of heart; the joys and consolations of the Christian labourer are few compared with his disappointments. God has so willed it. The religious often burns with zeal for souls, she longs to do good to them, to see the good seed spring up and bear fruit, but often she has to deal with rebellious and ungrateful souls, in which, as in a hard, stony ground, the seed of grace takes no root. Some, too, who for a time promised much, disappoint her. Even as a storm passes over a field of wheat almost ready for the sickle and lays it low, so many, who did once run well in the narrow path of a Christian life, suddenly yielding to a strong temptation, desert it for the broad way. These reverses may well weigh down the Christian worker, and call forth tears of sorrow.

In Gethsemani, Jesus, our Lord, was betrayed by one of His own. There His sacred Heart was crushed by disappointed love, there He endured desolation, fear, and physical agony as well as mental, while His indomitable Will met and conquered the

[1] St. Matt. xxiii. 37.

natural repugnance, which He experienced for suffering, even as we do. It is possible that the religious may have her conflict in Gethsemani in one form or another. It would be foolish for her to imagine that she can claim exemption from bearing 'the burden of the day and the heats.'[1] For her, as for her Lord, the moment may, and probably will, come when in conflict with weariness, ennui, and fear, she, too, will exclaim in anguish of heart: 'My soul is sorrowful even unto death.'[2] 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?'[3]

Religious, in their dealings with souls, must necessarily come in contact with the outcrop of human weaknesses such as inconstancy, oddities, and perverseness. The fact that Jesus was betrayed by Judas for thirty pieces of silver, and denied by St. Peter, is a warning that the disciple must expect the same treatment.

Contemplate your Lord, standing before the tribunal of His unjust judge, Pontius Pilate. What awful outrages He endures! In derision of His Royalty, the cruel Roman soldiers crown Him with thorns, cast a purple mantle around His wounded shoulders, and place a reed in His hand for a sceptre. The religious must have her share in these ignominies. Probably these will take the form of injustice, misrepresentations, and misguided opposition. Your holy vocation, my dear Sisters, so far from exempting you from the law of suffering—common to all the fallen sons of Adam—gives you a right

[1] St. Matt. xx. 12. [2] *Ibid.* xxvi. 28.
[3] *Ibid.* xxvii. 46.

to a large portion. Your charter to suffering is clearly drawn up: 'All that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution.'[1] These trials come not only from without, but also from within. You know, from experience, that there are passions in your soul, which revolt against His Royalty and strive to annihilate it within you.

Have you never suffered from the wild aberration of your imagination, never felt the opposition of your lower nature rise up so persistently that, at times, you have trembled for your perseverance, for it seemed as though the flesh must ultimately conquer the spirit?

Finally, we take our stand upon Calvary and watch the Crucified. How He suffers in His sacred Body! Look at the awful wounds; think, too, of the mental anguish of His Soul, and how it tells on the human frame. Physical and mental tortures swoop down upon Him as their legitimate prey. Contemplate His sacred Body, covered with bleeding wounds. Truly does Isaias describe our Lord on the cross, in these words which sum up His bodily torments: 'From the sole of the foot, unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein.'[2]

Your bodies are but human, my dear Sisters, therefore you are exposed to the ills of the flesh, which often constitute a grievous burden. You may suffer from decline, weakness, and infirmities of all kinds. Some are acute and easily diagnosticated, others elude the physician's researches. In any case, we are all hastening onward to that

[1] 1 Tim. iii. 12. [2] Isa. i. 6.

complete disorganisation of the human frame which men call death. Therefore you, in common with all mortals, bear in yourselves an overflowing spring of suffering.

Do you realise now, my dear Sisters, that in your religious life, even more than in the common round in the world, you will inevitably find all those germs of suffering which attack the children of men and which the Son of man deigned to endure for our redemption? All sufferings find entrance into the cloister, and at times with great intensity. They have their seat in body, soul, and mind, and also in your will and affections; they attack you from without; they fall upon you from within the citadel of your own souls. Manifestly your vocation calls you to suffer, but at the same time it enables you to reap a rich harvest of holiness and merit from these sufferings.

When troubles meet you on your road, do not be dismayed or astonished, hasten rather to profit by them. Look upon them as so many opportunities of acquiring holiness, and never forget that God's grace is sufficient to uphold you, for 'power is made perfect in infirmity.'[1]

You know now, my dear Sisters, how to look upon suffering, what is its real value. Undoubtedly this is not the view taken by the world, for, in its estimation, suffering merits only repulsion and hatred. For the world, suffering connotes a thing to be avoided when possible, a dire, accursed necessity; a cause of unhappiness and sadness.

[1] 2 Cor. xii. 9.

Worldlings can only suffer with discouragement and despair.

It should not be thus for religious: it cannot be thus for those who take the Christian view of suffering and study it in its origin, and in the Person of our Lord. Given the true appreciation of suffering, it cannot disquiet the soul, which rises above and controls it. Whatever tribulations overtake fervent religious, they remain firmly established in peace and hope. The cry of their soul is ever that of St. Paul: 'I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed, for I know in whom I have believed.'[1]

This is the secret of the union between suffering and happiness, which distinguishes Religious Life. St. Paul's words prove that he knew this secret; he exclaims: 'I am filled with comfort, I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulation.'[2]

The thought of all that suffering effects in the soul, when accepted with faith and love, should give you an intense, supernatural joy. Consider that rough diamond which, hidden for long centuries, has just been brought to light. Look at it well; although at present unpolished, the expert would see a stone of the purest lustre. For the moment it is dull, but when it has been cut and polished it will be a valuable jewel. Thus it is with regard to the perfection of souls. Naturally, they may be inclined to goodness, but if they are to shine with the lustre and beauty of holiness, they must be subjected to tribulations.

Suffering is the file that smooths away the

[1] 2 Tim. i. 12. [2] 2 Cor. vii. 4.

unevenness of surface, the chisel that reveals all the inherent possibilities of the soul for holiness.

Your experience will confirm the statement I am about to make. It is this : the soul advances in perfection in proportion as its sufferings are great and prolonged. The science of suffering is the science of holiness. Suffering snaps the ropes that hold us back from God. Countless imperfections prevent us from joining ourselves to Him, who is the one refuge from earth's storms and tempests. The more we suffer, the more we can sympathise with those who have a heavy cross to bear—the quicker we find means of alleviating or healing their wounds ; and therefore prolonged suffering perfects us in fraternal charity.

Suffering results from sin, the legions of sorrows that overwhelm mankind can all be traced back to sin ; and when we suffer ourselves, we realise this better and are spurred on to ardour in the constant and generous practice of good works, in order to mitigate the tribulations of earth. Therefore, suffering helps you to make rapid and real progress in sanctity, since by it you advance in charity.

You must welcome suffering, my dear Sisters, if you desire it to accomplish, in your souls, all the designs God has in sending it. God permits that good and bad alike should suffer ; the former for their sanctification, the latter for their ruin, according to their respective dispositions in receiving it. Those who murmur and revolt against it, who give way to discouragement, sadness, and despair, when suffering is meted out to them, become worse

than they were before. If it is to sanctify a soul and render the sufferer more pleasing to God, it must be received, if not with a joyful welcome, at least with patient resignation. By means of patience, suffering becomes a mighty means of holiness. But what is patience, whence comes the word? From *patiens*—suffering, therefore it signifies bearing up bravely under sorrow, and utilising each trial as a fresh starting-point whence we run in the way of God's commandments. Patience presupposes the existence of suffering and is made perfect thereby. The truly patient profit by the counsels and warnings of sorrow. It is not possible to be insensible to suffering, not to feel its sting, but this does not prevent the soul from accepting it as the messenger of God's mercy and love. This supernatural patience differs widely from the stoical endurance of the proud philosopher.

Further, joy should characterise our patience; and what more reasonable than that we should be joyful? We should rejoice when we think of all the benefits which suffering brings in its train, even here upon earth; and, above all, of the rich harvest of glory and blessedness it stores up for us in Heaven.

Ponder over these helpful considerations, my dear Sisters, they will assist you to suffer well and increase your merit. They will constrain you to utilise to the full all your present or future sorrows and contradictions. Be firmly resolved to accomplish God's designs concerning you. These involve suffering, which is the royal road to holiness,

the road trodden by our Divine Master; and your pace thereon will correspond to your courage and generosity in bearing trials.

Weariness, sadness, ennui, and the countless daily difficulties of life, as well as the greater crosses, will be welcome as means to an end; above all, as the messengers of God. To each and all, you will be enabled to say with St. Andrew, as he ran to his cross and embraced it: 'O blessed cross, thou hast been consecrated by the precious Body of my Lord. O cross, so long desired, so tenderly loved, so constantly sought after. Now, at last, my desire is realised. Receive me and give me to my Lord, who hung upon thee for my redemption.'

FIFTEENTH CONFERENCE

OBSERVANCE OF THE RULE IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL RELIGIOUS PERFECTION

Let us also continue in the same rule.—Phil. iii. 16.

We have considered the triple duty incumbent on all religious—avoid evil, do good, suffer generously. Their progress in perfection will be in proportion to their fidelity to these three points.

There is no need of exceptional means of holiness nor of some extraordinary kind of spirituality. In the beaten track of obedience, religious will find all they need, provided they strive daily to exercise greater vigilance in avoiding sin, more energy in practising virtue, and increased generosity in carrying their cross. These three exercises of the soul cover all that perfection exacts.

It was thus that the saints attained to holiness: they reached the desired goal because, like brave, undaunted athletes, they persevered courageously in declining from evil, doing good and suffering patiently.

In theory, the attainment to perfection is simple enough. Any Christian who wishes to ascertain

whether he is walking in the way of perfection proper to his state of life, has but to question himself as to how far he avoids sin, practises virtue, and suffers patiently. If the answer is in the affirmative in each case, he can be in peace and apply to himself the words of St. Paul. This Apostle, in the joy of his soul, and in anticipation of a glorious reward, triumphantly exclaimed: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith. As for the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord, the just Judge, will render to me in that day.' [1]

It is even easier for a religious to know how she stands as regards the pursuit of holiness. Instead of asking herself numerous questions, she has but to examine how she observes her rule. If conscience assures her that she keeps it faithfully in all points, then, undoubtedly, she is on the road to perfection. One of our popes once remarked that if he knew a religious had kept her rule in every detail, he would ask for no other proof of sanctity, for this alone would suffice to make her deserving of canonisation.

This does not mean that religious perfection differs essentially from that required of the laity, nor that the means of holiness are different for the former. It simply means that by the rule the path of holiness is mapped out clearly for religious, and all the necessary aids are supplied abundantly. The rule includes the observance of the three conditions mentioned above.

[1] 2 Tim. iv. 7.

For a religious, the obligation to strive after perfection may be realised by her obedience to the prescription of the rules. She must 'continue in the same rule' under all conditions and circumstances. For each and all of you, my dear Sisters, this is the secret of holiness. It is easy to prove this assertion. In religion, thanks to your rule, you can fulfil the first condition of holiness by avoiding sin. Your rule, like a protecting dyke, stands between you and evil. If now and then—even as water filters through a fissure in the dyke—sin does pierce the wall of the rule, at least the soul is not devastated by the flood. When venial sins and imperfections are freely committed, they neutralise holiness, but the rules keep mortal sin at a distance and cripple the force of all lesser defects. Behind this rampart the religious lives in security, even as a soldier on guard is preserved from the bullets that whistle over his head, so long as he remains behind the fortifications. The cannon thunders, the balls rain upon the strong rampart, but they cannot overthrow it. In like manner, the rule, well kept, protects the religious, and this is no small advantage.

What easy victories sin gains over Christians in the open field of the world, even over those who, by their baptism, and the help of God's grace, are called to lead a life of holiness. One cause of their defection is want of thought. Of old, Jeremias complained that all the land was desolate 'because there is none that considereth in the heart.'[1] What

[1] Jer. xii. 11.

was true then is equally true in our times. Men do not stop to reflect: they are carried away by the torrent of their passions. St. Augustine bitterly laments this folly of humanity. He exclaims: 'O torrent of worldliness, who can resist thee! How long wilt thou continue to flow on? When will thy bed dry up? How long wilt thou continue to bear away the children of Eve to the midst of that immense and terrible ocean, over which even those who sail clinging to the wood of the cross voyage so perilously?'

The world considers only the agreeable side of sin. Unlike the prophet, they do not 'dig in the wall'[1]: well content with the specious appearance of evil, they never sound its depths. Sin presents itself under pleasing colours, it multiplies promises and flatteries. Hence it is made welcome, and those, who sin thus, give no heed to the hollowness of its protestations and joys. They do not trouble to look below the surface, and to reflect on all the wounds which sin inflicts, nor on the unhappiness it brings in its train. Worldlings make a truce with sin, and never for a moment suspect that they are in even greater peril than a man who, quite unconsciously, is standing close to a dangerous serpent. If he realised his danger, he would flee from the spot with horror. The same holds good of worldlings: they sin because they do not reflect on their danger.

Now a religious who desires to keep her rule faithfully, is bound to reflect often and seriously.

[1] Ezech. viii. 8.

The rule bids her reflect frequently, that she may keep her intelligence and her affections free from the solicitations to evil. Much is gained when a religious has no affection for sin. All the spiritual exercises bring the religious face to face with herself, and prevent her from being absorbed by exterior occupations. She can never give herself up wholly to worldly affairs, but only in so far as this is compatible with her calling and special office. Therefore, she is protected from the fascinating mirage of sensible objects and worldly interests, and upheld on the slippery, downward path along which they threaten to draw her.

Think over the various exercises which make up your day, my dear Sisters. Is it not true that if you perform these—not only according to the letter, but also in the spirit required—you must necessarily reflect? The main object of these varied spiritual exercises is to maintain your souls permanently in the act of reflecting on the great truths. This is the inevitable result of recollection, of living in the presence of God, and of applying yourselves seriously to the interior life. Under these conditions it is almost impossible to be taken at a disadvantage by sin. You see it coming towards you, you know its end and methods, however cunningly it disguises them. If the temptation thus carefully watched reaches the threshold of the conscience and strives to force an entrance into the soul, it is quickly repulsed. Even though the fervent religious, taken unawares, perceives that sin has penetrated within the citadel of her soul, still the knowledge she has

of its malice, and the danger to which this sin exposes her, lead her promptly to expel such a formidable enemy.

In the world, souls give themselves up to sin and remain long in its mire because none hold before them the mirror of reflection. If they admit their guilt, they may become so hardened as to boast of it. In their blind folly they exclaim: 'I have sinned and what harm hath befallen me?'[1] They speak thus, because their blindness prevents their perceiving the intrinsic hideousness of evil. No warning voice points out their danger. In Religious Life the rule is a wise and charitable mentor, it warns religious of their peril and, by enlightening them as to the true character of sin, builds up a high wall against its encroachments.

Not only does the rule render this service to the religious, but it likewise keeps her away from the occasions of sin and the snares of the world. There are in the world many who do reflect on their sinful lives, and, notwithstanding, consciously and deliberately continue in evil, in spite of the reproaches of conscience. How is this? Because they are too spiritually weak to resist the fascinating charm which vice exercises over them. They are unable to stand when interior weakness and exterior enemies combine against them. Therefore, they let things slide and take their pleasures as fancy dictates; thus they go from sin to sin, and nothing has any power to hold them back from the allurements of vice.

Religious are preserved from this danger, since

[1] Eccles. v. 4.

the rule protects them from themselves, from their caprices, their love of change and fitful moods. While the rule conduces to the lawful use of liberty, it prevents the religious from its abuses. At every moment, the rule is a faithful mentor, who ever warns her against the attractions of evil and helps her to avoid it. If, at times, the rule seems pitiless, it is nevertheless merciful. As St. Francis of Sales says: 'Religious Life accepts those who are imperfect and full of bad habits and passions, but it does not allow them to be ruled by these defects. The rule acts like a press, which crushes out from the soul all that is displeasing to God.'[1]

It is easy to see what a powerful auxiliary you have in the rule, my dear Sisters. Constantly you have to struggle against your passions which act both through your souls and bodies. Therefore you need a constant check, and this you find in your rule. It regulates, from morning till night, your time, your energies, and the use of your faculties. Like a faithful guide it prevents your slipping or it raises you when you have fallen. While your rule strengthens you against your inherent weakness, it enables you to resist the attacks of your exterior enemies with fearless boldness.

Religious are guided by their rule in their conversations, visits, and necessary intercourse with the world, and thus they are spared many temptations and occasions of sin. A strong suggestion to evil may often be overcome by fidelity in observing some small point prescribed by the

[1] *Entret.* xx., Œuvres complètes, t. vi. p. 377.

rule. For thousands of religious the faithful observance of their rule has been a safeguard from sin! The religious, who takes shelter in the haven of the rule, is in security, like a vessel that rides at anchor; whereas those who despise their rule and pay no heed to its commands, are like a ship that is tossed on the ocean by the angry billows and liable to be engulfed.

Let this conviction of the utility of your rule, as a preservative from evil, sink deeply into your souls, for this consideration alone should urge you to observe your rule faithfully and to love it with all your soul. For you it is the greatest good, since it enables you to fulfil the first condition of attaining to perfection—namely the avoidance of all sin.

Further, your rule enables you to do good. Perfection that is based on the observance of your rule is certain to be free from illusions, and to comprehend all the necessary virtues. Therefore, your rule assists you in complying with the second principle of perfection—that is to say, in doing good works.

Virtue presupposes continual effort, fighting, and counter movements to resist the evil germs within us and to help us to overcome that repugnance for good which sin engenders. How are you to persevere in that courageous warfare which will assure the final victory? The answer is simple, but note well the three qualificatives—by the *faithful, constant, supernatural* observance of all that the rule prescribes. Now, it is evident that a religious who keeps well within the barriers of her rule is forced to combat her natural

disinclination for all that cramps and confines her perverse desires. She must resist temptation to self-will, caprice, and intermittent spasmodic action. She must fight bravely, in order to force her rebellious will to accept the curb of the yoke of the rule, for, naturally, the will seeks its satisfaction at any price. She must perforce conquer herself before she can possess her soul in peace, work constantly and joyously, and not only keep her rule exteriorly, but love it with all her heart.

All this, my dear Sisters, is pre-eminently favourable for the development and preservation of virtue in the soul. Consequently, the rule well kept is, as stated above, a means of living up to the second principle of perfection, which is to do good works.

We can prove this assertion by entering into greater detail and showing how the rule, well kept, trains all the faculties of the religious and obtains from them the most perfect fruit of virtues of which these faculties are capable.

For example, the body must be trained to virtue in its sphere, that it may be the ally of the soul and not an obstacle to the grand spiritual work of sanctification. Now it is clear that the rule watches continually over the movements of the body and legislates for its true welfare. Thus the rule determines the dress, food, and hours of sleep, that are accorded to the religious. This complete subjection of every detail admits of no concession to ill-regulated desires for bodily comfort. Inconvenience, privation, self-renunciation, and

sacrifice are the order of the day in a convent, and, in consequence, virtue thrives. The body—weak and inferior though it be—nevertheless becomes a holocaust well-pleasing to God, and this is due to the constant practice of mortification, which cuts off, not only sinful excesses and indulgences, but likewise the satisfaction of legitimate desires, such as Christians in the world may claim without sin or even imperfection.

What of the intelligence and all its faculties? The rule keeps them well in hand, and preserves them from the divagations common to mankind: it perfects these faculties, and without neutralising them holds them in judiciously. Faith is the virtue God asks of the intelligence, and religious are constantly expected to make acts of faith and to live up to its teaching. This is what St. Paul styles 'living by faith.' Can you conceive that a religious, who is not animated and guided by faith in all her actions, could possibly comply, even for one week, with all that the rule exacts, while her reason is proudly asserting itself by claiming its independence? How could she accept the instructions given in accordance with the rule, the prescriptions concerning humility, obedience, and all those other virtues which can only flourish on the grave of pride? Undoubtedly, the rule presupposes that faith rules the intelligence of a religious, while, at the same time, it develops and strengthens faith by the manifold opportunities it provides for exercising this virtue.

Then, as regards the heart or affections of a

religious, how admirably the rule regulates these! As faith is the virtue by which our intelligence should live, so love is the virtue for the affections, and the observance of the rule affords the religious innumerable opportunities of exercising this love of God. She could not persevere without love in the constant, faithful observance of her rule, for at every moment of the day it asks for some fresh proof of the love of God, and her compliance with all its manifold exactions is an incontestable proof that the fire of love burns brightly in the depths of her soul. As St. Francis of Sales truly says: 'If the love of God is to enter into a soul, the reign of the old Adam must be overthrown. You ask me how this is to be done. I reply, by prompt obedience to all your rules.'[1]

Now the rule exercises its sanctifying influence chiefly over the will, by forcing the religious to practise continually that abnegation which is alike the source and the consummation of virtue. As the juice of the grapes—even to the last drop—is pressed out in the wine-vat, so the marvellous pressure of the rule draws forth from the soul a constant overflowing source of abnegation and perfect submission to the holy will of God. Such is the result of fidelity to the rule for a fervent religious. To quote St. Francis of Sales once more: 'The rules and daily routine of conventual life are like a ladder by which religious—like the angels seen by Jacob in a vision—ascend to God by charity and descend to God by humility.'[2]

[1] *Entret.* xx., p. 376.

[2] *Ibid.* l. t. vi. p. 10.

We will now pass to the third and the indispensable constituent of religious perfection—as far as it is attainable upon earth—namely suffering. Perfection consists in withdrawing the soul from the slough of miseries and defects due to the fall of man, and helping it to ascend the mountain where Jesus stands on the summit. Looking up, the religious sees Jesus, her crucified Saviour, and He thus addresses her : ' Look and make it according to the pattern that was shewn thee in the mount.' [1] The lesson our Lord teaches on Calvary is that, without suffering, there can be no real, lasting virtue.

The rule of a religious house exacts suffering ; only at this price can religious obey their rule. We may look upon it as the cross upon which they are called to place themselves daily, that they may be crucified in all their faculties and in their bodies. It is ever a cross and a heavy one, in spite of the spiritual sweetness—unknown to the world—which ever accompanies and follows obedience to rule. Each nun has her special task assigned to her ; each hour regularly brings its own employment, there is no escaping from it ; and compliance with the inflexible time-table of each day involves suffering. The rule controls the imagination by depriving it of the leisure to roam at will in the land of dreams and fiction. It inflicts suffering to work constantly at an occupation that has little charm in itself, and that requires a supernatural intention on the part of the doer in order to ensure perse-

1 Exod. xxv. 40.

verance. Now, can the will be ever in dependence on the good pleasure of another, without suffering? The religious may sometimes be engaged in an agreeable work: the bell rings, and she is forced to leave it for a less congenial occupation, or for one she detests. The rule holds the religious in its meshes continually. She is not free to dispose of her time and, precisely when she wishes to do one thing, the rule prescribes something else. She must rest when she would like to work, speak when she longs to keep silence. This enumeration might be extended indefinitely, it suffices to grasp the principle, namely that the rule continually and in everything mortifies the natural inclinations of the religious. She obeys, in spite of the revolt of her lower nature, and thus advances in the virtue of obedience through bearing generously the cross of her rule.

Those who faithfully observe their rules find ample and even superabundant means for attaining to a very high degree of perfection. St. Paul, in the ardour of his love for Christ, longed to suffer for his Master, 'to fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ'[1] in his flesh. Thus, too, it frequently happens that religious, who have meditated before the crucifix or the Tabernacle on the grand mystery of suffering, on its necessity and fertilising power, have likewise become enamoured of the cross. To some, as for example St. Theresa, God has granted the signal favour of an earnest desire to suffer; to take for

[1] Coloss. i. 24.

their motto the words of St. Theresa : 'Either suffer or die.' How did they satisfy their thirst for suffering? Not by asking permission to make use of severe bodily mortifications, such as disciplines or hairshirts, which frequently expose the soul to temptations, to pride and dangerous illusions, but by the perfect observance of their rule. There are sufficient sufferings provided by the rule to satisfy the most ardent aspirations—whatever form these may assume; and these means have the great advantage of mortifying self-will and keeping the soul in the beaten track of humility. Our blessed Lord, throughout thirty years in Nazareth, found His opportunities for suffering in the common life. He prepared Himself for His Passion by the hidden martyrdom of thirty years, by the faithful observance of all that He imposed upon Himself for love of us.

Therefore, my dear Sisters, place your perfection in the faithful accomplishment of your rules. Examine yourselves by this standard. If you are prompt in complying with their prescriptions, then you will decline from evil, do good, and suffer generously; in a word, you will walk in the paths of sanctity. If you infringe your rule deliberately, then you have need to be reminded of the warning given by Thomas à Kempis: 'The religious that liveth out of discipline is exposed to dreadful ruin.'[1] Sin finds a ready entrance into their souls; they are too weak to exclude it. Nor have they the courage to advance in virtue; in vain

[1] Book i. c. xxv.

does the rule open out its ample means of suffering and consequently of merit, since religious, who do not observe their rules, are too indolent and indifferent to profit by them.

Therefore, I repeat, my dear Sisters, seek your perfection in the faithful observance of your rule, for there alone will you find it. Religious might have a great reputation for sanctity, and even work miracles; but, if they are lax in keeping their rule, these apparent signs of holiness, far from being securities as to their virtue, would constitute a great danger. On the other hand, the religious who appears to be useless and insignificant in the eyes of her sisters, may merit, by her fidelity to the rule, to hear God praise her at the day of judgment because she has ever striven to do His Will, as interpreted by the rule of her congregation.

A saint recommends us to beware of thinking that we have ever, even for one day, observed our rule perfectly. This thought should animate us to endeavour always to progress in the perfection of our obedience to the rule. We can apply to it what St. Paul says of discipline or training in virtue: 'All chastisement for the present indeed seemeth not to bring with it joy, but sorrow: but afterwards, it will yield to them that are exercised thereby, the most peaceable fruit of justice.'[1]

[1] Heb. xii. 11.

SIXTEENTH CONFERENCE

IN WHAT THE FAITHFUL OBSERVANCE OF THE RULE CONSISTS

The beginning of wisdom is the most true desire of discipline.—Wisdom vi. 18.

In the preceding conference I showed you that, by observing the rule, a religious truly walked in the way of perfection. We will now examine *how* the rule must be kept, in order that you may utilise this great means of sanctity and seek none other. In the book of Wisdom we are told that: 'The beginning of wisdom is the most true desire of discipline,' but, in order that the discipline of Religious Life may be a security for the religious, and a source of inestimable privileges, certain conditions are laid down, which I propose to develop in this conference.

The first condition is that religious keep their rule in all its integrity, even to the smallest details; that they should observe their rule to the letter, and endeavour to steep their souls in its spirit.

In a religious house, the rule is a code, in which all has been legislated for and foreseen. The religious cannot perform a single action, outside the sphere of

the rule, which supervises the inception or aim of every act. True, the various recommendations, counsels, and prescriptions of the rule are not all of the same intrinsic importance. For example, those rules which relate to the performance of your vows, oblige under pain of grievous sin. Some of the prescriptions of the rule are framed in view of assuring the execution of the greater precepts, and, if these are violated, the fault is but venial, though it might be graver if the violation sprang from contempt of the rule.

If every breach of the numerous prescriptions of the rule were a grievous sin, the Religious Life, instead of being a calm harbour, free from the violent tempests of the high seas—as the Fathers of the Church represent it—would be a seething cauldron of never-ending scruples and fears. Instead of being a place of greater safety and more abundant means of holiness, Religious Life would be a deadly battle-field, upon which souls would run greater risks of perdition than worldlings, if every infraction of the innumerable by-laws, counselled or commanded, constituted a mortal sin.

Therefore, I lay down this truth clearly that you may be enlightened on this point, and be able to form a correct judgment on this matter: In itself, the rule is not binding under pain of mortal sin, therefore the religious who breaks her rule does not always sin grievously, sometimes the infraction involves no sin whatever. But, I must add, in accordance with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, that rarely does a religious break her rule without

committing some fault, because infractions of the rule generally spring from some inordinate affection or desire, such as idleness, curiosity, or attachment to her own views, and it is this deceptive element which constitutes the sin and determines the degree of culpability. Strive to grasp these principles clearly, my dear Sisters, that you may not be tormented by useless scruples, and see sin where, in reality, there is none.

What I have said above applies to the rule considered from one point of view only, namely that of its binding force as regards sin. This is the narrower aspect of the rule, but it behoves us to examine it from a wider side, namely in its bearing on the perfectionment of the religious. For, if it is to be the ruling principle and subject-matter of their perfection, it is clear that they must keep it integrally, without letting themselves be ruled by the consideration of the greater or less degree of culpability incurred by its transgression.

If the observance of the rule is to be a means of holiness, religious may not confine their obedience to certain prescriptions of their choice. No, they must keep the whole rule, the smaller details and those which are, manifestly, capital points. Religious who deliberately refuse to obey certain rules, and conform only to those they have elected to observe, are certainly refusing to walk in that path towards perfection to which all religious are bound to tend.

Now, my dear Sisters, those who aspire to this sublime degree of perfection must live up to their

aspirations. You desire to be perfect? Very well, observe your rule perfectly. Do not be content to keep your rule only when it enjoins what is easy, congenial, or what fits in with your wishes, inclinations, and habits, but obey promptly and lovingly all that your rule exacts. Remember that true devotedness to God does not consist in giving much, but in giving all. If you stop short of this *all*, you are guilty of rapine in the holocaust.

But you are determined to give God all—to keep back nothing for yourselves. Therefore, you will study your rule diligently; you will try to grasp the spirit of your rule, and in all your actions you will consult the rule and take it for your guide. Jesus came into the world to do His Father's Will. This was the path traced out for Him from the moment of His Incarnation: the path along which He willed to walk, for love of us. He Himself said: 'Till heaven and earth pass, one jot, or one tittle shall not pass of the law, till all be fulfilled.'[1] These, too, are the sentiments of the fervent religious, and she reveals them by deeds rather than by words. She is vigilant, ever on the alert for the faintest indication of the rule; prepared to submit mind, heart, and will to it, and, by so doing, she expresses from it all the precious drops of perfection it is capable of yielding; never, by voluntary imperfection, does she lose the smallest portion.

There are religious who boast of their breadth of view, which exempts them from complying with the minute and old-fashioned prescriptions of the

[1] St. Matt. v. 18.

rule. They leave these for those who hold narrow, prejudiced opinions, and flatter themselves with discriminating, to a nicety, how and when the rule should be applied. Professing to keep the spirit of their rule, they violate both the spirit and the letter. The fervent religious, on the contrary, values the little practices which ensure perfect regularity, such as the times of silence, the places where conversation is permitted, the obligation to ask certain permissions simply and humbly. If she fails to observe some detail of her rule, she does so from human frailty, never from a set purpose to disobey. She repents of her fault and strives to amend.

Moreover, it is a sign of fervour not only to observe the rules integrally, but also to fulfil them *when* and *as* the rules prescribe. Cassien, in one of his conferences, praises the primitive anchorites, because their appreciation of the benefits of observing their rule with fervour led them to cease writing the moment the signal was given for another exercise. They would even leave a letter incomplete. Religious should emulate these examples of religious obedience. To do this they must esteem their rule, give themselves up to its guidance and, in its favour, sacrifice their time, tastes, and liberty, passing from one action to another exactly at the appointed time. The moment the bell rings, they immediately go whither it calls them; they endeavour to be punctually at their place for each exercise of the community.

All this must be done constantly. The religious

has to maintain her fervour, even when in the presence of worldlings, who cannot appreciate the beauty and necessity of prompt obedience to the rule, and would seek to dissuade her from obeying the signal. She has to resist, likewise, the inherent tendency of human nature to slacken down, as years go by, and to lead the soul to give up with disgust what she formerly practised so ardently. The more years she has spent in religion, the greater should be her fervour in observing her rule, the deeper her esteem for it. She is bound even to greater regularity as an aged professed nun, than she was as a novice. No plea of exemption obtains, be it years of fervour, advanced age, great services rendered to the community, or the esteem in which she is held by her sisters or by seculars. All these are so many spurs and incentives to fervour, and, by her life of regularity, she edifies all, maintains the ancient traditions of the house, and secures her own advancement in virtue as well as her truest happiness.

To do all this constantly and effectually, religious must be animated, in the observance of their rule, by a supernatural intention. This is the second condition laid down for religious obedience to the rule. Without this deep conviction of the intrinsic value of observance of the rule as a means of arriving at perfection, religious could not always practise obedience to its numerous prescriptions. If we look at some of the regulations from a purely human standpoint, we shall never perceive their true value; they may even strike us as puerile

and despicable. Considered in itself, what does it matter whether religious speak at this particular time and not at another, in a given place and in no other? What harm can there be in accosting a sister in the corridor without actual necessity, or if there be a good reason for addressing her, why should the conversation be as brief as possible, and carried on in a low tone of voice? If you put these questions to any person of the world he would unhesitatingly reply in the negative. The world looks only on the surface, and regards these things as ridiculous trivialities. A religious, who takes this superficial view, will also decide that these things are too insignificant to be troubled about, and, consequently, she will break these rules deliberately or even unconsciously.

But this is not the true standpoint to judge of these minor regulations of a religious house. Those who desire to live up to the height of their sacred calling, look below the surface. They realise the supernatural benefits of all these little rules, because, to quote St. Paul, the eyes of their hearts are enlightened.[1]

In truth, my dear Sisters, these minute regulations conceal great graces, and it depends on you whether you profit by them or not. It is no little thing to resist the interior or exterior temptation to break silence, to ask for some trifling permission, to sacrifice some satisfaction or natural desire for which your lower nature clamours. Such an action rises straight to the throne of God, and, small as it

[1] Eph. i. 18.

may appear, humanly speaking, it is great before God, who considers the intention rather than the deed.

We may compare these minute observances to uncut jewels. Those who do not know their value, those who look at the surface only, take them for common stones, not worth picking up. These uncut jewels may be strewn about thus for years, and those who walk over them little suspect what a fortune they tread under their feet, as they daily pass that way—perhaps for long years. But if a mineralogist sees these stones, his practised eye perceives their true value. He knows that the rough envelope or crust conceals a valuable diamond, which he at once picks up.

Religious, if they have the true spirit of their vocation, act thus with regard to the little practices imposed by the rule. Where seculars see but a common, worthless pebble, the religious sees a precious jewel, which she can obtain provided she bends her will to accomplish some trifling regulation. We might take another comparison—that of the rock whence a stream of water flowed when Moses struck it with his rod. In like manner the religious, by her purity of intention and supernatural good will, touches the rock which is composed of the little crystals of minute observances, and draws from it refreshing streams of sanctity, which render her life fertile.

Hence, my dear Sisters, in order to secure constant obedience to all the rule exacts, it is necessary to keep your minds fixed on the supernatural side of these rules. This high standpoint alone will

ensure your perseverance and fidelity in keeping your rule. It will help you to overcome all temptations to slacken your ardour and give up the combat. The moment you accomplish your rule from a lower standpoint, you lose a large part, if not all, of your merit.

Suppose, for one moment, that a religious observes her rule by mere routine, simply because she has accustomed herself to keep the rule exteriorly, but without any higher aim than the actual performance of what it requires; would she, under these circumstances, be working at her perfection? You see at once that she is not; her obedience is purely mechanical, and, for an action to be supernatural, the intelligent and free co-operation of the will and affections is necessary. If an act is to have any value before God, it must be as the exterior sign of love for Him and a desire to do His holy Will.

There are regulations and rules laid down for various societies in the world—rules which are even more rigid than those that obtain in religious houses. Thus the soldier has to submit to a very rigid discipline; the workman has to comply with the regulations which he sees framed on the walls of the workshop. Many other trades and professions are ruled by numerous laws. But, generally speaking, these rules are observed because men fear to break them; they observe them because they are forced to do so; love of God has no part in their compliance, whence it follows that obedience thus yielded has no merit before God.

Therefore, religious should ever strive to act from

supernatural motives, and to renew their intention frequently, lest routine should gain the ascendancy and lessen the merit of obedience or even vitiate it altogether. Purity of intention is a gage of religious perfection.

We now pass on to the third condition required for keeping the rule well. It is joy, and this condition is as necessary as the other two we have mentioned.

In the holy Gospels, Jesus Christ, our Lord, frequently bids us serve Him joyfully. The more closely we are called to walk in His footsteps, the more should we abound in joy; not indeed a joy born of earth and its ephemeral satisfactions and pleasures, but a joy that springs from sacrifice and descends from above. Worldlings cannot imagine how joy can dwell in the cloister, where all the most legitimate natural desires have to be immolated; to them religious seem to be laden with an intolerable yoke. They expect to find religious sad, because they think that conventual life is too onerous to be associated with joy. The world looks upon nuns as galley-slaves condemned to the chain of slavery, and great is their surprise when the reality gives the lie to their preconceptions. They cannot understand how religious can be joyful, and yet this is so.

Undoubtedly the rule is a burden, but one of which the weight is lessened by the uplifting power of love; the rule is a yoke, but one which does not wound, because it is imposed by the divine, paternal hand of God. This is how true religious look at their rule, and, in accomplishing it, they find a joy which

must have been tasted before men can even realise its existence. The religious does not feel herself trammelled and hindered by her rule; on the contrary, it helps her to rise to God, even as a bird uses its wings to soar aloft at will. The rules are a burden, but a helpful one, which she delights to carry. Religious, happily held captive by their rule, are a thousand times happier than the shameless captives of their vile passions, for the world has its tyrannical regulations, of which nothing mitigates the severity. The world has its taskmasters—prejudices, customs, and fashions—so much so that we might almost apply the epithet 'regulars' to them, as to religious. But what a gulf separates the two codes of laws. That of the world is forced and superficial, based on the dictates of passion; that of Religious Life claims free adhesion and is founded on the laws of God.

The world has its manifold heavy chains, which apparently neither shackle nor sadden those who wear them. Worldlings seem merry under the weight, but their hearts are heavy because they are cribbled with remorse. Only in a well-regulated holy life is true joy to be found. Where shall we find joy in all its expansive simplicity and purity? Certainly, not in the world. No, you must seek it in religious communities, and, in each, you will notice that the most fervent are the most joyful. Joy is compatible with austerity, and this is implied by the choice of a passage concerning joy which the Church brings before us in Lent. She bids us rejoice even in the most penitential season of

her year: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say, rejoice.'[1]

How can you be otherwise than joyful in religion? You profess to obey Jesus Christ, to serve Him alone. Now suppose, my dear Sisters, that He were visibly present in your midst, speaking with you and regulating every detail of your day, would you not experience an ineffable consolation? Would you not hasten to comply with His commands and even forestall them? If, instead of remaining in the silence and seclusion of the Tabernacle, your Eucharistic Lord were to come forth visibly to direct the labours of each hour, would you not willingly yield to all He might ask, whether it were rest or action, silence or conversation in recreation, and each for as much and as long as He willed?

Now, for the religious, these consoling suppositions are transformed into realities. By living faith she knows that Jesus, her Master, is ever present, and this is the secret of her joy. The rule serves as a veil, which conceals her Lord. In all that is enjoined by the rule she hears His voice, recognises His Will, and—adoring His behests—she promptly obeys them. Her attitude of mind is expressed by the inspired words: 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.'[2] Whenever, by the voice of obedience, the message reaches the fervent religious: 'The Master is come and calleth for thee,' like Mary of Bethania, she hastens joyfully to do His bidding.

[1] Phil. iv. 4. [2] 1 Kings iii. 10.

If you are convinced of these great truths, my dear Sisters, you will have no difficulty in observing your rule. You will obey its least regulation integrally, supernaturally, and joyfully. This alone suffices to assure your progress in perfection, you will make giant strides without fear of illusions, since in all your conduct you are guided by your rules. This sure guide will lead you safely through temptations, difficulties, and sufferings and obtain for you the victory. The words of St. Paul will be realised in you: 'Whosoever shall follow this rule, peace on them and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.'[1] When called before the tribunal of God, you need have no fear, since you will have a well-grounded, humble confidence that on earth you have striven to do your Lord's Will, as interpreted by your rule.

[1] Gal. vi. 16.

SEVENTEENTH CONFERENCE

ON THE OBSERVANCE OF THE RULE IN THE MOTHER HOUSE

Keep that which is committed to thy charge.—1 Tim. vi. 20.

WE have seen, in our preceding conferences, what weighty reasons there are for believing that true perfection for the religious consists in the observance of the rule. We have likewise pointed out how the rule must be kept, if it is to be a fruitful source of blessings.

These considerations apply to each and all the houses of a given congregation. In every house the rule, faithfully obeyed, is a principle of sanctity for all the members of that house, be it large or small. A branch house may consist of but three or four religious, but, if they observe their rule, God's blessing rests upon them. He looks down at these fervent religious with pleasure, even as He looked with complacency upon the holy house of Nazareth which sheltered Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. In that humble dwelling Jesus was subject to Mary and Joseph, who themselves were ever submissive to the will of God. Virtue was practised at Nazareth in a most sublime degree.

All fervent communities take Nazareth as their model, for, in religion as there, labour, prayer, and obedience are in honour. The book of the rules is their principal study, and their daily guide. The sisters meditate frequently upon these rules, in order to grasp the inner meaning, for they desire to live up to the spirit of their religious code and not simply to fulfil it literally. When St. Paul sent some instructions to his disciple, St. Timothy, he gave him this counsel : ' Meditate upon these things, be wholly in these things, that thy profiting may be manifest to all.' [1] This exhortation might be addressed to the religious, when handing her the book of rules.

The rule is a sacred trust for all religious, wherever obedience may have placed them, but it is particularly incumbent upon the Mother House to guard the rule faithfully, to maintain it in all its purity and perfection. Though you fully realise the truth of what I have just said, and know well the motives on which the statement is based, I deem it profitable to set these motives before you again, that you may attach yourself more and more to your rule, and reap an abundant harvest of precious graces.

I have several times reminded you that God expects a return of holiness, proportioned to His gifts to each individually, and I exhort you never to lose sight of this truth. A second principle, no less incontestable, is that the degree of sanctity to which a religious attains, is dependent upon her keeping the rule *integrally*, *perseveringly*, and *joyfully*.

[1] 1 Tim. iv. 15.

These two principles have a very special application for all those who have the privilege of living in the Mother House. This is self-evident and, in reality, needs no long chain of arguments by way of corroboration.

It is not my intention to depreciate the branch houses. Wherever your superiors place you, there you will find ample means of grace for arriving at the degree of perfection proper to your vocation. In the poorest and smallest house you will receive as much assistance, and even more, than is necessary for your progress in virtue. It would be a dangerous illusion for a religious to attribute her spiritual languor and slow progress in perfection to the unfavourable conditions under which she lives in a given house. Such a one would do well to examine her environment, to consider all the means of sanctification at her disposal, to fructify the talents committed to her, instead of sitting down idly to lament her fate. In truth, there is more fear of her failing to co-operate with the proffered means than of these means failing her.

Nevertheless, having clearly laid this principle before you, lest you might err in the matter, when obedience or business requires that you should dwell in one of the branch houses, I unhesitatingly affirm that those who are chosen to remain in the Mother House enjoy a very great privilege. It is easy to see the reasons why this should be so.

First, the whole organisation of the Mother House is more than elsewhere calculated to spur souls on in the paths of holiness. There, religious

receive instructions on their special duties more frequently; there, they find ample spiritual direction. In the Mother House there is always a numerous community, and the spiritual exercises, made in common, stimulate fervour. The Superiors of your congregation, who are charged to maintain the congregation in all its primitive purity, dwell in the Mother House, and they assist their inferiors by word and example. There are, in a word, numerous graces peculiar to the Mother House, and those who dwell there appreciate and profit by these means of advancement. What the full course of the river is to the streamlet, so is the Mother House to each of the branch houses. The fulness of the spirit of each order or congregation is to be found in it.

Whence it follows that the nuns, who dwell in the head house of their congregation, should advance more rapidly in sanctity. They enjoy a special privilege and *noblesse oblige*—privileges involve responsibilities. God expects an adequate return for special favours bestowed. Where more spiritual succours are given He has a right to look for greater fidelity, and more rapid progress in holiness.

The very name 'Mother House' proclaims the same obligation. All the branch houses owe their existence to the Mother House, and are proofs of the numerous blessings God has bestowed upon it, and —through its works of mercy—to numerous souls. Therefore, the branch houses are the daughters of the parent house and, in consequence, bound to it by the same bonds which unite the mother and daughter, namely respect, affection, and gratitude.

The Mother House is the nursery of the whole congregation. There, the young generation is trained and, before many years have passed away, these religious will have taken the places left vacant in the ranks by death and old age. What changes thirty or forty years bring about! Those of you who dwell in the Mother House have the responsibility of training the younger generation and communicating to them intact the true spirit of your congregation, that they may hand it down, in their turn, to others.

It is in the novitiate that the spirit of the congregation is transmitted. The novitiate is, as it were, the sanctuary of the temple. There, all aspirants to Religious Life—postulants and novices—receive the advice, direction, and instructions necessary for their holy calling. It follows naturally that if these aspirants, from the moment they cross the threshold of the novitiate, have communicated to them the true and sublime ideal of their vocation—which it is so important they should have—they will, in obedience to this first impetus, advance rapidly in holiness, along the path which has been pointed out to them.

In the Mother House, the postulants and novices are in frequent contact with the professed sisters. Now suppose these sisters were careless about keeping the rules, what would be the effect on these aspirants? What would happen if they saw the professed breaking silence, failing in exterior recollection—which is the mark of interior recollection and likewise conduces to it—negligent, and un-

punctual in their spiritual exercises, or wanting in that perfect charity which the rule prescribes? Manifestly, the effects of these bad examples would be felt in the novitiate; there could be no virile formation in such an atmosphere of tepidity, and the hopes founded on these aspirants for the future well-being of the congregation would be seriously compromised or annihilated. We can only give what we have, sound philosophy and common sense agree on this point and, as regards the matter in question, this principle has a striking application.

My dear Sisters, you love your congregation with all your soul. Do you wish to do your part in training the younger generation to grow up with this strong attachment to it? Do you wish to instil into them that spirit of perfect regularity as regards the rule? Would you see them grow in fervour and, later on—wherever Providence may send them—labour zealously for the good of their own souls, of the congregation and its numerous works? Would you see their labours blessed? There is but one answer to these questions, as there is but one means of obtaining these results, which are so desirable, and it is this: practise these virtues yourselves and that in a high degree.

It has been truly said that, in order to communicate a science or an art, we must have a background knowledge over and above what we propose to impart to our pupils, and this principle obtains likewise, as regards spiritual things, and more especially of the practice of perfection.

All who dwell in the Mother House—that is,

all the professed Sisters—have a certain share in training the novices. Your life and conduct should be a living lesson. In the novitiate, the aspirants are convinced of the grandeur of their vocation, and the virtues it presupposes, by means of spiritual reading, instructions, confession, communion, and prayer. This is but the theory which must be supplemented by practice. Where are they to find these examples? In you. Your lives must be practical lessons of holiness, by means of which the novices will continue and perfect their supernatural education. You must show them the practical application of the theories they have studied; the type and ideal, which they should feel drawn to copy.

This grand, sacred obligation should stir you up to accomplish it faithfully and to watch over anything that might prevent your fulfilling it successfully. But, at the same time, it is an immense privilege, since it opens out such a vast—I had almost said immeasurable—field for your zeal; since your influence will pass on to generations as yet unborn.

The Mother House is not simply the centre of development and formation, it is also the focus of reformation or re-creation, in the etymological sense of the word. It stands to the branch houses in the same relation as the heart to the body. Life comes from it to them, and there they renew their spiritual life. Such is the true view of a Mother House, and all the Sisters should look upon it thus. Even as the members of a family scattered in

different countries love and cling to their native land, and the home where they first saw daylight, just as they return joyfully to their country, so religious should be attached to the Mother House. They may be sent far from it, but still they persevere in the close union of prayer; they write there for advice when in difficulties and correspond with their distant sisters. In a word, they find their strength and consolation in the dear old Mother House, where they first learned to know and love their congregation. Now, precisely because of this relation between the Mother House and the various branches, those who dwell in the former are bound to keep the old traditions faithfully, to maintain the true spirit of the founders, to practise all the virtues expected of a religious.

The Mother House is a place of passage. Throughout the year, and especially at the time of the retreats, for business or prayer, sisters come and go constantly. They rejoice at the thought of returning thither, and this joy upholds them in their trials. These visits should be as profitable as they are joyful. Our Lord once called His Apostles to rest awhile with Him in the solitude of the desert. For your sisters, who visit the Mother House, it is such a real rest to quit their ordinary occupations and cares in order to steep their souls once more in that atmosphere of virtue, which so specially characterises the Mother House where, during the time of probation, they were so happy and edified. The renewed intercourse with the Mother House is a stimulus to increase in fervour.

It may be compared to a clock, by which, because its accuracy is warranted, all the other clocks in a town are regulated. The Mother House is bound to set up the exact standard of perfection for all the members of the congregation, wherever they may dwell.

This being indisputable, it is, therefore, incumbent on all who dwell in the Mother House, whether simple religious or superiors, young or old, to outvie with one another in the practice of virtue, and in never tolerating any deliberate transgression of the rule. St. Paul tells his disciples to follow his example: 'Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ,'[1] and the nuns, who constitute the community of the Mother House, ought to so live that St. Paul's words can be applied to them. Those, who return there, should feel themselves strengthened by the edification they receive, and, on leaving, take up their former work again in their respective branches with greater energy and zeal.

It would, indeed, be sad if these visits had a totally opposite result; if, instead of finding encouragement and a stimulus to progress in virtue, these sisters saw only negligence and indifference. The responsibility would lie at the door of those who gave the disedification, if some sister, after a visit to the Mother House, were to relax her vigilance on certain points of discipline, in consequence of the greater latitude which she saw tolerated there. Nature is only too ready to seek pretexts for self-indulgence, and woe to those who provide these specious excuses.

[1] 1 Cor. iv. 16.

Never, I trust, will such a misfortune happen to your congregation, for those who give scandal to their weaker brethren incur the anathema of our Lord. On the contrary, endeavour to be for all the sisters who pass by the Mother House 'the odour of life unto life,'[1] so that if any of these had degenerated from their first fervour—either from discouragement or any other cause—or had fallen into the fatal habit of negligence and imperfection, it would suffice for these sisters to come in contact with you in order to arouse them from their lethargy, and animate them to advance in holiness.

You who dwell in the Mother House must always be the incorruptible guardians of the rule, not only of the greater rules, which are respected in all the houses—thanks be to God—but also for those minor details, which to a cursory, superficial observer often seem so insignificant. Trifling as these minute observances may seem, they contribute to strengthen and perfect Religious Life, even as the buttress sustains a building and ensures its stability.

It was proverbial that none could come near to St. Catherine of Sienna without feeling the better for it. The same might be said of an exemplary Mother House. If you, my dear Sisters, by your vigilance and perfect regularity of conduct contribute to the blessed work of edifying and sanctifying your sisters, rest assured that it is a great honour, as well as a constant source of merit. Though you may never leave the Mother House, your influence will be far reaching. It will spread to the branch

[1] 1 Cor. ii. 16.

houses and help to keep up in them that exact observance of the rule which constitutes the true happiness of every community, and draws down upon it the blessing of God. In that rich harvest of merit and happiness, you will have no mean portion.

Yes, my dear Sisters—you who are privileged to dwell in the Mother House—it is yours to act as custodians of the rule. Never suffer it to be despised. If your charge authorise your so doing, protest whenever you see the rule in danger. If you are one of the rank and file, raise the silent protest of good example. Watch over the smallest innovations and repress them.

It was said of Jesus that 'He was set for the fall, and the resurrection of many in Israel,'[1] and the words might in a sense be applied to all who hold a position of responsibility. The faithful observance of the rule in the Mother House sets a pattern which the branch houses will follow. As long as the waters flow freely at the source, the streams will be well supplied; if the source more or less fails, the streams lessen in the same proportion. Therefore, as custodians of the rule, see that the waters always gush freely from the source.

This exhortation is addressed to each and every nun. You have each your share of influence, whatever be your position. None are free from all responsibility. Do not imagine that because you do not help in the government of the house, that your example carries no weight. You are a member of

[1] St. Luke ii. 34.

the community, and, as such, you contribute to its power for good or evil. A few negligent religious will suffice to lessen the fervour of a whole community—since, as the Holy Spirit warns us: 'A little leaven corrupteth the whole lump.' [1]

Therefore each sister must do her part to observe her rule with all possible exactitude. She must strive to uphold the rule in its integrity and purity so that, as far as it depends upon her, the Mother House may be the overflowing source of innumerable graces, which will carry fertilising streams of life and fecundity to all the branch houses, and maintain in them a like fervour.

[1] 1 Cor. v. 6.

EIGHTEENTH CONFERENCE

ON EXTERIOR SILENCE

In silence shall your strength be.—Isaiah xxx. 15.

ONE of the most important of your rules is that which concerns the observance of silence, therefore it is necessary for me to say at least a few words on this subject; and I propose to speak of exterior silence—that of the lips.

To a certain extent, all Christians are bound to observe silence and, for them, it consists in avoiding those idle words, for which Christ, our Lord, says: 'they shall render an account in the day of judgment.'[1] The rules concerning conversation, laid down by St. Paul, are binding upon all Christ's disciples. The Apostle bids his converts think—and, in consequence, speak—only of things that are true, modest, just, holy, lovely, and of good fame.[2] All have need to bear in mind the words of the wise man—words, alas, which are too often unheeded: 'In the multitude of words, there shall not want sin.'[3]

But the obligation to watch over the tongue is

[1] St. Matt. xii. 36. [2] Phil. iv. 8.
[3] Prov. x. 19.

far more binding upon the religious, to whom we may apply the words of Jeremias: 'He shall sit solitary and hold his peace, because he hath taken it upon himself.'[1]

The rule attaches a great importance to the strict and literal observance of silence. This is clear from the energetic tone of the wording of the precept, and it is necessary for you, my dear Sisters, to know what is enjoined on you, over and above the obligations, common to all Christians, to which I have just referred.

You are occupied in active works of charity; therefore, you are not asked to keep absolute, perpetual silence. This would be incompatible with your vocation. What the rule requires is that you should only speak when, and where, it is absolutely necessary, and as befits a religious. You are not allowed to converse freely as seculars do, because such freedom of speech would inevitably lead to loss of time, and dissipation. Excess in conversation is bound to encourage a multitude of thoughts, which would be utterly out of keeping with the serious, supernatural tone, which should characterise all religious. In addition to this prudent reserve, the rule requires that, at certain times and places, silence must be rigidly observed, not only in word, but also by avoiding all that might trouble, or even lessen, the spirit of interior recollection.

Silence kept faithfully and supernaturally, as we have explained, becomes a true virtue, and

[1] Lam. iii. 28.

obtains for all who observe it a precious source of countless blessings and strength.

In the first place, the practice of silence leads to an eminent degree of mortification, which, since it is the very essence of the spiritual life, plays an important part in a religious community. Indeed, a great deal of the good done in a religious house is due to the practice of exterior silence.

Religious Life is a kind of crucifixion of the soul with Christ. Thus, St. Paul speaks of being 'crucified to the world,'[1] and, in another passage, he explains that those who are dead to the world must 'mortify' their 'members which are upon earth.'[2] Among these, there is one that is most difficult to keep in check—that 'unruly member,' the tongue.

God has given us a tongue that we may communicate with our fellows. The gift of speech is very precious, and in exercising it, men find a real pleasure. It affords exercise and an outlet for our intelligence, imagination, and emotions. Our whole being finds satisfaction and joy in the exchange of thought, and all those exterior relations, of which the tongue is the instrument. So great is this pleasure that, oftentimes, we find it difficult to refrain from speaking. Hence it follows inevitably that, when an exterior force obliges a man to keep silence, he must necessarily suffer. Numerous examples prove this. Thus the deaf suffer because they are hampered in their intercourse with their fellows, and cannot freely exchange ideas. Deaf mutes are even more to be pitied. Their lot was

[1] Gal. vi. 14. [2] Col. iii. 5.

indeed sad, until, in recent times, science and charity combined have found means of teaching them to communicate their needs and ideas. Formerly, those deprived of speech were characterised by melancholy far more than the blind, who, to judge superficially, are much more grievously afflicted.

But it is needless to seek further to establish the fact that it is difficult to overcome the desire to speak. Your personal experience proves that it is very difficult to keep back something you long to say, to refuse yourself the satisfaction of saying just one word, of asking a question to content your curiosity—a fault so inherent to our nature.

Who does not know what it is to burn to know the news, and in order to gratify this desire to set all the senses in movement, more especially that of hearing? Consequently, it is very meritorious to keep silence, and repress all these eager desires, especially when we live with those who equally desire to speak, and whose very presence, combined with their ability to satisfy our curiosity, excites it more vehemently.

Nuns live in community, and this makes the practice of silence even more difficult to observe. The hermit in his solitary cell, inaccessible to his fellows, has less merit and less difficulty in keeping silence. All conduces to help him to observe it. But, in a religious house, we live side by side, our occupations even oblige us to be with our sisters, and yet we may not speak without necessity, and even then briefly and in a whisper. Clearly, this requires great effort and continual mortification.

Those who teach in the schools know how difficult it is to enforce silence there, how continually they have to reprove the children for breaking silence during class hours. In youth, there is a plenitude of life which finds an outlet in words that, so often, exhortations, promises, scoldings, and even punishments fail to hold in check, especially with young children. Well, my dear Sisters, in this respect you resemble the children you teach. Like them, you must practise mortification, if you would keep your rule of silence faithfully.

Now this mortification is all the more praiseworthy, in your case, because of its continuity. We may apply to the law of silence the words quoted by the Apostle St. Paul: 'For Thy sake we are put to death all the day long';[1] for silence is no intermittent mortification for religious, but one ever present. Other practices of mortification are confined to given days and hours, they are exacted at intervals, as for example, mortification at table, which has to do only with mealtimes. Even as salt is used in all foods, so silence is ever incumbent on the religious, except during recreation.

If you have understood my explanations concerning silence, and if you fully realise its nature and importance, you will realise how diligently you ought to comply with all the regulations on this point.. You will be very attentive never to break the great silence, which it is customary to observe in all convents at stated times. The saintly founders of religious orders attach a special importance to

[1] Rom. viii. 36.

silence being observed in the chapel, refectory, chapter hall, and dormitory. But the fervent religious not only observes the great silence, she is also careful never to speak in times or places of ordinary silence, without necessity.

Even in doing your work, my dear Sisters, you can limit your words to those that are necessary, and be careful to speak quietly. In dealing with your pupils you can edify them by your moderation and courtesy in speech. Necessarily, you are thrown in contact with seculars, to whom, by your calmness, prudent reserve, and constant charity you are called to do good. The world has eagle's eyes for the defects of a religious; therefore, never give these rigorous critics reason to reproach you with sinning against charity in words. Let them see by your demeanour and conversation that you are a true religious, animated by those noble sentiments which befit a spouse of Christ.

Even in recreation, when conversations are permitted with one another, a certain reserve befits all religious. It needs mortification and constant vigilance to repress over-eagerness in sustaining a discussion, or in asserting an opinion; and to refrain from any undue levity of manner. If these things are unseemly, even in seculars how much more so are they unworthy of a religious?

Hence it is clear that the law of silence is far reaching, since it governs so great a portion of your lives, and is a fruitful source of merit and virtue, precisely because, in order to keep it integrally, so much mortification is required.

Moreover, this particular form of mortification is within reach of every one of you. There are some religious who, on account of bad health or their occupations, cannot perform certain corporal penances, but who could justly plead her inability to observe silence? No bodily infirmities could be put forward as an excuse. You see this clearly. Therefore, in spite of ill health and continual labour, the bodily mortification of keeping silence is well within your powers, and, at the same time, it will bring you a rich harvest of merits and virtues.

Therefore, be even more vigilant as regards silence than in the past. Examine yourselves frequently as to how far you are making progress and what further means you might take to advance more rapidly. For one, it may need more attention not to break the silence through thoughtlessness, or impetuosity, while another may find it necessary to speak more softly and calmly. All efforts to observe the rule of silence perfectly cannot fail to attain their corresponding fruits of holiness.

Another great benefit of the rule of silence is the edification it gives in the community and, first of all, the mutual edification of the members. When each and all are occupied with the various duties assigned to them in silence and recollection, the community presents an imposing spectacle. There is no levity, idleness, or useless conversation. All are silently and industriously doing their work. In such a house there is an atmosphere of peace and happiness, even a foretaste of Paradise, and it has a great influence for good over all who dwell therein.

Seculars are in the whirl of earth's many interests and, consequently, have great difficulty in leading a supernatural life. 'The Lord is not in the earthquake,'[1] and those whose lives are one long, tumultuous scene cannot lead a life of close union with Him. In a religious house all is so different, and the exterior silence tends to increase the union of the soul with its God. The silent, calm atmosphere of the convent is a continual and powerful incentive to virtue. The sisters edify one another, that is, they literally build up one another in virtue, and the thoughts of all are more easily fixed on eternal realities. As they silently pass and repass along the corridors, they are free to converse with God, and His society is infinitely preferable to that of creatures.

When all the members of a community take this true, supernatural view of the observance of silence, it becomes easy and agreeable to keep; rarely does the temptation to violate the rule assail them, or if it should surprise them, they easily overcome the tempter. Each holds herself responsible for maintaining the rule, and the sight of a community thus silently working for their God and, at the same time, conversing with Him, surely offers, even to the holy angels, a sight worthy of their admiration.

If silence thus observed enchants the angels of God, it also has a powerful influence over seculars, upon whom it produces a strange and salutary emotion. What most strikes the casual visitor when entering a religious house? Is it not the

[1] 3 Kings xix. 11.

perfect silence which reigns there? What a contrast it offers to the incessant flow of conversation—often so inane—in the world! This is particularly noticeable in those severe Orders of monks, who make the heroic vow of perpetual silence. Visitors are often overcome by emotion when passing along the cloisters of the Trappist or Carthusian Monasteries. There is something so unearthly in this solemn silence that souls have been brought back to God under its salutary influence. It has even effected the conversion of notorious sinners.

In those convents, like yours, my dear Sisters, where speaking is permitted at times, the effects of silence are less remarkable; still, they are visible whenever the regulations on the point are faithfully kept. A secular, who visits the convent during the hours of silence, is edified by what she sees. All is calm, there are no groups of nuns talking together, no sign of frivolity or dissipation. If it be the hour for recreation, the visitor is edified by the modesty and peaceful happiness of the sisters. The community presents a living image of that 'mildness and modesty of Christ,'[1] which should characterise all who live in the presence of God.

Your visitor will withdraw edified by the vision she has seen of religious silence and peace. She will have learned a profitable lesson. In the cloister, your silence will have preached an eloquent sermon, more eloquent than words, for the sight of your happiness and peace, in that atmosphere of severe silence, forms a striking contrast to the unhappiness

[1] 2 Cor. x. 1.

of worldlings even in the midst of their most exciting conversations.

Further, the observance of silence is an immense assistance to each of you individually, since it keeps you from those numerous imperfections which result from breaking this rule. This is manifest from St. James's energetic words, in which he points out the evils that come from an unbridled tongue. He writes: 'If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.'[1] Undoubtedly, these familiar words apply to all Christ's disciples and, consequently, more rigorously to religious, who profess to keep silence more strictly than seculars.

Clearly, St. James places perfection in vigilance over the tongue, and if you will think over this matter carefully, you cannot fail to perceive how extremely appropriate his words are to your holy vocation. For whence spring the greater number of faults in religious houses as elsewhere? May we not trace them to the tongue? The sins committed by the tongue are innumerable and, though they do not always constitute a grievous breach of the law of charity, still the tongue easily develops into an instrument for expressing resentment, antipathy, impatience, and jealousy. These faults can, and do, exist even in a convent, simply because all the inmates are fallen children of Adam, and the religious habit does not instantly destroy nature with all its evil tendencies. If religious all observed silence—as I have explained it—from how much

[1] St. James iii. 2.

spiritual uneasiness and sadness they would be delivered! For to practise silence perfectly would ensure their rapid advancement in holiness, since he who is able to bridle his tongue can 'lead about the whole body.'

St. James multiplies comparisons to prove this assertion. He writes: 'We put bits into the mouths of horses, that they may obey us, and we turn about their whole body. Behold also ships, whereas they are great, and are driven by strong winds, yet are they turned about by a small helm, whithersoever the force of the governor willeth. So the tongue also is indeed a little member, and boasteth great things.'

Yes, the religious who can perfectly rule her tongue controls her passions, avoids the devil's snares, and is truly free.

On the other hand, the abuse of the tongue is like a small flame which lights up a huge conflagration. It would be terrible to see human passions striving for the mastery in the cloister, and the havoc spreading as rapidly as when a forest is on fire. Yet this might come to pass if the rules of silence were systematically ignored.

All founders of Religious Orders have attached great importance to the observance of silence. All masters of the spiritual life esteem it of capital importance. They quote the text I have chosen for this conference in proof of their views: 'In silence shall your strength be'—strength to walk in the paths of virtue.

Silence, my dear Sisters, is, as I have said,

your rampart against the attacks of the spirit of the world and its frivolous agitation. In the practice of silence, you will find a defensive weapon, powerful against the enemies of your salvation. The devil fears this religious silence because he has experienced its strength, also he tempts less frequently those communities where it is in honour. Rarely does he gain signal victories over a religious who keeps the rule of silence perfectly.

In conclusion, my dear Sisters, I wish to repeat what I said in commencing this conference. Silence is a priceless treasure and therefore difficult to acquire and retain. I do not disguise the difficulty, nor the obstacles that beset your path, but I wish to urge you to combat them, even more generously than in the past. To spur you on to do this, I would bid you look attentively at your Divine Master. His example will lighten your labour.

He is the Master of silence, as of divine eloquence. The 'Imitation' warns us that 'none can speak safely, if he is not prepared to keep silence willingly.'[1] In Jesus, we see this grand principle in action. He had the right to speak unceasingly. From His divine lips only useful, sanctifying words could fall. Was it not an imperative duty for Him to teach continually, since He came upon earth to evangelise? It would seem so, but, in truth, how did He act?

He passed the greater part of His Life upon earth in silence and obscurity. He is the 'silent Word'! What an apparent contradiction in terms!

[1] Book i. c. xx.

Yet the Fathers of the Church write these words, as a description of Christ our Lord. In the manger of Bethlehem, in the workshop of Nazareth, in presence of His judges in Jerusalem, in the hands of the cruel soldiers, and on the cross, Jesus kept silence: He was the silent Word.

Contemplate the Incarnate Word in the Tabernacle. There, too, He keeps silence, and by His example He invites you to imitate Him, to find your strength and hope in the practice of silence. There He Himself teaches you that: 'In silence shall your strength be.'

NINETEENTH CONFERENCE

ON INTERIOR SILENCE OR RECOLLECTION

It is good to wait with silence for the salvation of God.—Lam. iii. 26.

In the preceding conference I dwelt upon the observance of *exterior* silence, in conformity with the rule; in this instruction I propose calling your attention to the great importance of *interior silence*, because it is impossible to persevere in the observance of exterior silence without interior recollection, which is its principle and mainstay.

Interior recollection consists in keeping the faculties of the mind well under control, and in a calm, regulated disposition. It has a special bearing on the imagination—that 'domestic fool,' as St. Theresa calls it. For some persons, imagination holds the sceptre; they love to sit and dream idly of all kinds of subjects, which—in the case of a religious—are, to say the least, useless and distracting. Moreover, people who give the reins to their imagination, are unable to concentrate their thoughts and energy within the narrow, prosaic circle of the duty of the present hour.

Now, the practice of interior silence or recollection

is the best weapon for attacking the defect of dissipation, since it enables nuns to retain the control of their imagination, to close their ears to the news of the world, to refuse to interest themselves in all those distractions which are so welcome to seculars.

If we wish to dry up a stream, we must prevent the source from feeding it. It would be useless labour simply to bale out the water, since the fountain head would at once supply as much, or more, than was taken out of it. The only means of success would be to dam or divert the source in another direction.

Now, apply this to the impetuous torrent of words that so often pours forth from the tongue. Our 'unruly member' is simply the outlet: the source lies deep within the soul. You can only be faithful to the exterior observance of silence on condition that you practise interior silence. If you would cut off the flow of words, look to the source. This is why I have chosen recollection as the subject of this conference: it completes the matter treated of in the preceding instruction.

There is a very intimate connection between peace and interior silence, since the latter establishes and preserves the former in the soul. As I have developed the great advantages of peace in a previous instruction, it will not be necessary for me to point out the value of this interior recollection, as the harbinger of peace. It was peace you sought, when —wearied and troubled by all the restless pleasures and worries of the world—you took refuge in

Religious Life, as in a port of safety. The religious has made an indissoluble contract with God, and this is an ever-flowing source of divine peace. But is this peace inexhaustible? Not in itself: the religious can enjoy it at will; it is proper to her holy vocation, and yet she herself can stop the flow of peace. How so? By again opening the avenues of her soul to the vain solicitudes which she had professed to give up; by emulating worldlings in their search for earth's baubles; by being anxious for the future, and by hugging the illusion that, for her, happiness is never to be found where she is, but somewhere else. Now, all these disquieting elements disappear wherever interior silence reigns.

Unquestionably, religious have their cares, more especially those who are called to the active life, but these solicitudes—since they are in accordance with the Will of God, and in so far as they are connected with the discharge of duty—are no obstacle to recollection. Naturally, those who teach children or nurse the sick are bound to foresee how they can best discharge their respective duties. Every occupation gives a certain preoccupation, even though the office be very insignificant. But preoccupations of this kind do not distract the soul that desires above all to please God, and to live in His Presence. God and His commands are the origin and end of such preoccupations, hence they cannot endanger the peace of the soul. Trouble and anxiety can get no purchase over a religious who discharges her duties faithfully and even ardently, because her zeal and alacrity are supernatural.

Her eagerness is not like that of Martha, to whom Jesus said reproachfully: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful, and art troubled about many things.' [1]

It is, however, perfectly possible for a religious, while strictly confining her energy to the work given her, to allow herself to be carried away by natural activity and impetuosity, which are unequivocal proofs that she is wanting in purity of intention, that she looks too much at things from the human point of view. So long as she is the *slave* instead of the *mistress* of her occupations, so long as she allows them to absorb all her thoughts, time, and activity, then, however good these things may be in themselves, since they leave her no time for God, and her own soul, this religious will never attain to recollection. St. Bernard speaks very gravely of this danger to Pope Eugene III, formerly one of his monks, who had been unexpectedly called from a secluded cloister to the honour and responsibility of the Papal Throne. The Saint conjures this Pope not to forget his own sanctification in his zeal for his brethren, and tells him that the very first object of charity is his own soul, to which all other interests, even spiritual, are secondary.

If this be true, even for the Sovereign Pontiff, how much more forcibly does it apply to the religious! She can never advance in interior silence if, having quitted the world corporally, she remains attached to it in spirit, desiring to know all that passes, troubling herself about things alien to her calling and

[1] St. Luke x. 41.

attaching herself to its interests. The 'Imitation' has an excellent passage on this subject; it says: 'We might have much peace, if we would not busy ourselves with the sayings and doings of other people, and with things which concern us not.'[1] These words have a special application to religious, since peace is pre-eminently her appanage, by the fact of her renunciation of the world's occupations and obligations, which no longer materially enchain her. If in the seclusion of their cloistered life religious do not walk in the royal paths of peace, the fault lies at their own door. As Thomas à Kempis says: 'How can he long abide in peace, who entangleth himself with other people's concerns; who seeketh occasions abroad; who little or seldom recollecteth himself interiorly?'[1]

Bearing in mind this weighty declaration, you would do well, my dear Sisters, to examine whether you endeavour to practise interior silence, whether you generously overcome all that is contrary to recollection. Ask yourself whether you allow any interest—however intrinsically good—to wholly absorb your thoughts, and thus deprive you of your interior liberty. These mere human anxieties may be centred in manifold objects, corporal or spiritual, personal or general, but the effect is always the same with regard to interior recollection. These exterior tumultuous voices make it impossible for the soul to dwell in peace and silence. Therefore, whatever be the price, we must free ourselves from their harmful influence by our practical esteem

[1] Book i. c. xi.

for the gift of peace and consequently for its true source—interior silence.

We read in the book of Osee: 'I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness, and I will speak to her heart.'[1] If this be the condition under which God speaks more closely and intimately to the soul, then we have here a powerful incentive for practising interior silence. It is one of your most valued privileges, as religious, to converse with God familiarly and devoutly, as a child speaks with its father, a wife with her husband. You have renounced worldly conversations—often so prolonged and dangerous—in order to enjoy the society of Him, whose conversation 'hath no bitterness,' and in whose company there is no 'tediousness, but joy and gladness,'[2] and you wish to hear His words, which are 'more to be desired than gold and many precious stones, and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.'[3]

Interior silence will assure you the fulness of this privilege. God is faithful to the implicit promise contained in your consecration to Him as your Spouse. He will visit and converse with you on condition that you open the door when He knocks, and give Him a hearty welcome. Like an intimate friend, who calls in unexpectedly, God often visits the silent soul and speaks words of joy and encouragement. He loves to come frequently, because His delights are 'to be with the children of men.'[4]

This explains the frequent and consoling inter-

[1] Osee ii. 14.
[2] Wisdom viii. 16.
[3] Psalm xviii. 11.
[4] 1 Prov. viii. 31.

course which exists between God and His saints, whom He visited often, because He always found them on the watch for His coming—ready to hear and answer Him. If, when He knocks at the door of some souls, He finds them besieged with numerous cares and preoccupations, how can He enter? He must pass by those souls, because being thus distracted they would not even hear His low voice. It is often thus with worldlings. God either keeps silence, or He speaks to them in vain. This might likewise happen to the religious, were she careless about the observance of interior silence, which is so necessary if God is to speak to her soul.

Moreover, this neglect of recollection would prevent the soul from finding God when, in her turn, and at certain times fixed by the rule, she seeks to converse with Him. God is the master of His gifts. Often, when dealing with those consecrated to Him, He takes the initiative. He comes unexpectedly, as and when He pleases. Still, there are set times, ordained by His Divine Providence, when He makes an appointment with His own; there are moments when the religious is justified in expecting a visit. And He will not fail to come, if the soul maintains itself in recollection. But if He does not find that soul in the attitude of attention, then He withdraws, and His words are fulfilled: 'You shall seek Me, and shall not find Me.'[1]

In the course of the day, religious have their various spiritual exercises to perform—meditation,

[1] St. John vii. 34.

Holy Mass, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the Divine Office or that of our Lady. To perform these devotions devoutly, they must be recollected. Countless distractions, about earthly interests, will not vanish as by enchantment the moment the bell rings for prayer, nor can those who nourish these preoccupations find sweetness therein. . . . Like a heavy weight, these cares will draw them down to earth, and prevent their souls from communing with God. They can no more rise promptly to spiritual intercourse with God than a bird could fly were its wings weighted with lead. Remove the obstacle, and the bird can take its flight. Remove the exterior dissipation, and the religious can rise to the enjoyment of spiritual realities. Even as a balloon, filled with gas which is lighter than air, darts upwards the moment the rope is loosed which held it captive, so the religious whose mind and affections are always centred in God rises to Him. In the words of the Scriptures, she has disposed her heart 'to ascend by steps,'[1] 'her conversation is in Heaven,' and all her thoughts tend thither.

If her obligations keep her, at times, chained to earth and prevent her from continually ascending to her God, at least she turns spontaneously to Him the instant that bond is severed. Like all other mortals she has her 'time of clouds,' her dark hours and days, her difficulties and temptations. Alternatives of light and shadow are inseparable from our creatureship, but those, whose

[1] Psalm lxxxiii. 6.

souls are prepared to converse with their Creator, will always receive ample spiritual refreshment and strength.

Another advantage of interior recollection, which disposes the soul for union and conversation with God, is that it likewise renders all intercourse with our fellows safer and more profitable. These relations—though inevitable and lawful—nevertheless have their dangers. If, my dear Sisters, you would mingle unscathed with the world in the limits of your vocation, be faithful to the virtue of recollection. If you know how to keep this interior silence, you will be wise and prudent in your speech. When Christ sent His Apostles forth into the world, He said to them: 'Lay it up therefore in your hearts not to meditate before how you shall answer.'[1] In a sense, God deals thus with those who guard interior silence faithfully. When the moment comes for them to speak, He gives them 'a mouth and wisdom' which men cannot 'resist nor gainsay.'

The Spirit of God, with whom the religious converses habitually, will direct her thoughts, judgments, and words when she deals with her neighbour. Her deep interior life will be revealed by equanimity, self-possession, and a marvellous facility for promptly adapting herself to circumstances. Her whole demeanour breathes forth peace and happiness, and all who have relations with her are impressed by these signs of spiritual life, the fruits of prayer and interior silence.

It is impossible to counterfeit these virtues.

[1] St. Luke xxi. 16.

If one who lacked this deep inner life were to strive to model her words and gestures after the pattern of some holy religious, it would soon be revealed as a spurious imitation; the first unpleasantness or contradiction would show the worthlessness of these apparent virtues. Nor can natural talents—unstable and incomplete in themselves—however brilliant, make up for the lack of interior recollection.

Therefore, my dear Sisters, endeavour to profit fully by the ample means of advancing in the true inner spiritual life—means which the rule provides so abundantly. Only by interior sanctity can you rise to the height of your calling, and become true religious upon whom God can look with complacency. You may, for a time, without this deep inner life, occupy yourselves zealously with various works of charity, but, remember, you did not enter a convent merely to labour, but to sanctify yourselves.

The life of the soul, which consists in union with God, is the only real life. Jesus lived thus in intimate union with His Father during His life upon earth, and those who wish to be true spouses of Christ strive to imitate Him and by prayer and Holy Communion to live by Him.

In the Holy Eucharist, our Lord gives us a marvellous example of interior silence, and in souls where this silence reigns He accomplishes great things. He isolates them from earthly things that He may reveal heavenly mysteries to them, and, because all their faculties are steeped in peace and silence, they are ever quick to hear His sweet voice, ever prompt to obey it lovingly.

TWENTIETH CONFERENCE

KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.—2 Peter iii. 18.

In Jesus Christ are centred all the grandeurs, privileges, duties, and responsibilities of Religious Life. He is its 'Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end,' since it is based entirely upon His teaching and examples, which religious strive to assimilate and follow.

Whence it follows logically that you must always contemplate your Divine Model, who is alike 'the Author and Finisher of faith,'[1] and of your sanctification. So far, my dear Sisters, we have considered the greatness and duties of Religious Life in the abstract. We will now turn to the concrete side and meditate upon our Divine Master, that we may realise something, at least, of our indebtedness to Him, and learn all He would fain be to us, provided we respond to His invitation to mount higher—to approach more closely to Him than ordinary Christians.

What are your obligations, as religious, towards

[1] Heb. xii. 1.

Christ, your Lord? Clearly the first is to know Him.

St. Peter tells us: 'Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven, given to men, whereby we must be saved.'[1] All true religion consists, therefore, in knowing Jesus Christ. Every Christian must study Him, who is the source of the life of grace upon earth and of glory in Heaven. He Himself lays this down as the one necessary condition: 'Now this is eternal life; that they may know Thee and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.'[2]

If this be true of the happiness of the saints in Heaven, where they know God and contemplate the Sacred Humanity of the Word made flesh, it also holds good of the life of grace upon earth. The unique and indispensable condition for attaining to the enjoyment of the Beatific Vision in eternity is that each—according to his vocation, and in the measure of the grace given him—should know Jesus Christ in this world. According to the recommendation of the Prince of the Apostles, all Christians should strive to progress daily in this divine science. Naturally, this obligation is even more incumbent upon religious, who are not only closely united to Him in virtue of their baptism, but have tightened this bond of union by their voluntary act of self-dedication to His service as religious.

The very title they bear, 'the brides of Christ,' is a proof of this greater obligation. It is patent

[1] Acts iv. 12. [2] St. John xvii. 3.

that the spouse should have a more intimate knowledge of her Lord than the simple child of God, therefore, in this conference, I wish to place before you some considerations, which will enable you to grasp this truth in all its fulness and practical consequences.

The duties which you are called to discharge presuppose and exact a knowledge of our blessed Lord. All your life is consecrated to practising great and onerous duties. Do not deceive yourselves, you have a heavy cross to carry, but, at the same time, this cross is your glory and, one day, it will be your chief claim to an eternal reward. But how can you attain to a degree of sanctity which is so far superior to that asked of the simple faithful? By striving to know Christ, for He who gives us the Evangelical Counsels, and the example of all virtues, alone can give us grace to practise them.

Before Jesus trod this earth of ours, men had no conception of the virtues proper to Religious Life—namely, poverty, obedience, and chastity. As the ages passed on their course, God gradually enlightened the Jews, His chosen people. These virtues were dimly foreshadowed, but it was reserved for Jesus Christ to reveal them in their noonday splendour. He realised fully all the dim prophetic types of virtue: with the advent of Jesus into the world, came that of the evangelical virtues. Those who were privileged to come nearest to Him and to know Him as the Messias, were also the first to practise these sublime virtues. We might name our Blessed Lady, St. Joseph, the Apostles, disciples,

and the ministering women. Moreover, we perceive that, in proportion as they grew in the knowledge of the God Man, they set forth His virtues in their lives. Thus Mary, the most perfect of all creatures, is also the most perfect imitatress of Jesus, her Divine Son, with whom she lived in such close union.

This principle still holds good. In the world there is so little virtue worthy of an eternal reward. Why is this? Because men know little or nothing of their Lord, the God of virtues. Therefore they are in ignorance of His doctrine, promises, threats, and commandments; they are incapable of understanding the counsels. While the faithful are struck with admiration at the marvellous harmony of the doctrines and prescriptions of the spiritual code of life, they are not infrequently utterly incapable of understanding the counsels of perfection—nay, often they are scandalised by them. Those who walk far from Christ, who do not know Him who is 'the light of the world,' plunge daily into deeper night, as they retire from the divine focus of all illumination.

The nearer souls follow Christ, the greater insight they have into truth, and, in consequence, they necessarily grow in virtue. By meditating on His virtues, so numerous and attractive, they feel impelled to imitate Him. The insight they have thus obtained is a foretaste of the Beatific Vision, which in Heaven will eternally be their rest and joy. It is, and ever will be, the principle of all sanctity. Sometimes we marvel at the heroism of the saints, we cannot understand how they were able con-

stantly to practise such sublime virtues. Yet the explanation is very simple. Their heroism had its source in their knowledge of Christ. They knew Him more intimately than the simple faithful. Enlightened interiorly, they were attracted by the beauty and fruitfulness of virtue, and this knowledge either removed their natural repugnance for the labour of acquiring virtue, or enabled them to overcome it. It is characteristic of the light that Jesus gives, and of which His Divine Heart is the source, that it not only opens the intelligence, but also enamours the soul of virtue and strengthens the will to acquire it. Thus Thomas à Kempis exclaims: 'If thou hadst once perfectly entered into the interior of Jesus!' Truly, if only religious would deeply study His incomparable teaching, they would be irresistibly impelled to pursue with ardour the work of their perfection, by the acquisition of virtues proper to their state of life.

There is another reason why religious should endeavour to excel in the sublime science of the saints, and that is because they have chosen Jesus Christ as their Spouse and portion for ever. He desires to be theirs most ardently—according to His promise to be their All-in-all—and, manifestly, this cannot be realised if they do not know Him intimately.

Generally speaking, the simple faithful do not experience the pressing need of knowing Jesus intimately, nor is this deeper knowledge an obligation for them. They have relations with their neighbours which are denied to religious, and though they

rarely find all they desire in their intercourse with creatures, nevertheless they do find some peace, consolation, and joy in these relations with their equals.

You, my dear Sisters, have generously renounced all earthly relations, as far as it is lawful to do so. You have chosen God for your heritage, therefore, unless you break your sacred promises and renounce your glorious privileges, you cannot seek your strength and consolation, except in Christ. He has promised to console and help you in your needs, and He alone can fulfil this promise. Now in order that you should instinctively turn to Jesus to supply your needs, it is absolutely essential for you to know Him by prayer and meditation. Thus will you pierce the clouds that enshroud Him, acquire a knowledge of His attributes, and have a solid base for your profound conviction of His Divine attributes, of His goodness, mercy, and patience; in a word, of all those virtues which attract so powerfully the love of the creature.

Examine how human relations work out. Does not the degree of intimacy depend on the knowledge which people mutually have of one another? If we have only a passing acquaintance, we are reserved with people and even feel embarrassed in their presence. We exchange a few polite phrases, we may even converse freely on indifferent subjects, but we are careful not to go below the surface, not to speak of intimate matters. When we know a person intimately and are certain of his kindly feeling for us, then we freely give him our confidence; holding nothing back, we speak heart to heart.

Apply these considerations to our blessed Lord. If we treat Him merely as an acquaintance, if our relations with Him are formal and cold, if we remain on the surface in speaking with Him, surely this proves that we do not know Him intimately, and, as loving intercourse can only accompany and follow intimate knowledge, we have need to put in practice the apostolic exhortation: 'Grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.'

I now pass to a third consideration. As religious you have exceptional advantages for studying Jesus Christ, and it is your duty to realise this, that you may profit by these opportunities. You can learn to know Him by studying His life, as set forth by eye-witnesses in the inspired narratives of the Holy Gospels. They were written by disciples of Jesus; by men who could have applied to themselves the words of St. John: 'That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life, . . . we declare unto you.'[1] In the Gospels, Jesus Christ is revealed in all His truth and beauty. There, we hear His words; we see Him in action; we learn to esteem His Divine attributes of mercy, patience, humility, and goodness; there, too, He reveals His infinite love, in all its attractiveness, that—in the words of St. Paul—we 'may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth'[2] of the charity of Christ.

We do not sufficiently prize the incomparable

[1] 1 St. John i. 1. [2] Eph. iii. 18.

treasure of the Gospels. Yet it is within the reach of all. While spiritual books, which offer a certain novelty, are read eagerly, the golden book of the Gospels is left on one side, and yet it is the one book from which we can learn the all-perfect Life of Jesus. We teach the Gospel narratives to our children, we read the Sunday Gospels, and hear them chanted at High Mass and often go no further. Yet how advantageous it would be to read a few passages daily, to study it seriously, to make it the subject of our meditations! Thus should we become truly versed in the knowledge of Christ, while our affections and intelligence would find abundant nourishment.

We cannot be said really to know a person unless, in addition to recognising his bodily features, we are conversant with his life-story, his character, his habits, and have had intimate relations with him. Now the Holy Gospels furnish us with all that is requisite for knowing Jesus Christ thus. It suffices to meditate on the Gospels (instead of reading them hurriedly through). If studied, they truly nourish the soul. To quote the 'Imitation' once more: 'The teaching of Christ surpasseth all the teaching of the saints, and he that hath His Spirit, will find therein a hidden manna.'[1]

In the narratives of the accredited authors of the Life of Jesus you can find ample matter concerning Him, and it is important to dwell upon every detail, since each helps you to form some idea of your Divine Saviour. If a child, before attaining

[1] Book i. c. i.

to the use of reason, has lost his father, that child might acquire some knowledge of him from letters and family documents. Jesus bids us know Him and we find this knowledge in the Scriptures, which, as He tells us, testify concerning Him.

We must, however, confess that to attain to this sublime knowledge of Jesus Christ, something more than human industry is required. Jesus must come to our assistance and reveal Himself to us. How willingly He does this! The inspired words concerning wisdom may be applied to the Word Incarnate: 'Wisdom is easily seen by them that love her, and is found by them that seek her. She preventeth them that covet her, so that she first showeth herself unto them. He that awaketh early to seek her, shall not labour, for he shall find her sitting at his door.'[1]

Yes, Jesus, our Lord and Master, manifests Himself to those who are attentive and recollected. By His interior illumination, He gives them, in an instant, that knowledge of Himself which books are inadequate to supply. He leads the soul into the desert, and there speaks intimately with it. Who can set forth worthily all He teaches the soul? In the lives of the Saints, we obtain a glimpse of the supernatural favours which He showered upon these pure souls. To some, who were unskilled in worldly sciences, He gave great insight into His divine attributes of power, justice, mercy, and all His other perfections. Under His marvellous direction, the saints learned to know Jesus, to

[1] Wisdom vi. 13.

converse with Him. They excelled in this knowledge, and who can discover all their secrets!

Why should not all religious strive to know Him thus intimately? It is one of their privileges to come face to face with Him so often. Like St. Mary Magdalene, they can sit at His feet, listening to His teaching and questioning Him. They can keep His words in their soul after the example of our dear Lady, and thus learn divine truths, which the world, in its feverish turmoil, neither knows nor cares to learn. The daily meditation, examination of conscience, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and the use of ejaculatory prayers during your occupations, all help you to bear in mind what He thought, said, and did. Thus, daily your knowledge of Him grows in width and depth, till it comes to form an integral part of your very being.

There is another means of studying Jesus Christ, even more efficacious than meditating in silence and contemplation at the foot of your crucifix or before the Tabernacle, and it, likewise, is one of the inherent privileges of your calling. This means to which I allude is Holy Communion. It is, above all, at the Eucharistic Banquet that Jesus Christ manifests Himself to the soul, even as He revealed His Presence to the disciples of Emmaus. We are told it was when 'He took bread, and blessed, and brake and gave it to them,' that 'their eyes were opened, and they knew Him.'[1] The Eucharist is alike a mystery of faith and of vision, and the revelation of our hidden God is made to the soul in propor-

[1] St. Luke xxiv. 30.

tion to its living faith. To those who live by faith, Jesus reveals Himself and gives a foretaste of the eternal revelation, which Heaven reserves for the redeemed.

According to the opinion of the Fathers of the Church, St. John owed his deep penetration of the mystery of the Incarnation to the knowledge Jesus communicated to him when this beloved disciple leaned on His Master's bosom at the Last Supper. Hence, St. John is symbolised by the eagle, which rises in its flight so far above all other birds. But the privilege of resting on our Saviour's bosom is even surpassed by His visits to the inmost soul, and how often does He thus unite Himself to His own, and even more frequently to religious! Each time Jesus thus honours His spouses, they should profit by the plenitude of grace and truth which He so ardently yearns to impart to them.

We are told that when St. Philip said to our Lord, 'Show us the Father, and it is enough for us,' Jesus reproachfully answered: 'So long a time have I been with you, and have you not known Me?'[1] Might He not address the same reproof to some who, after long years spent in religion, in an astonishing familiarity with all the means of grace, such as prayer, the Holy Gospels, and Holy Communion, still know Him so imperfectly? Must we not conclude that they have not properly utilised the precious talents confided to their care? They have seen His example, lived in the light of His Presence, and yet they are in ignorance or illusion as to His

[1] St. John xiv. 9.

desires, intentions, and views of human things. Often, Christians know earthly friends better than their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

My dear Sisters, I exhort you never to deserve this reproach of Christ. If you have hitherto been negligent in studying Him, begin to do so now in earnest. Esteem the knowledge of Jesus, study His life and teaching incessantly. If you are in earnest learning this blessed science, hereafter your laborious—though, nevertheless, consoling—efforts will be rewarded by the full and perfect knowledge of God, which in eternity will be His gift to the redeemed, and likewise the reward of their serious study here upon earth. In Heaven we shall know, even as we are known.

TWENTY-FIRST CONFERENCE

NUNS SHOULD INCREASE IN THE LOVE OF OUR LORD

Lovest thou Me more than these?—St. John xxi. 15.

When Jesus appeared to His disciples on the shores of the Lake of Tiberias, He put this question to St. Peter: 'Lovest thou Me more than these?' that is, more than the other Apostles and disciples there present. What was St. Peter's reply? He answered: 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love thee.' Peter knew that he really loved His Master, that he had a sincere desire to love Him more, but, remembering his sin, he was content to assert that he loved Christ, though, out of humility, he dare not affirm his love for Christ to be greater than that his brethren bore their Master.

May we not take our Lord's question to His Vicar as addressed to each whom He has called to consecrate themselves to Him in Religious Life? Surely, in their inmost souls, religious are conscious that, in virtue of their high calling, Jesus is ever asking them if their love is genuine, if it fulfils

all the conditions required. It is but just that religious should love Him more than the simple faithful. Those Christians who live in secular callings are bound to love our Lord to whom, by baptism, their souls have been united; but since they are occupied with many temporal solicitudes, exposed to the brunt of the conflict with evil, and to violent temptations, it is natural that these distractions and cares—even though lawful—should turn their thoughts and affections from God in some degree. These simple faithful cannot give up all their time and energies wholly to the service of religion. Now nuns have, by their holy vocation, been freed from these worldly entanglements and distractions. St. Augustine tells us that when Christians love creatures for themselves and not purely for God's sake, since their love is divided between the creature and the Creator, it follows that they love Him less. A consecrated virgin, therefore, can attain to a higher degree of the love of God than a married woman who, because she lives in matrimony—holy and lawful though it be—is bound to love her husband.

I trust, my dear Sisters, that, were the question put to you individually, you could confidently affirm that you do love your Lord. You would be unworthy of your name of religious if the essential characteristic of your profession were lacking. St. Paul, in the ardour of his faith and love, once exclaimed: 'If any man love not our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.'[1] Surely a religious

[1] 1 Cor. xvi. 22

wanting in love for Him would incur this malediction!

Not only must you love your Spouse and Master, but daily you are under the obligation to grow in love, even as you are bound to grow in the knowledge of Him. These two growths are inseparable; increase in knowledge of Christ develops love for Him, they bear a direct ratio one to the other.

Only in Heaven can we love Jesus, our Lord, as He merits to be loved, because only in the next world are we able to attain to the fullest knowledge granted to creatures. But meanwhile, as fresh light concerning Him penetrates into our souls, love increases in our hearts, and since the Divine Person of Jesus is, in a special and more abundant manner, revealed to nuns, it is incumbent upon them to love Him more ardently. Therefore, they do well to examine their love for God, that they may see whether, in truth, it really rises to the height that their profession exacts.

Suppose we make this examination together, and while I develop the general principles of true love and their application, do you, my dear Sisters, examine your conscience. Ask yourself: Do I truly love my Lord and Saviour? Or better still, listen to the sweet voice of Jesus within you as He asks each the touching question: 'Lovest thou Me more than these?' That you may judge yourself truly and candidly, I will lay before you the essential conditions of real charity and how far it extends.

The first characteristic of the love of God is its *sovereignty*.

Undoubtedly, the simple faithful, every Christian soul is bound to love God. The precept is laid down for all, without exception, to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind. Now this general obligation exacts more of the religious than of the laity. Seculars are allowed, within fixed limits, to love creatures and to rejoice in their mutual love. For them, the sovereignty of love claims no more than that they should avoid all that is calculated to weaken or stifle the love of the Creator in the soul. It does not forbid them to give their affections to creatures, provided, in so doing, these creatures do not usurp the place of the Creator.

St. Paul speaks of marriage as a lower vocation than virginity. He does not in the least disdain the former, he merely sets forth its inferiority to the latter. Manifestly the love of man and wife can exist in and for God. It ought to be thus practised, but this love does not go *direct* from the soul to its Creator, but makes use of the creature as an intermediary. The married woman rightly thinks 'on the things of the world, how she may please her husband.' This is her duty. But what occupies the virgin who, by the Religious Life, has consecrated herself wholly to her Lord? St. Paul gives the answer: 'The virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy, both in body and in spirit.'[1] These words have a special reference and application to a religious, since in a pure soul she should ever keep a virginal love for Christ—a love free from all worldly alloy. She

[1] 1 Cor. vii. 34.

is not content to reject all that might destroy her love, but, in accordance with her duty, she strives to excel in love: it is an obligation and a privilege for her to love God with all her soul. Therefore, religious give up legitimate relations with creatures that they may give themselves wholly to their Lord. They dedicate to Him all their thoughts, all their desires, every beating of their heart. To Him they give their daily toil, and their well-earned rest each night. Their whole life and every instant is for Him alone. The true spouse of Christ works for Jesus and seeks His good pleasure in all her actions, even as a faithful wife continually thinks of her husband, though she is engaged in work that seems to have no bearing upon her love for him.

St. Bernard, when writing to a friend, said: 'I take no pleasure in your letter unless I find therein the name of Jesus.' Thus the religious experiences a feeling of depression and is conscious of a void when she fails to find her Spouse. No other than Him can satisfy the longings of her soul, which are truly set forth in the words of the Canticle of Canticles. 'My Beloved to me, and I to Him.' This aspiration is embodied in every one of her actions, it permeates her whole life.

The love you owe your Lord, my dear Sisters, is contained in the words I have just quoted. You must love Him with all your powers, because He has first loved you. You are His by right, and the relation between you and Him ought to be far more intimate than that which exists between Him and seculars. Even the world admits the

priority of your calling and, for once, it judges wisely. This appreciation is seen in the envy which good Christians feel for the religious vocation: they revere the habit, and wish God had called them to wear it. Even worldlings—notwithstanding their prejudices and vices—have a certain instinctive, indefinite reverence for religious.

You are the spouses of Christ: in a sense, He is for you, as for the priest, the portion of your inheritance. He loves you in a special way, over and above the complaisance He has for all His children, even for the most favoured among the ranks of the simple faithful. Therefore, He gives Himself to you without reserve, He gives you certain rights and inestimable privileges. He permits you to have, by anticipation, some part of that mystical union of the soul with its God—union of which earthly marriage is a type and figure. He loves you with the sovereign love of a spouse, therefore He desires to be united to you. This explains the words of the Canticle of Canticles: 'My Beloved to me, and I to Him.'

What obligations result from the love of Christ for you? Manifestly, that in your feeble measure you should render love for love; that for His divine and infinite love you should give Him the best of your incomplete human love. You can but give Him *all*, yield the first place to Him, and realise in your actions the grand cry of St. Paul: 'For me, to live is Christ.' [1]

Now, my dear Sisters, enter into yourselves

[1] Phil. i. 21.

and see whether you love our Lord thus. He is jealous of your love; He must necessarily have the first place. Do you give it Him, does He reign as King in your souls? You have now the light of my explanation on one of the characteristics of true love. If Jesus asked you once more, 'Lovest thou Me more than these?' could you truly reply: 'Lord, Thou knowest all things'; Thou knowest that I give Thee the love Thou seekest.

It is indubitable that, at certain epochs of your lives, you have loved our Lord thus; were it otherwise, you would never have asked admission to a religious house. The true love of your Master enabled you to triumph over all obstacles, so that you could, in truth, make your own the words of the spouse of the Canticle: 'I to my Beloved.' You proved the sincerity of your love when you broke the chains that held you back, and 'leaving all things,' followed Him.

Certainly, when you entered religion, God had the first place in your thoughts and heart. Does He still reign there to-day? There is a danger, even in the Religious Life, of souls allowing themselves to be ensnared again by the world's traps, whence they had escaped. Religious are often exposed to attach themselves unduly to little things, after having renounced great things. God wills that they should break these bonds, for such they are; He desires that religious should love Him more than their charge and their devotions. He expects to find them respond promptly to the call to make some sacrifice—be it great or small—and often it

needs a more vigilant love to make the lesser sacrifices on account of their multiplicity. Love exacts a readiness to give Him all, and only on this condition can you truthfully say to your Spouse, 'Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

To this *sovereign* love of God which should enclose your whole life, with its numerous details—even as a vast net, cast into the ocean, imprisons a multitude of fishes—we must add another quality, namely, *constancy*. The protestation of love for Jesus made by St. Peter after the Resurrection was never retracted. To it, St. Peter owed his elevation to the dignity of Shepherd of the whole Flock of Christ, and St. Peter proved, by his deeds, the sincerity of his words. It had not always been thus. For example, the triple denial belied the ardent protestations of love made by St. Peter a few hours before Christ's Passion. Yet, when the Apostle uttered those bold words, he was as much in earnest as when he made his triple protestation of love on the shores of the Lake of Tiberias, but, in the Cenacle, St. Peter did not know his own weakness; he sincerely thought he was ready to die for Jesus. Love for his Master had led St. Peter to leave home, trade, and family. So far, all was genuine, but, at that time, the Apostle's love was lacking in one essential element, namely, constancy. It had not yet been annealed in the furnace of suffering. Frequently, during our Lord's Public Life, St. Peter had had great consolations. He was proud of his Divine Master, who worked such marvellous miracles, won the admiration of thousands, and aroused the

jealousy and hatred of His foes, for was not their very opposition a tribute to his Lord's greatness? All these events called forth St. Peter's esteem and love for Jesus more and more. But he had not yet been called to suffer for, and with Jesus, and he, who has never suffered for the one he loves, does not know what true love really means. Love and suffering are ever united, the one cannot exist without the other, at least, not for any prolonged period.

Jesus Christ gives us an example of constant, enduring love for mankind and for each human being. St. Paul writes: 'Christ loved me and delivered Himself for me.'[1] Therefore, since love and suffering are wedded, it follows that we must suffer likewise for Christ.

All religious should be firmly convinced of this truth; otherwise their love will only be ephemeral; it will not stand the double test of time and trials. So many Christians make such loud-sounding, presumptuous professions of love, which have no firm foundation. These are, as often as not, made in all sincerity, and in utter ignorance as to their unreality. Such Christians love Jesus when He grants them spiritual consolations, such as facility in meditating, sweetness in receiving Holy Communion, an attraction for recollection. They love Him when a pleasant path, agreeable to their natural inclinations, opens out before them; then all seems joyful and bright in His service, but nature enters for a great part into these protestations of love.

[1] Gal. ii. 20.

It is well to love our blessed Lord when He showers His consolations upon us, but it is better still to love Him when 'the powers of darkness' overtake us, when Jesus conceals Himself, and often it seems as though He had abandoned us for ever. It is then that our love should be constant, and though, at these times, it seems less ardent, because the emotions are not brought into play, it is, nevertheless, far more real. If natural sensibility and imagination are less moved by love, it exercises its power over the will even more forcibly, enabling the soul to hold out until this darkness of soul is once more dissipated by the dawn of consolation, and the rising of 'the Sun of Justice.'

Jesus, by His example, teaches you to be constant in your love, in all times and places, and in bearing whatever trials He sends or permits to overtake you.

In spite of your weakness and inconstancy, our Lord has loved, and still loves you. Never has His love cooled towards you on account of your lack of generous response to the manifold advances of love He makes unceasingly. You know this so well, and should model your love upon His. You are journeying along life's highway to the goal of Paradise where, in the enjoyment of the Beatific Vision, love will be perfected in the splendour of glory. Therefore, my dear Sisters, go bravely forward, even though often the darkness of night overwhelms you, though the path be steep and slippery, and weariness threatens to obtain the mastery. You must love your Lord in dark, as in bright hours, and carefully avoid

swelling the ranks of those who promise much in times of consolation, and then fall away when faced by trials. Your love must be firm enough to stand the test of crosses. If you cannot carry them joyfully, at least accept them with peaceful resignation. True love knows no fluctuations, it does not depend upon mere sensibility, but holds firm, and is both nourished and revealed by suffering. The virgin martyr, St. Agnes, in the midst of her torments, exclaimed: 'I love Christ.' This sweet saint knew her love was real, because it had stood the test of suffering. It was love for Christ which helped her to endure the dungeon, threats, and torments. This holy virgin loved Christ, even when He seemed to abandon her to her persecutors, and, in her suffering and martyrdom, her love was deeper than in days of past joys.

I exhort you, my dear Sisters, to take the words of this saintly Roman virgin as your motto. Repeat these words frequently: 'I love Christ.' Love Him, whether He leads you up to Thabor or Calvary. Love Him when He allows you in perfect health to work in His Vineyard, and also when illness forces you to give up your charge. Serve Him then by more fervent prayer, closer union, and continual self-sacrifice. Love Him when spiritual light enables you to penetrate the mysteries of faith, and when He allows you to wander through the barren, waterless desert. Love Him in life, that you may love Him with all your soul in death and, throughout eternity, join in the chorus of the redeemed, 'I love Christ.'

Seculars often allow their love to cool down, to modify even as their lives change, but religious are bound to maintain and even increase their degree of fervent love. Exterior circumstances have no power to lessen true charity in the soul. Some seculars do attain to great love for Christ, but these are exceptions, whereas a high degree of love is the normal standard for religious. All their environment conduces to this end. Profit then by this means of progress: let the proofs of your love for your Lord be unequivocal, for it is always possible for the will to assert itself and to accept suffering, in spite of all natural repugnance. Provided we are in earnest in our desire to prove our words by our deeds, we can fearlessly say: 'I love Christ.'

We now pass on to the third characteristic of true love; it must be *progressive.* Even as the level of a river rises daily higher, as the numerous tributaries pour forth their contributions, so love should ever rise higher, on account of the constant streams of graces which God is ever pouring into the souls of religious. The Scriptures tell us that 'Deep calleth upon deep' and, in like manner, grace engenders grace, for in proportion as we profit by one, God bestows another, and so the stream ever pours onward, provided the recipients are faithful and diligent in utilising these unspeakable gifts of God.

Even as when God sent a deluge upon the world, 'the flood-gates of heaven were opened,' so torrents of grace are daily poured forth upon

all religious houses. What should be the result of these heavenly favours? Should they not bring souls nearer to God by raising them higher and higher even as the Ark rose, as the volume of the waters increased? Religious should make their lives one continual ascension from the impure, dark, misty regions of earth, to the sunlit firmament, where the Sun of Justice dispels all clouds. 'The path of the just, as a shining light, goeth forwards and increaseth even to perfect day.'[1] Only in eternity will the love of Jesus attain to its apogee in the soul of man. Until then, the trumpet call must continually sound forth: 'He that is just, let him be justified still, and he that is holy, let him be sanctified still.'[2]

This consideration should have great weight in Religious Life, which is 'the school of love.' In religion this is the chief subject taught, and every action of a nun should have love as its origin and end. The Professor in this great school is infinitely versed in this subject, none can surpass Him in this knowledge. In a religious house, the thought of the love of Jesus is ever present to the mind, all the environment is impregnated with this thought, as with a sweet perfume. St. Francis of Sales tells us that, in the Church of God, 'all belongs to love, lives in love, by love, and for love.' If this be true of the whole temple of the Catholic Church, how much more forcibly does it apply to the sanctuary of Religious Life!

Now, in a school, pupils are expected to progress

[1] Prov. iv. 18. [2] Apoc. xxii. 11.

in their studies. You expect this of the children you teach. If they do not satisfy your expectations, you are justly vexed by their indolence, and rebuke them for negligence and idleness. Naturally, you are not so unreasonable as to expect all to arrive at the same degree of proficiency, since the differentiation in talents cannot give the same results in each child, just as all soils, though sown with the same quality of seed, do not produce an equally good harvest. Also, you reasonably ask of scholars, who have already frequented your schools for three or four years, that they should know more than those who have but recently entered the lowest class.

Christ, our Master, expects as much of those whom He has deigned to teach. After years of tuition in the Religious Life, after countless opportunities for prayer, Holy Communion, and other devotions, surely He has the right to ask each one: 'Lovest thou Me?' He is justified in exacting more of those who, for years, have been scholars in His school of love, than of those who have just entered on their probation. He wills your progress year by year, and, as you approach the term of life when all your efforts will be rewarded, and your love perfected, it is meet that love should become stronger, more courageous, and more devoted.

I trust, my dear Sisters, that you now realise the import of the simple question: 'Lovest thou Me?' It connotes loving your Lord and Master *solely*, *constantly*, and *progressively*. This is comprised in your vocation, and only on condition that your love

has these characteristics, can you reply confidently : 'Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

Now examine whether your love has these qualities ; note if any one is wholly or partially absent. Does your Master reproach you with not giving Him the first place in your love ? If so, break the bonds that hold you captive by detaching yourselves from creatures, that your soul may be free to rise in the pursuit of love.

Does He complain that your love is but fitful, that you only love Him in joy and consolation, and not when tribulations overtake you ? If so, watch over your affections and brace yourselves up to self-immolation—to a life of recollection and sacrifice. Does He reprove you for resting on your oars, for indulging in a kind of somnolence, that has a paralysing effect on the soul ? In this case, arouse yourselves and hasten forwards.

Whatever imperfections your Master points out, hasten to remedy them. On the threshold of eternity you will be asked for your password. It is charity. Christ, with all the tenderness of a Spouse, will then ask if you have loved Him as He expects to be loved by those specially consecrated to Him. What will be your answer then ? What you are preparing to answer now by your lives here below. Never can you love Him as He merits, but do your best, and beg Him to supply then, what you have failed to acquire upon earth, and He is ever contented with souls 'of good will.'

TWENTY-SECOND CONFERENCE

THE IMITATION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Be ye therefore followers of God, as most dear children.—Eph. v. 1.

We have seen, my dear Sisters, that all religious are bound to know and love our Lord Jesus Christ, and that this knowledge and love constitute the very essence of their vocation, as well as their inestimable privilege. Those who ignore these responsibilities, sacrifice all that sweetens Religious Life upon earth, as well as the joys which the fulfilment of these obligations procures in the next world. But these obligations of the religious extend further, since something more even is required than knowing and loving our Lord, that is, if we accept love in its fullest meaning.

We know that knowledge of Christ, without its complement, love, would be insufficient. Moreover, love would be incomplete were it restricted to the imagination and emotions. It needs to sink into the soul and determine the will to perform generous, constant actions, if this love is to be perfect. Now, the great proof of love is *imitation*. If we truly love

a person, we instinctively seek to imitate him: imitation is an essential characteristic of love.

This holds good of relations between human beings, though, on account of men's hidden weakness and defects, imitation often proves a source of great danger. This same principle, however, applied to God, equally holds good, and, moreover, it has none of the drawbacks of human imitation. The soul can freely and profitably imitate God, in the measure of its strength, since He is absolutely perfect—in Him there is no shadow of any defect.

Hence the proof of true love consists in imitating Jesus Christ. All that I have said of the qualities and claims of love may be summed up in *the imitation of Christ's virtues.* Our salvation is indissolubly bound up with this imitation, for as St. Paul tells us: 'Whom God foreknew, He also predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn amongst many brethren.'[1]

It is of the greatest importance for all Christians —for religious, above all—to grasp the primary importance of this truth, because it is the very foundation of all spiritual life. Without it, the whole edifice would collapse. Moreover, it behoves all to have clear and correct views concerning this imitation of Christ's virtues. It does not consist in a feeling of tender emotion, nor in the mere adhesion of the will, but in practical acts of virtue. We must do more than merely contemplate

[1] Rom. viii. 29.

our Lord's life, more than admire the virtues Jesus practised, more than sympathise with Him in His awful Passion. We must pass on to the imitation of our Master, we are called upon to look at, and make our lives 'according to the pattern' which Jesus showed us on Mount Calvary.

Let us briefly examine how we are to set about this stupendous task. On what points would He have you imitate Him? How are you to give your Lord the proof that your love is genuine by imitating Him, in so far as it lies in your power? I propose to answer these questions in this conference.

In the first place, it is comparatively easy for all Christians to comply with the obligation to imitate their Divine Master. We, who live under the New Law of grace and love, need not seek far afield for a model. We are not asked to plunge into a deep study as to the nature and conditions of the heavenly life which we are called upon to live even upon earth, for Jesus Himself came down from Heaven as the Word Incarnate, that He might bring Himself to our level. Throughout thirty-three years He lived amongst men, and He continues His life on earth, by means of the Holy Eucharist. Thus, for nearly nineteen hundred years, He has remained with His Church as its strength and food.

How has He invited us to become like unto Him? By becoming like unto us, by taking our humanity with its two constituent elements—body and soul. That we might the more easily imitate Him, He thought, spoke, and acted as man. To quote the

words of St. Augustine: 'Man became God, God became man.' [1]

It is manifest, my dear Sisters, that if you are to imitate our Lord in His thoughts, words, and deeds, if, in a restricted sense, you are to identify your lives with His, then you must begin by His sentiments and dispositions.

The religious, who would reform herself interiorly, must study devoutly the interior life of Jesus, and fashion her affections according to those of His Sacred Heart. All exterior amendment that is not based upon interior reformation is necessarily limited and short-lived. 'All the glory of the King's daughter is within,' [2] and the vital principle of the beauty of the religious—i.e. of her spiritual perfection—must likewise have its origin within. St. Paul, addressing his converts, gives them this recommendation: 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus,' [3] and the religious should strive to model her thoughts, judgments, and affections upon those of her Divine Master. The spirit of Jesus must dwell in her, that she may be able to live by Him.

Where will you find the inner life of Jesus and His sublime dispositions revealed? In Heaven, you will see Him face to face and know Him, even as you are known by Him. Here upon earth, we must, perforce, be contented to see Him 'as in a glass darkly.' But, at least, we have certain data—those which Jesus has Himself deigned to reveal concerning

[1] Sermon 9, *De Nativitate*.

[2] Psalm xliv. 14.

[3] Phil. ii. 5.

His inner life. We have more than sufficient knowledge of Him to enable us to compare our lives with His, and to judge how far we are imitating our Divine Model.

This subject is so vast, that to give an adequate notion of it we should require a whole treatise on the Religious Life, so we must confine ourselves to tracing the broad lines of this helpful study.

Let us examine, for example, how Jesus looked at the various things and subjects which continually occupy our thoughts. What sublime ideas He had of God! Before the Divine Majesty of His Father, Jesus, as Man, ever maintained an attitude of the most profound humility and self-abasement. How he despised the world, and, at the same time, was moved with the deepest pity for its miseries! What did He think of this present life, of its wealth and glory? How did He esteem those fundamental virtues of Religious Life—poverty, chastity and obedience? How far did He practise these virtues Himself?

We might multiply these questions concerning our dear Lord's interior dispositions, but where must we look for the answers? In the Holy Gospels: there, in Jesus' own words, we shall find clear indications of what He thought; there He reveals to us His Sacred Heart. Before this mirror of the inner life of your Lord, you, my dear Sisters, have a sure standard by which to measure your thoughts, views, and interior dispositions. Looking to your Model attentively, it will not be difficult to see how far you resemble Him on these points, and whether *interiorly*

your lives bear any resemblance to Jesus, your Spouse.

It is also necessary for religious to imitate Jesus in His exterior life, and here, too, He is our Divine Exemplar. In Him, we see the ideal of that perfection which should characterise our relations with God and our neighbour. Jesus once said: 'I do always the things that please Him,'[1] and these words sum up His conduct towards the Eternal Father, but who can fathom all that these few words express? This simple sentence comprehends Jesus' exquisite purity of intention, so free from human or interested motives; His ardent desire to labour for the Glory of God, which He came upon earth to procure; His generosity in accepting sacrifices in order to carry out the Father's wishes, and His perfect fidelity in every minor detail. Such is the example Jesus Christ has given us.

Moreover, that He might make His lessons more striking, He condescended to live exteriorly like an ordinary human being. He deigned to accept those humiliations—the consequences of corporal needs—which even saints considered a grievous burden. He submitted to the material actions of sleeping, eating, and drinking, but not for His own satisfaction. Since He did all to please His Eternal Father, and acted with the greatest perfection, He raised the execution of these acts—material as they were intrinsically—to the dignity of ardent acts of love.

[1] St. John viii. 29.

Jesus prayed continually; all His actions were prefaced and carried through with prayer. Notwithstanding His uninterrupted interior recollection, Christ, our Master, set apart times for prayer, for that direct intercourse with God, which He so urgently exhorts us to practise. If you look at Jesus' life of prayer upon earth, you will understand, my dear Sisters, why, in Religious Life, such great stress is laid upon spiritual exercises. It is because they constitute its very essence and vitality. Contemplate our Lord's profound respect, attention, and recollection in presence of His Father's Majesty. Note how He had recourse to prayer under all circumstances, and found therein a constant spring of strength and consolation. If day failed to allow Him leisure for set exercises of devotion, night supplied the deficiency; often Jesus passed the whole night in prayer and, during His crowded hours of toil, the moment occasion offered, His petitions rose to the throne of grace, His soul communed with the Eternal Father.

Let it be your endeavour, my dear Sisters, to realise, in some measure in your lives, the continual union with God by prayer, which so pre-eminently distinguished your Lord. Contemplate His life under this aspect, and then ask yourselves whether you, too—as far as human weakness permits—can truly say that you likewise strive to do always that which pleases the Father. It is not possible to live up to the ideal which Jesus presents to our contemplation, but we can aspire to this high standard. We can detach ourselves

from exterior concerns and from undue preoccupations about ourselves, that we may be free to rise untrammelled in spirit to our Father. It is possible to accomplish God's Will joyfully every hour of the day; to find our consolation, strength, and joy in prayer; to draw from it the courage and patience necessary for supporting the weariness of earth's exile. Above all, we can habitually practise interior recollection, which maintains the soul in peace, and disposes it for the formal act of prayer. By all these exercises of interior recollection, the religious can, at length, reach the goal—that is, she can imitate Christ, her Lord. There is no other path that conducts the soul to this blessed union with Christ, than the faithful imitation of His relations with the Father, so far as the limitations of creatureship permit.

When Jesus lived among men, He conversed freely with them, just as we are necessarily in frequent relation with our fellows. He did not lead the life of a hermit and simply give Himself solely to prayer. The Gospels represent Him mingling freely with His compatriots. He dealt with the good and the evil, learned and ignorant, rich and poor. Therefore, my dear Sisters, wherever obedience may place you, you have but to look at Jesus, your Exemplar, if you would know how to fulfil your office, for Jesus 'was seen upon earth and (He) conversed with men.'[1] He became Man, that He might save all.

Could Jesus have superiors? Strictly speaking,

[1] Baruch iii. 38.

No. He is the Sovereign Superior, who can have no equal, since, as St. John says: 'All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing that was made.'[1] Yet, for our instruction, the Incarnate Word behaved as though some of His creatures had power over Him. He 'humbled Himself'; 'He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man;'[2] hence we see Him accepting orders from His own creatures. For the time being they were invested by Him with an authority, of which He was the unique source.

How did He act with regard to those whom He thus placed in office? Contemplate Nazareth and you will see the answer in action in the mutual relations of the Holy Family. But not only did Jesus obey the guidance of Mary and Joseph—creatures who knew what their true position was and the dignity of Him whom they commanded—but, likewise, Jesus respected the authority of those cruel judges, who summoned Him before their tribunals, and treated Him so unjustly.

Jesus 'was subject' to Mary and Joseph with true, humble, filial submission of mind, heart, and will. This submission to His first superiors lasted throughout thirty years. How did He comply with the commands of another class of superiors—the judges and executioners? Jesus 'held his peace,' He obeyed their orders in silence; He suffered them to condemn Him to death. Instead of calling these guilty judges before His sovereign

[1] St. John i. 3. [2] Phil. ii. 7.

tribunal, He accepted the awful humiliations of His Passion, and the ignominious death of the cross from their hands. Thus Jesus instructs all Christians how to obey those whom God has placed over them 'not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.'[1] Religious ought specially to imitate Jesus in their relations with their superiors. He has given them a perfect example of supernatural, filial submission to authority; of obedience, even unto death in the service of our neighbours—and of that daily death to self, by continual mortification. How, then, should religious always look upon their superiors? They should obey them with deference and respect, as the representatives of their Lord and Master. This subject of obedience to legitimate superiors is one upon which all who desire seriously to follow the example of our blessed Lord, should frequently examine their conscience.

We may say, in all reverence, that, within the same limitations as Jesus had superiors, He likewise had equals—that is, He lived with men who exteriorly resembled Him, and He came in daily contact with them in the ordinary social and business relations of the world. What do we notice in His dealings with those who appeared to be His equals? The answer is given in the Gospels—one which covers an infinity of detail, into which we could not possibly enter: '*Jesus of Nazareth . . . went about doing good.*'[2] He did good in every conceivable way; He gave gracious access to all; He spoke gentle words, and was prodigal of His

[1] 1 Peter ii. 18. [2] Acts x. 38.

kindly services. By His innumerable miracles He consoled and assisted all who sought His aid.

'He went about doing good.' We should do well to meditate on these comprehensive words, which cover the whole life of Jesus upon earth, and, in our daily relations with others, strive to imitate our Divine Model. What better motto could religious choose than this brief sentence: 'He went about doing good'? For they—like their Lord—should do good to all men, and thus be the living images of their Divine Master.

'He went about doing good.' This consideration will help us to bear with our neighbours, to put up with their infirmities, shortcomings, and rudeness. It will check us when we are tempted to imperiously impose our will or opinions, to give way to irritation when opposed or contradicted, to overcome any feeling of resentment against those who have made us suffer.

'He went about doing good.' If we meditate on these words frequently, we shall treat our fellows with kindness, gentleness and condescension, and be ever ready to sacrifice our wishes. We, too, shall go 'about doing good' to all, at all times, and under all circumstances. If we follow this divinely given rule, community life will be an earthly Paradise, since all the members would aim at reproducing, in their lives, those traits which distinguished their Lord and drew all hearts to Him. Only He, who has left us the example, can give us the courage to imitate Him. All the virtues have their source in His Sacred Heart, as He Himself

points out when He says to each of His disciples: 'Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart.'[1]

Jesus likewise had inferiors, and these include His own Apostles and disciples, whom He gathered around Him—that He might instruct and prepare them for the great work He was going to confide to them—and also the multitudes who thronged around Him, attracted by His powerful words and mighty deeds. How did He deal with this third class of persons?

He dealt compassionately with their dense ignorance, their violent prejudices and passions, their numerous moral miseries. However wearying and exasperating they were—from our human point of view—His patience was unchangeable. We see this in His treatment of the Apostles. For three years He taught them unweariedly in spite of their obstinacy and stupidity. He bore with their false conceptions, prejudices, and unteachableness. By His gentleness, He raised them from the plane of terrestrial things to a realisation and deep apprehension of the realities of the spiritual world. He ever supported their infirmities with a loving tenderness, which we might call maternal.

Here, again, my dear Sisters, your Divine Exemplar stands before you. You have inferiors, and I would even venture to assert that, from the standpoint of your grandeur as religious, your inferiors consist of all those seculars, whom God has not called to the privileges of Religious Life.

[1] St. Matt. xi. 29.

You have inferiors, likewise from a lower standpoint, since many look to you for help and guidance and accept you as their mistresses. You have to deal with young and old, with good and bad, with all ages and conditions of men. Look to your Master's example, that you may treat them with charity and indulgence, and that you may likewise exercise the firmness requisite for a superior. You will be faithful followers of Jesus, provided your soul ever overflows with loving sympathy for all who, in any degree whatever, have a claim upon your ministry, whether spiritual or corporal.

It would need several conferences to develop the important subject of the necessity for all religious to imitate the example set by Jesus Christ. The imitation of Christ sums up the whole Christian Life. Thus the golden and immortal book of Thomas à Kempis, which treats of this subject, has for title 'The Imitation of Christ.' As the painter fixes his attention upon his model and examines it from different points of view, and in every detail, that he may paint a portrait which shall bring him fame, so the religious strives to keep her mind fixed upon her Lord's examples of virtues. To this end, she studies His dispositions, words, and deeds, and when called to judge, speak, or labour, her ruling thought is, 'What would our Lord have done were He in my place? How would He have spoken, what view would He have taken?'

Religious who act thus are truly blessed. Jesus helps them to set forth His living portrait before men. Nay, He goes further, since He Himself

imprints His sacred traits upon their souls. He forms this image within them, by means of prayer and, above all, of Holy Communion. A great work of sanctification is being effected in the soul that is striving to resemble her Lord, while, for His part, He is seeking to produce in it an imprint of His life and virtues.

None are so happy upon earth as those in whom this twofold work is being carried on, and it is a pledge of that future blessedness, of which St. John speaks when he says: 'Dearly beloved, we are now the sons of God, and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone that hath this hope in Him sanctifieth himself, as He also is holy.'[1]

Let this consoling promise and hope suffice to arouse you to strive to progress in holiness, that you may be eternally united to Jesus Christ in the glory of our Heavenly Home and 'follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

[1] 1 St. John iii. 2.

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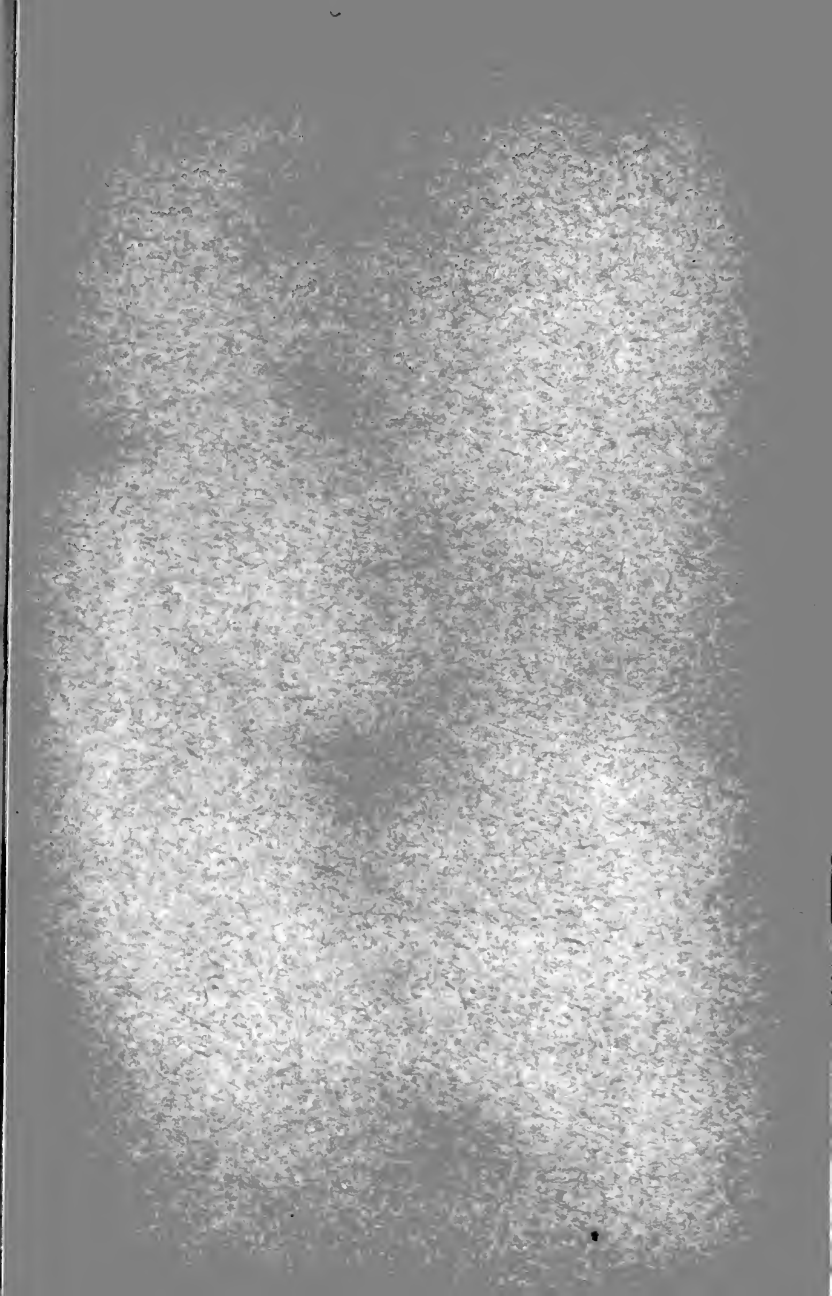

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