

# Conferences on The Vows of Religion 1925



# CONFERENCES

## ON

### THE VOWS OF RELIGION

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#### FIRST CONFERENCE

#### ON THE VOWS IN GENERAL

The nature and excellence of the Vows of religion.

*Vovete et reddite Domino Deo  
vestro.  
Vow ye, and pay to the Lord  
your God. (Ps. 75:12)*

The Vows of religion are a sacred bond into which a man enters with Almighty God by the help of divine grace. By the Vows a man renounces for the love of God everything that he possesses, and himself also, in order to serve God with greater perfection and freedom, and to follow more safely after Christ Jesus our Lord.

**The Vows are a bond** not wholly unlike that whereby a man takes service with an earthly prince. But note that the bond is **sacred**; all connected with it is holy, and to break it would be sacrilege.

**We enter into this bond with Almighty God**, and we do so **by the help of divine grace**. Man must be led by grace, and grace will also sustain and strengthen him. « No man cometh to the Father but by Me. » (John 14:6) « You have not chosen Me: but I have chosen you; and have appointed you that you should go and should bring forth fruit; and your fruit should remain. » (John 15:16). The only motive for this promise is a desire to please God, and the promise is made to Him alone; for the Vows of religion comprise the sacrifice of the whole man, and sacrifice may be offered to none save to Almighty God.

**By which he renounces entirely** etc. A man's possessions may be summarised under three heads; the things of earth, the things of the

flesh, and his own will. By the Vow of Poverty a man renounces earthly possessions; by the Vow of Chastity he renounces the pleasures of sense; by the Vow of Obedience he renounces his own will; that is to say, himself. This renunciation is **entire**, for we are speaking of perpetual Vows which make a man a religious. He renounces all things **for the love of God**. Vows offered to any other except to Almighty God would be valueless.

**In order to serve Him.** We see here the end which a man must have in view when he makes his Vows. He must see in the Vows: 1) a means of serving God **with greater perfection**, by, following the way of the evangelical counsels: 2) a means of serving Him **with greater freedom**, because thereby a man strips himself of all that might delay his progress; and 3) a means of serving God **with greater safety**, for by the Vows a man's salvation is more assured.

**Following Christ our Lord.** The Vows are a means of following more closely the Lord Who « being rich became poor for your sakes; that through His poverty you might be rich. » (2Cor 8:9). They are an imitation of His perpetual sacrifice. « Wherefore when He cometh into the world He saith: sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldest not, but a body Thou hast fitted to Me. » (Heb 10:5). Finally, by the Vows a man draws more near to Him Who became « obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. » Our Lord Himself invites us in His Gospel to leave all things, and to renounce ourselves. « If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor...and come follow Me. » (Matt 19:21). « If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. » (Matt 16:24).

It is easy to judge of the excellence of the Vows by their nature, whether we consider them in themselves, or in relation to Almighty God, or to the man who makes them. Considered in themselves, the Vows are the most precious and universal sacrifice. Considered in relation to Almighty God, they are the sacrifice which brings Him most honour. Considered in relation to man, they are the sacrifice from which he gains most advantage.

1) The Vows of religion, considered in themselves, include all that we can offer as a sacrifice to God. By the Vow of Poverty a man sacrifices all outward possessions. He can no longer look upon his goods as his own, nor use them freely and independently. By the Vow of Chastity a man sacrifices his own body. He can no longer dispose of it as he was able to do before the Vow was made, but must look upon his body as something consecrated to the Lord. By the Vow of Obedience a man sacrifices his

whole self; for he submits his will to that of another man, who stands to him in the place of God, either by his own free choice, or by the order established by Divine Providence. We can imagine no offering made by man to God which is not contained, directly or indirectly, in the Vows of religion. These Vows are excellent in their own nature, and very meritorious; nevertheless, the act whereby the Vows are made is more or less perfect according to the dispositions from which it proceeds. In the case of a man whose dispositions are as perfect as possible, according to the measure of the grace given to him, the Vows would be the most perfect and heroic action within his power. Further, as the Vows are practised anew every day, and every moment of the day, we can renew this act constantly, if we are faithful to our promise.

2) The Vows, considered in relation to Almighty God, are a sacrifice which brings Him more honour than any other. The Son of God teaches us that « greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends. » (John 15:13). This is precisely what is done when a man makes the Vows of religion. True, he does not lay down his life in blood, as did the martyrs; but that is because such an act is out of his power. He dies after another fashion, which is sometimes no less painful than martyrdom, for it is continuous, and extends to every action of life. For this reason, the Saints consider the life led by a good religious to be a **continual martyrdom**, and the opinion is commonly held that a man who makes his vows with good dispositions obtains a complete remission of all his sins, and of any penalty that may be due to his sins. This opinion is based upon the fact that a man who makes a perfect consecration of himself by the Vows, may be supposed to possess pure and perfect charity, and to unite his will entirely to the will of the Lord. It may be assumed that such a one is submissive to the will of God, and confident in His goodness; and that, in deep humility, he desires to give back all that he has received from on high. In a word, such a man may be supposed to possess every virtue whereby God is glorified.

3) When we consider the Vows in relation to the man who makes them, we see in them an unending stream of graces. The Vows ennoble man and make him perfect. By Poverty he is raised above the earthly man. By Chastity he is made equal to the angels. By the Vow of Obedience he becomes as it were divine; for his will is closely joined to the will of God Himself, and in this will is the rule of his every action. The Vows perfect a man's liberty by making him as it were stable in virtue, and by lessening the subjection of his will to evil, They free him from many hindrances to perfection and salvation; they shelter him from many a danger. They enrich him by making his actions more meritorious, and they contribute even to his earthly happiness, by freeing him from the

thousand cares and anxieties, and empty or frivolous desires which tyrannize over the soul. The Vows oblige a man to practise those virtues which are at once our happiness here below, and a pledge of our eternal beatitude. Instead of hampering those duties which are incumbent upon every Christian, the Vows make them more easy and, for this reason, religious Vows are compared to the wings whereby a bird soars aloft, or to the wheels of a carriage, which add indeed to its weight, but which enable it to move more easily, and to carry a heavier burden. Our Lord has promised a hundredfold in this life to the religious; and such an one, who is faithful to his promises, knows better than any other how true are the words spoken by the Saviour of the world: « My yoke is sweet and My burden light. »

It would be easy to say more upon this subject, and to bring the authority of the Doctors of the Church to reinforce my words. St. Bernard has given a short but perfect summary of the advantages of the religious state.

« Is it not » he says « that pure and spotless state wherein a man lives a purer life, falls less often, rises again more swiftly, walks in greater safety, and is more often blessed with the dew from heaven? Is it not that state wherein he rests with less fear, and dies with greater hope, wherein he is sooner cleansed, and more abundantly rewarded? »

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## SECOND CONFERENCE

### A GENERAL VIEW OF THE VOWS OF RELIGION

The obligations imposed by the Vows of religion.

*Non estis vestri:  
You are not your  
own.*  
(1Cor 6:19)

Every Vow by its very nature imposes an obligation under pain of mortal sin. The Vows of religion are no exception to this rule; hence is it impossible to break them in a matter of some importance, without incurring the guilt of mortal sin. We will not now discuss this question, nor will we stay to consider what constitutes grievous matter; that will be discussed later on, when we treat separately of each Vow. For the moment, we are content to consider the more general obligations which result from Vows of religion. These Vows impose two duties upon us: 1) we must look upon ourselves as consecrated to God: 2) we must tend constantly towards perfection.

**1) We must look upon ourselves as consecrated to God.** This is the duty of every Christian; for he is consecrated to God by his baptism, and this consecration is perfected by the reception of the other sacraments. The Christian belongs wholly to the Saviour Who redeemed him with His precious blood. Every follower of Christ is the temple of the Holy Ghost in body and soul; but, strictly speaking, this consecration only obliges him not to wander from the service of God by doing what is forbidden, or by leaving undone what is commanded. The priest, or minister of Christ, is consecrated in a more special manner, for he belongs more clearly to the Lord, Who chose him to share in the offering of the great sacrifice. The priest is the mouthpiece of Christ, and His representative to men.

The priesthood therefore imposes great obligations; but, except for the Vow of Chastity, which is only tacitly annexed to the reception of major orders, these obligations are not so explicit that we can say of a priest that he is vowed to the Lord, as we say this of a man who is wholly

consecrated to God. The consecration of the ordinary Christian, or of the priest, is almost entirely the work of Almighty God, although the free co-operation of the creature is required. In virtue of his consecration by Vow, the religious, on his side, acts with all the perfection whereof he is capable. He immolates his whole self, with all that he has, and all that he may one day possess; he sacrifices wholly his body, and his soul with all its powers. He is altogether holy in virtue of this sacrifice. « Whatsoever is once consecrated shall be holy of holies to the Lord. » (Lev 27:28)

Hence: 1) the religious can no longer use his goods, his body, or his own will, in a manner contrary to his Vows without committing sacrilege; and this sacrilege will be greater or less according to the importance of the matter in question. 2) The religious must henceforth only live for God; any strength or knowledge or talent which he may possess must be used for the Divine glory alone. He must view the world as a land of exile, from which he expects neither riches, honours, nor pleasures. 3) The religious must commit himself wholly into the hands of God. God will work in and by and through His servant, according to His own good pleasure. That holy will may impose promotion or abasement, consolation or sorrow, rich gifts or long continued weakness and poverty; and, since we learn from the choice of Christ our Lord that nothing brings more glory to God than humiliation and suffering, and an entire renunciation of all creatures, it is such things as these that the religious should desire.

2) The second duty imposed by the Vows of religion, is that of **tending constantly towards perfection** by the practice of the Vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience; a duty so essential that it forms part of the definition of the religious state, and is a necessary characteristic whereby this state is distinguished from all others. Priests are required to tend towards perfection; but they do so otherwise, and are bound by no Vow. If a priest is worthy of his sublime vocation, he must live in accordance with the evangelical counsels; should he neglect to do so, he will be guilty of imperfection and infidelity. The religious is bound by a stricter obligation; should he cease to walk habitually in the way of the counsels, he will be guilty of a grave transgression. Henceforth, the sacred promise made to God by the Vows of religion, and the practice of the evangelical counsels, are one and the same thing. By both ways we tend towards perfection; for the object of the Vows is the evangelical counsels, and, by following the counsels, we strive to attain to perfection. The religious, who habitually neglects the pursuit of perfection, is, by this very fact, in a state of sin; for he lives in a habitual disregard of the obligation imposed upon him by his Vows. In truth, a little reflection on the three essential Vows of religion will make it clear that the evangelical counsels are contained therein, either as the matter of

the Vows, or as a means necessary to their fulfilment. All the counsels which bid us detach ourselves from earthly possessions, and despise them utterly, are included in the Vow of Poverty. Those counsels whereby we are bidden to hold ourselves aloof from the world, and from all the ease and comforts of life, which might flatter the flesh, are included in the Vow of Chastity; while the counsels which bid us renounce ourselves; and mortify our own will, are included in the Vow of Obedience. Any maxim of evangelical perfection, which does not seem to refer directly to one of the three Vows, may be said to do so indirectly; for, by fidelity to the Vows, we obtain the help we need to practise such commands; and it would be difficult for a man who was faithful to his Vows to fail in pursuing perfection. Or again, we may say that the teaching of the Gospel concerning our neighbour, on such points as the forgiveness of injuries, and the love of our enemies, is a part of charity, and therefore must be reckoned as a precept rather than a counsel. Whence it follows that we cannot habitually neglect to practise the counsels, or, (to express the same truth in other words), we cannot neglect to tend towards perfection, without breaking the solemn promise which we have made to Almighty God.

This might be the place to enter into some detail as to what the pursuit of perfection demands of us; but such details: would carry us too far; and further, we have already given some indication by saying, that this religious duty necessarily implies the practice of the evangelical counsels, and differs in no way from the observance of the Vows. I will therefore content myself with pointing out:

- 1) That, in order to strive after perfection by the practice of the counsels, we must sincerely resolve to avoid all sin, whether mortal or venial, and must endeavour to mortify every evil inclination of our hearts. This is an obvious truth; nevertheless it is sometimes forgotten in practice.
- 2) That our desire for perfection would be vain, if we did not also employ the means necessary for its attainment; such as prayer, the sacraments, solitude, silence, unworldliness, etc.
- 3) That it is possible to tend constantly towards perfection, and yet to remain very imperfect, and to fall into many venial sins; provided only that in our hearts we are firmly determined to advance in virtue, to correct our faults, and to make ourselves more and more pleasing to God. It is very necessary to renew this determination again and again, in the presence of the Lord.



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## THIRD CONFERENCE

### On those general means which may help to the practice of the Vows.

*Satagite ut per bona opera certam  
vestram vocationem et electionem  
faciatis : haec enim facientes,  
non peccabitis aliquando.*

*Wherefore, brethren, labour the  
more, that by good works you  
may make sure your calling and  
election. For doing these things  
you shall not sin at any time.  
(2 Pet. 1. 10).*

Every religious order finds in separation from the world, and in the common life led by its members, many means for carrying out with greater ease the sacred promise of the Vows. These helps are lacking to a Society which neither separates us in fact from the world, nor subjects us to a common rule of life.

By what means can we hope to supply for this loss; and where can we look for the help we need if we are to be faithful to the holy promises we have made to God Himself?

Before answering this question I would remark:

1) It is true that we are not cut off from the world physically, by our dwelling place, as are those religious who live in the cloister and in solitude; nevertheless we are, in a very true sense, separated from the world, as were the Apostles, and the first disciples of Christ, of whom our Saviour said « that they were in the world but not of the world. »(John 17: 14).

We, who are members of a Society that is pledged to follow Christ more nearly, are separated from the world that was the object of His anathemas; that world which is constantly at war with Christ, and which teaches a doctrine wholly at variance with His. We do not only profess to stand apart in heart and mind; but we have neither part nor lot in worldly joys and pleasures; we have no share in its pomp and vanities. The amusements and shows of the world are nothing to us, nor do we aspire to gain its riches. We are untouched by worldly honour and dignity; we care nothing for worldly praise and esteem, and each one of us should be able to say with the Apostle: « the world is crucified to me, and I to the world. » (Gal 6:14). In a sense, this obligation is laid upon every Christian, and, to a higher degree, upon every minister of Christ; but, by joining the Society, we make it more specially our own.

2) We do not live in community; but our Rules impose the same obligations upon all of us, and lay down one course of conduct for all. We have Superiors to watch over us, and to warn us charitably when we fall. There are also to be supervisors, whose business is to supply for what the Superior cannot do in his own person. Further, whenever possible, two or three will live together, in order to share in the most precious advantages of community life, at least in part.

3) It is true that we do not all enjoy the advantages of a life lived in community, apart from the world. There is also some difference in our method of practising the Vows; for this method is adapted to the kind of life which circumstances render necessary. If this manner of practising our Vows be in itself in any way less perfect, this defect is amply atoned for by the great advantages which result from our way of life, and by the valuable services which are thus rendered to the Church, and to each member of her flock.

We have now no difficulty in gaining a general view of the means that will help us to practise our Vows. Clearly there is no question here of any particular method of practice; we shall deal with such matters later on, when we speak of each Vow separately. We are now only dealing with the general obligation resulting from the Vows, which was mentioned in the foregoing conference; I mean the obligation of tending towards perfection by the practice of the evangelical counsels.

The best means of striving constantly after perfection are summed up in three of our Lord's words, when He spoke to all Christians of the necessity of salvation. We can rightly apply these, words to that conscientious striving after perfection which is the imperative duty of any man who has consecrated himself to God by the Vows of religion.

These words are See, Watch, and Pray!

1) **See.** This word reminds us of what we must do in order to obtain that, light which may in truth lead us to perfection. Let us think for a moment of the beauty of perfection; let us consider its nobility, its advantages and its happiness.

- a) **The beauty of perfection.** The very thought of perfection delights the soul. It includes all beauty, all excellence, all that is lovely, all that is good. Perfection alone can restore in us the Divine image and likeness, and draw down upon us the loving-kindness of the Lord.
- b) **The nobility of perfection.** How far nobler than his fellows is the man who possesses any degree of perfection. His thoughts are lofty, his affections pure; he has an upright mind and noble ideas. He fulfils all that is required of a child of God; our Lord Jesus Christ is the very soul of his soul; his body is the temple of the Holy Ghost. Such a man is holy, angelic, nay divine.
- c) **The advantages of perfection.** Who can count the vast spiritual riches of the perfect man? How much merit he acquires day by day, and how precious are the gifts which the Lord is pleased to bestow upon him.
- d) **The happiness of perfection.** If there be such a thing as happiness upon earth it is the lot of the perfect man. He is free from the slavery of passion, the devils are chained beneath his feet. He has all that he can desire, he does as he wishes; crosses and sorrows are changed into consolations.

We must also consider how just it is for us to strive after perfection. Is it not justice to do all that we can for God? Who is so worthy of our service? God has revealed His desire by all, that He has done for us, and by His commandment to love Him with our whole heart. Is not perfection worthy of all our desires, or can we ever do enough for Almighty God? How otherwise can we show our gratitude for all that God Incarnate suffered on our behalf; how better can we make our salvation sure? Never forget that the same duty which is so justly laid upon every man is imperatively required of anyone who has consecrated himself to God by the Vows of religion. Remember this; for, as I have said, it is impossible to, keep the Vows unless we are always careful to strive after perfection. The prudence enjoined by our Lord's command to see, bids us think over what we must do or leave undone if we are to fulfil so necessary a duty. With this end in view, we must make a special study of the Holy Gospels,

and of the teaching and example of our Blessed Lord; as well as of the other books of Holy Scripture. We must be attentive to the advice given us by Superiors, and also to the lights and inspirations which we receive from the Holy Spirit. Further, we must often examine our conscience, and meditate upon the truths of salvation. So long as we are faithful in these matters, and feed our souls upon these holy thoughts, it is very unlikely that our desire for perfection will ever weaken.

2) **Watch.** Vigilance belongs to the will. This quality makes us take every means suggested by prudence as likely to help us in the pursuit of perfection. Three such means may be mentioned; separation from the world; useful work suited to each one's station; religious practices.

**Separation from the world.** We do not only hope to save ourselves; but we strive to preserve others from corruption, and to withdraw them from evil. We wish to bring them to love Christ, and to keep His commandments. If we wish to succeed, we must have no part in a corrupt world; rather, we must be like salt, which is mingled with corruptible matter in order to impart its own nature, but not to take anything in return. « You are the salt of the earth. Again, we must be like the light which penetrates into the darkest corners in order to enlighten them, without losing anything of its own brightness. « You are the light of the world. » But of ourselves we are neither incorruptible nor luminous; and we can therefore defend ourselves against darkness and contagion, by guarding our hearts from worldliness, and from the love of earthly things. Such tastes are developed by much conversation, by useless visits and worldly manners; also by books which, without being precisely evil, are yet too full of worldly wisdom, and hence are far removed from Christian simplicity and religious Poverty. We must avoid frivolity; we must not take meals with outsiders unnecessarily, nor play any sort of games, etc. Separation from the world consists in staying at home when no useful purpose takes us abroad, and in avoiding such things as I have described, and others of a like nature.

**Useful work suited to each one's station.** An idle life is altogether contrary to the pursuit of perfection, for idleness is the mother of many vices. In the early days of the Church, the Apostle laments the conduct of the young widows, who had consecrated their lives to the Lord. « Being idle » he says « they learn to go about from house to house: and are not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. » (1Tim 5:13) Each one therefore, according to his station, must have some regular work, which will fill up most of the day. Any who are without employment must apply to the Superior, who will make such use of them as he may consider best for the glory of God, and their own

spiritual advancement. Those who have found work for themselves which they consider useful, should discuss the matter with the Superior. If the latter thinks that they can be more usefully employed, he should point this out, and try to induce them to change; but this must be done with charity, and the Superior should not use his authority unless the thing appear to him indispensable, as before God.

**Religious practices.** The first in importance of such practices, which in some sort contains all the rest, (at least all such as are essential), is the faithful observance of the Rule. The holiness of a religious depends upon this. The Rules prescribe all that the Lord requires of him; and by following his Rule he can be sure of doing what is most in accordance with the will of God. We must look upon it as a very important, even an essential thing, to keep the Superior informed of our position in life, our usual occupations, and the manner in which we fulfil them. The daily hour of meditation must be considered in the same light. For the moment we will leave aside the still graver duty of keeping the Vows which is incumbent upon us.

It would seem that such outward practices of humility and mortification as are holy and useful in the cloister, are unsuited to a Society which does not live enclosed by monastery walls. But though no such practices are prescribed, the Superior can grant permission to any fervent members who may hope to advance in virtue by these means. I mean such practices as to accuse oneself of breaches of the Rule, to kiss the feet of the brethren, to kiss the ground after some fault, either against the Rule or against the brethren. This last act of humility would be especially possible on two occasions. First, at the beginning or end of the meetings, when the Superior or supervisor speaks of some breach of the Rule, and certain members feel their consciences prick them. Secondly, when, during the course of the meeting, one member may have shown some temper or impatience towards another, or burst out laughing, etc.

3) **Pray.** Prayer is the last and best means of tending towards perfection. Thereby the weak become strong, and we obtain from heaven the help we so much need. Without prayer the two means already mentioned would be useless. The fewer external means of help we have, the harder it is to make use of them, the greater must be our recourse to prayer. Prayer includes all our spiritual exercises, vocal prayers, meditation, Holy Mass, Holy Communion, and examination of conscience.

Let us not think it enough to give to each of these exercises its exact time, and to spend a considerable part of each day in prayer. Let us bring to prayer all the devotion of which we are capable, with the help of

divine grace. Holy things must be done after a holy manner. If we are neglectful and lukewarm, we shall not please the Lord, nor draw down His blessing upon us; we shall rather provoke His anger, and our prayers will become to us a source of sin. But it is not enough for us to do our spiritual exercises well. Our life must be a life of prayer, and we must never be weary of praying, according to our Saviour's command that we ought always to pray and not to faint. » This habit of prayer will grow by the practice of the presence of God, by a pure intention which is often renewed, and by the frequent elevation of our hearts and souls towards God. We must be constant in prayer; but our prayer should be peaceful and without anxiety. We must ask this grace from God, confidently and perseveringly, while we trust in His help far more than in our own efforts. If habitual prayer is not in itself perfection, it is at least the most certain means of attaining to that blessed state. « Walk before Me » said the Lord to Abraham, « and be ye perfect. »

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## FOURTH CONFERENCE.

### The nature and excellence of religious Poverty.

*Beati pauperes spiritu.*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.  
(Matt 5: 3)*

When we make a Vow of Poverty, we bind ourselves by a voluntary promise, freely and deliberately made to the Lord, to live a life of Poverty; just as by the Vow of Chastity we bind ourselves to a life of Chastity, and by the Vow of Obedience we bind ourselves to a life of Obedience.

We practise **religious** Poverty in virtue of this Vow, especially when the Vow of Poverty is joined to the other two Vows, which are looked upon as essential to the religious state. This Poverty includes and presupposes that free and voluntary Poverty which is practised by all whom our Lord calls the poor in **spirit**; that Poverty which He places first among the Beatitudes. But it includes another obligation, that of the Vow; and for this reason it is called **religious** Poverty.

In order to understand and determine precisely wherein religious Poverty consists, we must understand what is meant by a **life of Poverty**. These words seem plain enough, and they are in fact clear. But since every disagreeable duty presents itself to our minds as it were enveloped by a thick fog, we will add some explanations which may clear up anything that seems obscure to the anxious mind.

A **life of Poverty** implies that we must live like the poor, who have nothing but what is given them from day to day, or what they can earn by daily work. It requires us to have only the necessaries of life, and

sometimes even to do without them; to be content with little; never to use anything rare or precious; in a word, to form our lives upon the life of Him Who « being rich, for our sakes became poor. » For our sakes. Riches were no danger to God made man; it was for us that He embraced Poverty, in order to detach us from riches, and to set us an example that we might follow, « so that all who imitate His Poverty may be enriched by every spiritual gift, » through the merits of the Poverty of Christ.

Our Divine Master's example shows us that we must live this life of Poverty by our own choice and free will. He also shows us the perfection to which we may bring even this outward Poverty. « The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests » said our Lord, « but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head. » Not only as God but also as man, Christ's dominion over all things could not be taken away; but He lived as though He had no rights and no possessions. Until the age of thirty, Jesus depended upon Mary and Joseph, and day by day He received from them the little He required for life. During our Lord's public ministry, He possessed nothing of His own; neither house, nor furniture, nor property, nor any garment beyond that which covered Him. He accepted the necessaries of life from the charity of His followers, so that He did not have to seek for such things; and St John tells us that one of the Apostles was charged to receive these alms. But no one looked upon this money as his own property.

Just in so far as we follow Christ in Poverty, will our religious Poverty be perfect; provided only that, while we imitate His Poverty in externals, our inward dispositions are like His. Those who live in community imitate the Poverty of Jesus at Nazareth; at least they ought to keep this divine example always before their eyes. They live, as it were, in their Father's house, where, without taking any thought, they receive what is needful day by day. They must not use anything as though it were their own, nor can they dispose of anything freely, and by their own caprice. The Poverty of Christ during His public ministry is the ideal of the apostolic life. Such was the Poverty of St Ignatius after he left his own country, and of St Francis Xavier during his missions. Such was the lot of M. de Montfort during his whole life, and many others have trodden the same road. M. de Montfort, on entering the Seminary, made a Vow to observe apostolic Poverty, and he was always very faithful to his promise.

Hence we see that even religious Poverty, that is the Poverty which is imposed upon us by Vow, may be practised after various fashions, and with greater or less perfection. The manner of observing the Vow may vary according to time and circumstances; it may be affected by the general aims of an order, or by the special aim pursued by an individual,



apart from any order. These diversities may be due to different motives; for example, the greater glory of God, the benefit of the faithful, and the general good of the Church.

Religious Poverty consists essentially in our renunciation of the power, whether actual or potential, of using our possessions freely and independently, in so far at least as our will is not contrary to the law of God. By the Vow of Poverty, we lose this free control, and only a restricted control remains, which is regulated by the Vow. We can only use such things as are left in our hands, or over which we have dominion, according to the teaching of the Gospel, and the counsels of evangelical perfection. The obligation lay upon us by Vow, under pain of sin, to follow the evangelical counsels in the use we make of our worldly goods, is sufficient to make Poverty truly religious; otherwise Superiors of religious houses could not practise Poverty, and it would be impossible for those religious to do so who live a missionary life outside their convent walls. Nevertheless, since the Vow of Obedience is generally joined to the Vow of Poverty, we cannot observe the latter unless we act according to the will of the Superiors in our use of temporal things.

The free and independent use of property is, therefore, alone incompatible with the Vow of Poverty. It is otherwise as regards the simple dominion over such property. Those members of the Society of Jesus who had made their first Vows were truly religious, although they kept the dominion over their property. Nor is a practical dominion contrary to the essence of the Vow of Poverty; above all if such dominion is retained for the glory of God, and the good of the Church, and is forced upon us by circumstances; provided only that we renounce all free and independent use of this same property, that such use as we make of it is restrained by Rules, or by the will of our Superiors, and is altogether in accordance with the evangelical counsels. The reason for this statement is, that by these safeguards we are sheltered from all the dangers that beset riches.

The cenobite is poor in his cloister, in virtue of his dependent position, and his conformity with the counsels of the Gospel; his Poverty is true religious Poverty, although he may enjoy the necessaries of life, and even a certain degree of comfort. He is poor because he lays no claim to anything; and, because of his Vow, he is, or should be, ready to content himself with bare necessaries. We can even say that he lives in Poverty, because he receives all that is given him day by day as an alms, not as a right; and because he can use nothing by his own free will. The apostle is poor if, after renouncing all things for the love of God, he awaits his daily bread from the charity of the faithful; but his Poverty, although very

perfect, would not be religious Poverty, unless he binds himself to it by Vow; for otherwise he would be in a position to act differently, and could do so without sin. A Christian in the world, who retains his property for some good reason affecting the service of God, is truly poor, if he has bound himself to follow the counsels of the Gospel in the use of his property, to the extent of his power; and if he does not act by his own will or caprice. If he act thus because of a Vow, his Poverty is true religious Poverty, especially if his use of his goods is governed by certain Rules, and is subject to the will of a Superior.

The Christian, who lives a life of religious Poverty, would in no way act contrary to his profession or Vow, were he to provide for his own support, either by working with his hands, or by the pursuit of some honest trade. But he must be content with the necessaries of life; and he must propose to employ all that remains of his earnings in charity, when he has provided what is needful for existence. Above all, in so doing he must obey the will of a Superior. A very large number of the early Christians relinquished their property and chose to be poor. They may even have bound themselves by Vow; yet we cannot doubt that any who had followed some trade or occupation before their conversion to the Gospel, continued to do so afterwards, and provided for their subsistence in this manner. « Let every man abide in the same calling in which he was called. » (1 Cor 7:20)

It is almost certain that the Apostles had vowed to renounce their property.

« We have left all things » said St Peter; and again: « Silver and gold have I none »; and yet we see Peter return to his nets after the Resurrection. He can have had no other motive than to provide for his own wants and those of his brethren.

During his years of apostolic labour, St Paul says of himself in so many words: « Such things as were needful for me and them that are with me, these hands have furnished. » (Acts 20:34).

These explanations of the nature of religious Poverty will be sufficient. They prove that this Poverty can be practised in the world, even when the dominion over our property is retained; provided that all use of our property is restricted in virtue of our Vow. It is even possible that, in practice, this Poverty will more closely resemble the Poverty of God Incarnate, and thus will be more perfect.

We must now say something of the excellence of religious Poverty. The Gospels everywhere show us how wonderful this virtue is; for religious

Poverty is none other than that Poverty which our Lord so often exhorts us to follow; or rather, it is this Poverty carried to perfection, and made more meritorious by the Vow.

This Poverty has been made so to speak divine by Christ our Lord. The Saviour of the world chose Poverty for His own lot; His birth, His life, His death, all furnish us with the most startling proofs of His love of Poverty. How often Christ praised this virtue, and invited all His followers to be poor. It was the poor whom He called to follow Him. He chose a poor Mother, and His foster-father was poor. His Apostles were chosen from among the poor, and it is to the poor that the most splendid promises were made. Jesus Christ is the King of the poor, and the love of our Saviour for Poverty is alone sufficient to prove the excellence of this virtue.

Poverty is the foundation whereon rests all Christian and religious perfection; for this lesson is taught us by our Divine Master, when He places Poverty first among the Beatitudes. « Blessed are the poor in spirit.» Herein we see another excellence of Poverty; it destroys the reign of sin within our hearts. This it does directly, in so far as concerns the concupiscence of the eyes, and the desire for worldly possessions which forms one of the three pillars that support the throne of Satan. Poverty wages open war upon this covetousness and overcomes it. But, indirectly, Poverty also destroys the other concupiscence, by taking away whatever serves to feed them. Further, Christian virtues are increased and strengthened by Poverty, especially such virtues as humility, meekness, and patience; for Poverty provides us with many opportunities for their practice. It is no doubt because such Poverty of spirit is very difficult, and exposes us to much suffering and contempt, that our Lord grants to this virtue the same reward as to those who suffer for righteousness sake.

Poverty makes the just man very like our Blessed Lord; for the livery of Poverty is that of the Saviour, of the world. For this cause, St James bids the brother of low condition glory in his resemblance to Christ, and the rich, on the contrary, feel confusion at his unlikeness to this Divine Model. (James 1:9, 10) To conclude, Poverty is a source of true happiness. It is a shelter from the anathemas and maledictions which the Lord has so often uttered against the rich. Poverty preserves us from the many vain and dangerous desires mentioned by the Apostle, and saves us from those snares of Satan whereby men come to everlasting death. By Poverty we are spared many cares, anxieties, and regrets, together with the remorse which pricks our soul; it dissipates many illusions that riches bring in their train, and from which we imagine a vain happiness. Poverty

points out that true joy is to be found in following Christ. Poverty places us under the special care of Divine Providence; it promises us the hundredfold in this life, and in the world to come, life everlasting. Joy is always the lot of those who are poor in Christ; whereas sorrow and care pursue those who are rich in this world's goods.

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## FIFTH CONFERENCE

### The practice of religious Poverty.

*Vade, vende quae habes, et da pauperibus.*

*Go sell what thou hast and give to the poor. (Matt 19:21)*

In virtue of the Vow of Poverty, the religious renounces all free and independent use of the things of this world; in future he can no longer use them as his own property, but must look upon them as belonging to the Lord. The will of God alone determines the use of all such things; and this will is made known to the religious by his Rules, and by the will of the Superiors to whom he is subject for the love of God. This definition always holds good. It applies equally, whether the religious has alienated the dominion over his property by selling it, or by giving it to the poor, (this is in itself most perfect); or whether he has simply left his property to his relations, as is usually done on entering a religious order; or whether, finally, he has preserved the dominion over his property for reasons tending to the greater glory of God. This restricted and dependent use of property is sufficient for a religious to be considered to live in Poverty; and, generally speaking, we may say that herein consists the practice of religious Poverty.

We may consider this practice of Poverty first, as it affects cloistered

religious; and second, as it affects those religious who make no such profession.

We must distinguish between **essentials** and **matters** of simple **perfection**; and, further, between the **inward** and **outward** practice of Poverty.

To practise religious Poverty it is **essential** for us to use nothing as our own property, that is, according to our own free will; but everything must be employed according to the Rules prescribed, and the will of the Superiors. The religious can neither give, nor receive, nor lend nor borrow, except according to his Rule. This holds good of all religious orders.

The **necessary** practice of Poverty includes all those matters which the religious must observe, under pain of more or less grievous sin against his Vow. This necessary practice varies externally in different religious orders.

The **perfect** practice of religious Poverty includes all that the religious might omit to observe without incurring any guilt. A man may imitate the great saints in their inward or outward practice of Poverty; he may take for his Rule the Poverty of Christ; he may be content with the bare necessities of life, and seek even in such things for that which is least precious; he may confine himself voluntarily to such actions as are suited to the poor, etc. There would seem to be no differences here, except such as may concern various types of Poverty, and the adaptation of these actions to the will of God

The **inward** practice of Poverty consists in the detachment of the heart from all earthly possessions, and in the liberty of spirit which is the outcome of such detachment; it consists, further, in a love for Poverty, and an esteem for all connected with this virtue. Here again there are no differences.

By the **outward** practice of Poverty, we mean such a method of using our visible goods as can be reconciled with the dependence and voluntary disappropriation to which we are bound by our Vow. It is almost entirely in this matter that the practice of the different religious orders varies. This difference results in principle from the diverse aims of the orders; and, more particularly, from the prescriptions of the Rule, and from the will of the Superiors who are bound by it. We must draw attention especially to the difference between cloistered religious, and those who, by their vocation, are called to live in the world.

Cloistered religious, who have their wants supplied and the necessaries of life provided by their order, are much more restricted in their use of outward things; and their dependence is much stricter. In their private capacity such religious can never act as proprietors; they can claim nothing as their own, nor can they put by anything without the knowledge of their Superiors. They can neither alienate, nor acquire property; they can neither buy, nor sell, nor lend, nor borrow, nor keep anything on deposit, whether it be at home or abroad. They can do nothing of all this without the Superior's permission; and this permission, to be valid, must not be gained by fraud or surprise. The Superior's permission can only be interpreted in certain circumstances, and there are some permissions which the Superior cannot grant; for instance, any permission calculated to do harm to the general good, or to an individual.

The cloistered religious is bound to follow the common usage of his house in every detail of food, lodging, or clothing. He must avoid anything peculiar in all these matters. Any outward show, or worldliness, or softness is forbidden. Anything over and above a fair proportion of the necessaries of life is looked upon as superfluous, and cannot be lawfully kept.

All this is of precept, and necessary, for those religious who are supported by their order. Any transgression in such things is a more or less serious sin, according to the greater or less gravity of the matter.

The perfection of outward Poverty consists, for cloistered religious, in being content with the bare necessaries of life, and even with what is least precious in these bare necessaries, so that they may experience some of the hardships of holy Poverty, and may, by practising this virtue, draw nearer to Christ our Lord, Who is the example and King of the poor.

Those religious who live out of the cloister, and who are not supported by their order, have more freedom; and their dependence in temporal things is less strict. By their Rule, and by the will of their Superiors, they even retain a practical dominion over their goods. To force them to give up this dominion would be contrary to the law and spirit of the Society. However, with the advice and consent of the Superiors, these religious may voluntarily surrender such dominion in order to attain to greater perfection. This right to use their property depends upon the circumstances of the case, and is granted for various reasons, such as the glory of God, the service of the Church, the upkeep of Divine worship, the relief of the poor. The members of the Society must be guided by such motives as these. The right to use their property remains to them;

the advantage however must not accrue to themselves individually, but to our Blessed Lord, to the Church and to its members. It is for this reason alone that our members preserve their possessions under a Vow of Poverty; and these aims only must be remembered in deciding as to the use to be made of such property, and in applying, it to their own needs.

This restricted and dependent use of his possessions only concerns the conscience of the religious. Outwardly he is free. We are speaking here of spiritual obligations, not of the claims of ordinary life. Any action would be as valid in civil life as though no Vow existed, even were such an action unlawful in the sight of God.

The members of this Society are not restricted as to their inward and spiritual liberty, in those cases where the Rule allows them to act. For reasons drawn from the necessity of the case, and from the general good, these permissions are both numerous and far-reaching. Every individual religious is granted, for his own use, all those permissions which were formerly given to the Superior of a religious house. Our permissions are even wider; for, in order to be valid, they do not need to be ratified by a major Superior. The religious is only obliged to consult the Superior, and to follow his advice, when the matter is of some importance. Hence each one is allowed to do all that is suited to his position in life, or that is required by ordinary social intercourse; but he must keep the Rules laid down by the Constitutions of the Society.

The great point is never to forget that although in the sight of men we remain masters of our property, we have none the less renounced it in spirit, and in the sight of God. It is to God that we have consecrated our possessions by the Vow of Poverty; henceforth they must be used only according to His good pleasure, and we must make use of right reason of faith, and of the teaching of the Holy Gospels, to discover what that good pleasure is.

All members of the Society are poor; therefore they must live like the poor, content with what is necessary, and rejecting all that is superfluous. Such conduct will not be difficult, if they possess that poverty of spirit in which all should strive to perfect themselves; that is, if they love and venerate Poverty, and despise riches; in a word, if their attitude is Christ-like. Nevertheless the general rule is that each member of the Society should remain in his own station; and the Vow of Poverty does not require him to surrender his property in the eyes of men. On the contrary, he retains his possessions in order to use them for the good of the Church, and the service of Almighty God. In consequence, the

manner of living poorly cannot be alike for all. What is necessary or superfluous for one may not be so for another, and, in order judge fairly, we must take into account each one's station in life, his position, and the circumstances in which he is placed. We may follow herein certain general rules: **1)** to see what will most edify, our neighbours; **2)** to avoid all display or softness; **3)** never to allow ourselves anything beyond what is enjoyed by the humblest and most careful members of our own class; **4)** never to be conspicuous owing to our neglect of the ordinary usages of life, unless it is a question of something opposed to the Gospel teaching; **5)** to follow the advice we should give to a friend, as in the sight of God, and to act as we shall be glad to have done at the hour of our death.

An upright conscience can safely decide many cases; but, in order to be more secure, and to practice both Obedience and Poverty, we must be careful to carry out all that the Constitutions tell us of the general account to be given to the Superior in writing every year, both of our state of fortune, and of the use to which we put our property. There is no need to enter into petty details. This account should be made year by year; and the Superior, after his annual visit, will set right anything which, in the sight of God, may seem to him useless or superfluous, all things considered. Two members chosen by the Society will do for the Superior himself precisely what the latter does for each of his subjects. All this is essential.

In order to have as much uniformity as possible, amid so much diversity, it might be well to have a list drawn up by some prudent and enlightened members. This list might give an approximate idea of a suitable amount to be spent on lodging, food, dress, furniture, etc. by the different classes of members of the Society. For the moment there are great difficulties in the way of such a step; hence, in the meantime, it is most necessary to refer to the judgment or advice of Superiors or visitors. Any doubtful case, which has not been provided for, should be submitted to the Superiors for their decision, and this decision must be respected.

We must be careful to remember all that the Constitutions tell us of the duty of never doing anything to increase our property. We must not seek anxiously for well-paid and prominent positions; but should rather prefer those posts where we may hope to do most work for God and for our neighbour. We are not however forbidden to inherit money; and we may accept an office or position in which we hope to be of greater use to the Church. We may continue to hold a lucrative post; we may pursue our business, or trade, or even do anything suited to our position in life, though thereby we may grow richer. But all this is only permissible if our hearts are free from any taint of avarice, and if we look upon all that we



have, or may possess in the future, as belonging to Almighty God. We must not work for ourselves, but for the Lord, to Whose service we are specially consecrated. In any doubt we must consult the Superiors.

There may be cases where the service of God requires us to go to law; but, in order not to be deceived by self-love, we must have nothing to do with any lawsuit until we have asked the Superior's advice, and obtained his consent and approbation. Should such a case arise, both Superior and subject must remember to act according to the words of the Gospel: « If one strike thee on the right cheek, turn to him also the other; and if a man will contend with thee in judgment and take away thy coat, let go thy cloak also unto him. » (Matt 5:39) Let us be sure that whatever we do is done for the greater glory of God.

Every matter touched on hitherto is of obligation; and any failure in these things will be a more or less grave sin against the Vow of Poverty. The more perfect, practice of Poverty consists, as to outward things, in the greater or less perfection with which we fulfil all these obligations, punctually, promptly, joyfully, and perseveringly. The more perfect practice of Poverty consists, further, in purity of intention, in the sublimity of the motives whereby we act, and in a greater resemblance to the Poverty of Christ our Lord. Again, it consists in being hard upon ourselves; in refusing many lawful comforts, and in choosing occupations which, though honest, are contemptible in the eyes of men. Finally, it implies a preference for the, society of the poor, and a desire to help them in every possible way. All members of the Society are advised to do their own work, whenever this is possible, and not to employ the services of others. Such conduct is well suited to the poor.

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**SIXTH CONFERENCE**  
**Helps to the practice of Poverty.**

*Sequere me.*  
*Follow Me (Matt 9:9)*

*Si quis mit venire post me, ab-  
neget semetipsur n ; tollat cru-  
cem swam, et sequatur me.*

*If any man will come after Me,  
let him deny himself and take  
up his cross and follow Me.*  
(Matt 16:24)

All the methods of keeping the Vows of religion which have been already mentioned, may be applied to the Vow of Poverty. Prudence bids us often remember the sacred bond into which we entered by our Vows; she reminds us of the excellence of religious Poverty, and its untold advantages. She requires us to fix an attentive gaze upon Christ our Lord, Who is the model and King of the poor, and to meditate carefully upon

His divine mysteries. The manger of Bethlehem, the hidden life at Nazareth, the cross of Calvary, these will remind us of the Poverty of our Saviour. Finally, we are exhorted to print deep upon our hearts and minds the divine lessons on Poverty taught us by Christ our Lord. We must never forget the blessings that He promised to the poor, or the anathemas that He hurled against the rich, and all those who follow after riches.

Such methods as these will help the religious who is poor in Christ to live according to His Vow of Poverty, by increasing his love and esteem for that state of life which brings him nearer to his Divine Master. But these methods are concerned rather with the inward spirit than with the outward practice of the Vow of Poverty, and we need something to help us in this outward practice. Many other religious live in Community, under the eyes of their Superiors; it is possible for their conduct to be uniform, for the same Rules apply to them all in common; they are not obliged to think about the means of subsistence, for these things will be provided by others. Such religious find in Community life all the help needed to facilitate the practice of that Poverty which they have vowed to the Lord. But what helps can we look for; especially those many members of the Society who live outside the community? I will mention a few.

First, we must take great care to understand the nature of our obligations with regard to Poverty. These obligations must not be so narrowed down as to relieve us of all the consequences of the Vow that may be unpleasant to nature. This would make our promise useless. But, on the other hand, we must avoid an ideal of Poverty which is impracticable, and which would lead us to behave in a way unsuited to our position, or even wholly contrary to it.

In the first place, our profession of Poverty requires us never to spend money for any evil motive, such as self-interest, vanity, luxury, ambition, or any ill-regulated passion whatsoever. Further, it requires us to be content with as little as possible in satisfying our natural tastes and inclinations, even when they are harmless, except in cases of real necessity. Indulgence here will only serve to diminish our love of penance and mortification.

If through long habit, or for some similar reason, we are forced to allow ourselves rather more, we should take this as a humiliation, and atone for our weakness by some other act of virtue. The reason is easy to see. By the Vow of Poverty we give our property into the hands of the Lord, to be used only according to His good pleasure. We know what this good

pleasure is by the teaching of the Gospel, by the will of our Superiors, and by our Rules. But, at the same time, this Poverty must be accommodated to each one's position, and to the just claims of social life. Let us however take care that, in judging of what is suitable, we follow the teaching of the Gospel, and not the rules of the world.

We who live in the world, have duties to fulfil, and virtues to practise, of which the cloistered religious in his solitude knows nothing. Over and above the important duty of almsgiving, and the relief of the poor, which forms a considerable part of the duties of members of the Society, we have to show hospitality, and to help our friends. Generosity rather than stinginess, and order and method in business, are some of the good qualities that we require; these render virtue lovable, and, by that very fact, bring glory to God, and spiritual profit to our neighbours, provided that we are careful always to keep our intention pure. We must then look upon such duties as the will of our Lord and Master, to Whom all our property is consecrated; and hence as being in no way contrary to our practice of Poverty. When we consider them in this light, we shall see that it is possible to practise Poverty very perfectly by repressing all evil cupidity; while at the same time, we bring our life into harmony with our many other duties.

Another great means of practicing Poverty is to prefer and to choose the society of the poor and humbly born, and to avoid associating with the great and powerful, or the rich in this world's goods, unless for any reason the glory of God requires us to act otherwise. We ought not to wish to be intimate with the rich, for fear of adopting their tastes and ideas, and of acquiring their manners, thus creating for ourselves a multitude of needs which do not harmonise with Poverty. We often lose a great deal of time in their society, and it is but seldom that we can speak freely to them of Almighty God. We do little good to the rich, and often, by our very action, we make it impossible to help them, while we do ourselves a great deal of harm. The true servant of God, whose time is divided between good works and the care of his own perfection, will find little difficulty in this practice of Poverty.

The third and last means which may help us to practise Poverty, is often to ask ourselves how we carry out the Rules laid down, and to give a faithful account to the Superiors. We ought also to consult the Superiors, simply and frankly, about all important or doubtful questions touching Poverty, and we should be docile in carrying out their suggestions. It might be useful for many of our number to place the care of their worldly affairs in the hands of some confidential agents, and to be content to watch over them without anxiety, and to refer to them for everything

touching domestic matters. But, before doing this, we ought to make it clear that we intend to follow the precepts of Christian moderation and humility, while continuing to live according to our position in life.

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**SEVENTH CONFERENCE**  
ON THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

**The nature and excellence  
of the Vow of Chastity.**

*Non omnes capiunt verbum istud,  
sed quibus datum est.*

*All men take not this word, but  
they to whom it is given.*

(Matt 19:11)

By the Vow of religious Chastity, we promise Almighty God to abstain, with the help of His grace, from all carnal enjoyment, even from such as is lawful in the marriage state, in order to serve God more perfectly.

In general we may say that the virtue of Chastity is necessary to all men, whatever be their state; for the Apostle spoke of this virtue when he said: « This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour... for God hath not called us (Christians) unto uncleanness, but unto sanctification. » (1 Thess 4:3, 4, & 7)

The peculiar property of this virtue is to preserve us from all unlawful pleasure. For the unmarried, all that appertains, or necessarily tends towards carnal pleasure is unlawful; as for example, glances, words, thoughts, etc. when these are indulged in freely and deliberately. This type of Chastity is called continence. For the married, all carnal pleasure is unlawful, except that which promotes the end for which marriage was instituted. Further, it is wrong to seek such pleasure for itself, seeing that to do so shows a want of restraint which is degrading to man. This is known as conjugal Chastity.

In any state of life the virtue of Chastity is always beautiful. It makes us lovable in the sight of God, and brings us the respect of our fellow men. We read in the Book of Wisdom: « O how beautiful is the chaste generation with glory, for the memory thereof is immortal: because it is known both with God and with men. » (Wis 4:1)

Religious Chastity, that is the Chastity to which we are vowed in the religious State, is far more beautiful still; for it saves us still more surely from all danger of contamination, and places the faithful religious beyond the reach of impurity. This Chastity is perfect when it is united to virginal purity; that is, when bodily integrity has been preserved.

The type of Chastity imposed by the Vow does not seem to have a wider scope than the continence of the unmarried; for this latter virtue forbids every kind of carnal pleasure. But the Vow adds another obligation to this first one, which is already very great; and further, the Vow perpetuates the obligation, or fixes it for a definite period, according as the Vow is perpetual, or limited to a certain time. It takes away, for a time, or for always, the liberty to enter into the marriage state, which we might otherwise lawfully enjoy. The Vow also reminds us more constantly of our obligations; it inclines us to practise those virtues which are necessary if the virtue of Chastity is to remain and increase within us, and, by these very means, Chastity is rendered more easy.

Our intention in making this Vow must be to please Almighty God by consecrating our bodies to His more perfect service. To this end we renounce all natural affections, (including even such as are lawful), which

divide our hearts, and hinder us from belonging wholly to our Divine Master. Unless we keep this end in view, our promise to live chastely would not be a Vow of religion; for we should have no intention of honouring the all-holy God by living in a more holy manner, and we should fail to understand the desire of our Saviour when He called us to make this Vow. Our Lord's words show us that a special grace is needed, and it would be presumption on our part to think that we could be faithful without this grace. But God will not refuse to grant this grace to any who understand how excellent it is, and who have been inspired by heaven to ask for it. When we have received this grace we must be more than ever faithful so to watch over ourselves as to preserve this precious gift; for without such vigilance the gift would remain sterile, or rather it would bring condemnation to the recipient, and we should soon come to our ruin.

These few words will suffice to explain the nature of religious Chastity. We will now say something of its excellence.

Even from the standpoint of natural reason, this virtue is very admirable, for it saves men from the danger of lowering themselves beneath the brutes, by the blind indulgence of the most imperious of all passions. Again, Chastity keeps men's senses in subjection to reason, and thus preserves civil society from a multitude of crimes which are at once its misfortune and its disgrace. Hence Chastity was honoured even by pagans, though their theory was imperfect, and their practice even more so. But we must judge of the excellence of religious Chastity by the light of faith.

Faith shows us religious Chastity as a **special gift** of God, the precious fruit of the Incarnation of the Word. Again, faith shows us this virtue as a painful but meritorious **sacrifice**, whereby a man consecrates his body to Almighty God; a sacrifice which, in the religious, presupposes a glorious victory over himself and all his enemies. Finally, faith shows us the sublime **dignity** of Chastity, which unites a man so closely to the Incarnate Word.

1) A special grace is required in order to practice even a lower degree of Chastity. Human nature is so corrupt, the world is so wicked, evil example is so catching, and the attacks of the devil are so violent in all that concerns the vice of impurity; that without a special grace, a man will be certain to succumb before long.

But an even more special grace is needed for the Vow of Chastity. In order to be faithful to this Vow, and to keep ourselves from all transgression contrary to it, we must lead the life of angels rather than

of men. We must « live in the body as being out of the body. » We must « be as the angels of God », for angels upon earth, or men fit for heaven, is the name given by St. Bernard to the chaste. This great gift was not made clearly known to men till after the Incarnation of the Word. When the Son of God took a body like our own, He purified our sinful flesh, He sanctified it, and made it in some sort capable of sharing here below in those advantages which belong to the blessed spirits in glory. Christ was the first to lead men to practice the Vow of Chastity.

He it was who revealed the heavenly gift contained in that stainless purity which had hitherto been so little regarded by men. « All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. » Doubtless our Lord was here referring in the first place to the Apostles, to whom these words were spoken; but He included all who might thereafter imitate their example, and follow Him more closely by the vow of Chastity. Stainless purity was especially dear to Jesus. He chose a Virgin Mother; His foster-father was virgin, as were also the great Precursor, and the Beloved Disciple. Finally, our Lord promised the hundredfold in this life, and life everlasting, to all those who leave father or mother, or any ties of flesh and blood, to follow Him. (Matt 19:29)

Before the mystery of the Incarnation was fulfilled, Mary had consecrated herself wholly to God. She was already full of the spirit of Christ, having been conceived immaculate in the first moment of her existence, when she was also endowed with great gifts of wisdom and holiness. On her presentation in the Temple, she solemnly renewed this consecration of her whole self; and when the great day dawned of the angel's visit, and the messenger of God announced the birth of her Divine Son, Mary delayed to give her consent to this great mystery, which was to raise her high above all creatures, until she was assured that the virginity which she had vowed to Almighty God would suffer no stain. This is the obvious meaning of her words: « How shall this be done, because I know not man? » (Luke 1:34) We see here how highly our Lady valued the gift of virginity, seeing that she preferred it to the most excellent dignity to which a creature could be raised by God.

The Church, under the inspiration of her Divine Lord, has always shown her high esteem for all who profess religious Chastity. The ranks of her sacred ministry are recruited from among those who make profession of this virtue; and virgins are the most cherished portion of the Christian flock.

We may add that, through the merits of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the world is peopled by a new race of men, who propose to follow



the example of the pure spirits in heaven. The Lord has fulfilled the words which He spoke by the Prophet to all the chaste who are consecrated to His service, to those « that shall keep His Sabbaths and shall choose the things that please Him. » « I will give to them, in My house and within My walls, a place and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall, never perish. » (Is 56:4,5) We may further understand by these words that the faithful religious will leave behind him a nobler seed than any for which he could have hoped in the course of nature.

2) In the second place, we may judge of the excellence of religious Chastity when we remember that this virtue requires from her faithful devotees a painful and constant sacrifice.

The Vow of Chastity is a sacrifice; for the gift of God does not, as a rule, take away the difficulties which attend the practice of this virtue. It enables us to overcome them by increasing our strength, or by lessening the violence of the temptation. We know from St. Paul's own words that He had received this gift of Chastity. « I give counsel, as having obtained the mercy of the Lord, to be faithful. » (1 Cor 7:25) Nevertheless, he declares that he suffered from the assaults of the Evil One, the sting of the flesh, which was to him a source of great humiliation. « There was given me a sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan, to buffet me. » (2 Cor 12:7). The Apostle goes on to say that he had often begged the Lord to free him from this miserable temptation; but the answer was: « My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity. » These difficulties are all the greater for being inherent in our nature, and their continual recurrence gives us many a hard fought battle.

Therefore this sacrifice presupposes great victories, when we are faithful. We have to struggle against our corrupt nature, and tame its passions by constant mortification, by fasting, temperance, and unceasing labour; but, beyond all this, we have to endure the violent assaults of the Evil One. The world is given over to the lusts of the flesh, and panders to our corrupt nature in every possible way. The sins of the flesh are encouraged; our ill-regulated desires are fostered on all hands. Amusements, shows, assemblies, pomp, festivities, books, conversations, visits, all that our eyes encounter in the streets and public places, and even in church, what can we say of these? Think of statues, pictures and engravings; think of what we listen to in the way of concerts and songs. Even in seemingly innocent habits and customs, there is such a tendency to make life easy. Think of our luxury in dress and food. Think of our perfumes, our amusements, our fashions, etc. The whole forms a fiery furnace which is heated ever more and more by the orders of the

Babylonian tyrant.

But there is a nearer and more violent temptation. The devil is careful to attack the chaste soul by evil suggestions, by mental pictures, and by desires which he instils into the heart. He even at times influences our body, and God permits him to assault and annoy us. The Evil One is full of rage against the pure in heart, because, through this virtue, such souls attain, even on earth, to an angelic beauty comparable to that which he lost by his rebellion against God. Chastity is hateful to him, because by this virtue he recognizes the seed of the woman with whom his seed is to be forever at enmity. (Gen 3:15)

3) Last of all, we are shown the excellence of this virtue, when we reflect on the dignity to which religious Chastity raises man.

Chastity lifts man above the ordinary level of human life; it makes him equal to the angels, and promises him a crown of glory. Here and now, it is a never ending source of virtue and merit. All this is of great value; but to us a far more precious prerogative of Chastity is to be found in the wondrous relation which it establishes between Christ our Lord and the souls of men. I mean that spiritual marriage, in which our Lord is the Bridegroom, and the pure soul the Bride. These nuptials are celebrated in Scripture in the Canticle of Canticles, and in Psalm 44. The Church loves to speak of virgins as the Brides of Christ; and our Lord Himself, in His revelations to the Saints, has often deigned to call them by this name. But it is more than a mere name. Here we see the effect of the Vow whereby the pure soul consecrates the body wholly to the Lord. By this act of consecration the pure in heart acquire special rights over the Body of Christ, the Saviour of the world, and man enters into more complete possession of that heavenly treasure which is the grace and glory of the Lord.

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## **EIGHTH CONFERENCE**

### **The practice of religious Chastity.**

*Brunt sient Angeli Dei in coelo.*

*They shall be as the angels of  
God in heaven. (Matt 22:30)*

St. Ignatius would seem to refer to these words of our Divine Master

when he says of the practice of Chastity in the 28th Rule of the Summary: « What concerns the Vow of Chastity needs no explanation, as it is plain how perfectly it ought to be observed; that is, by endeavouring to imitate Angelical purity in cleanness of both body and mind. »

We ought to respect the wise discretion shown by this great saint, whom we are proud to look upon as our Father; therefore we will avoid details which might be unsuitable for some. Those who need further instruction may be referred to books which treat of this matter, or to the ministers of Christ in confession. However, without departing from the spirit of St. Ignatius, or rather, in imitation of him, we will develop his meaning when he tells us that we **must endeavour to imitate Angelical purity**.

To **endeavour to imitate Angelical purity** does not mean that we are bound to attain to such purity; for this would be impossible without the help of an extraordinary grace, such as was vouchsafed to the Blessed Virgin, and, in a lower degree, to certain saints as St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, and the Beloved Disciple. These words only mean that we are to take the Blessed Spirits for our models in this matter of purity; and that we must be untiring in our efforts to resemble them, according to the measure of the grace given to us, and the conditions of our mortal life.

This purity requires us to keep ourselves free in body and soul from all lusts of the flesh, while we endeavour to increase the beauty of Chastity, both in soul and body, by every means in our power.

If our soul is to be free from all stain, we must be careful to guard its powers from any poisonous germ of evil, while we never cultivate anything that might encourage the suggestions of the Evil Spirit. We must watch over our memory, that faculty wherein is stored up any knowledge we may have acquired. We must guard our imagination, wherein are reflected the different objects which strike our senses. Nothing should be mirrored here which may encourage the evil tendencies of our nature. Certain readings or conversations, the dwelling upon certain objects, pictures, people, etc., such things as these soil our memory and our imagination. Hence there is need for great circumspection; and, unless in case of real necessity, we should never dwell upon such mental pictures. If they present themselves, we must try to get rid of them at once, either by disregarding them with contempt, or by turning to other thoughts and occupations

Our understanding should not be occupied needlessly with the things of sense, which bind us to earth. We should forget them as far as possible, and distract our minds from such thoughts.

Above all, let us be careful never to admit within our hearts any desire or affection which terminates in a creature, and has not God for its true end and aim. For this reason we should be very careful to watch over our hearts. As soon as we are conscious of any feeling or impression, however slight, we should examine whence it springs, and whither it is tending. « With all watchfulness keep thy heart, because life issueth out from it. » (Prov 4:23)

We should try on the other hand, to embellish the powers of our soul, by feeding them on supernatural and heavenly beauty. Our imagination should dwell on the thought of God, and on the great truths of religion; it should only cultivate such images as may strengthen the soul, and lift it to a higher level of spirituality and holiness. Our understanding should be accustomed to dwell familiarly on subjects of holy meditation, and our will should be continually directed towards all that is heavenly and sublime.

So we shall imitate the purity of the angels as closely as possible by our purity of soul. We should encourage ourselves to make this effort by remembering that our souls bear the impress of God Himself. Here is to be found a sanctuary which the Divine Lord of heaven and earth honours by His presence, and which has been entrusted to our care, so that we may know, love, and serve the Lord.

Perfect purity of body requires us to watch over our senses with great care, and never to indulge them beyond the limits of necessity, duty, and charity. Our senses must be always governed by reason; and it is towards our eternal salvation that we must direct our every movement, our steps, our words, our eyes etc. We ought to shut our eyes to everything that is useless, or frivolous, or likely to foster idle curiosity. Such things are always dangerous; for at best they fill our minds and distract our attention. Speak we must; but let us love silence, while we avoid the hearing of news, or the listening to conversation, or worldly songs which disturb our peace of soul, and cause us to lose much precious time. Let us imitate « the meekness and gentleness of Christ » by our whole demeanour, by our voice, and our way of speaking to others; for in our soul we must strive to be like God Himself, and in our bodies we must copy the example left us by the Saviour of the world, when He walked upon earth. Never let us forget that our senses are not given us chiefly for this short life, but for the life to come, which is everlasting; we should therefore only use them for what is pure and holy. We should dread any profanation, while we carry out the Apostle's words: « Glorify and bear God in your body. » (1 Cor 6: 20).

Purity of soul cannot exist without this purity of body; and it is by such means as I have described that we shall lead the life of angels upon earth; we shall be in the body as though we were not in the body. « May our Almighty and most merciful Father grant us this grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. »

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## **NINTH CONFERENCE**

**Helps to the practice of the  
Vow of Chastity.**

*Habemus thesaurum istum in*

*vasis licilibus.*

*We have this treasure in earthen  
vessels. (2 Cor 4: 7)*

The Apostle is speaking of the gift of grace; but his words may be applied with even greater force to the gift of Chastity. The treasure is most precious; but the vase wherein it is contained is easily broken, and we are always in danger of losing it. We can only hope to avoid so great a misfortune by the constant use of those means which our Divine Master provides for us in His bounty. These means are the same for us as for all others who are bound more closely to Almighty God by the Vow of Chastity. They may be found at some length in the treatise on the Vow of Chastity contained in the Practice of Religious Perfection by Rodriguez.

It would be well for us to refresh our memories by re-reading his words from time to time, until we have reduced these practices to a habit. I will therefore content myself now with a few words.

We have to fight in defense of Chastity against the flesh, the world, and the devil; and we must meet each of these adversaries with such weapons as will give us the victory over them. The flesh must be overcome by **mortification**, the world by **flight**, the devil by **prayer**.

**Mortification.** Our Rule bids us pay great heed to the mortification of the senses. « All must be exactly careful to guard the gates of their senses (especially their eyes, their ears, and their tongue) from all disorder. » (29th Rule Summary). Here the senses are pictured as the doors of the soul. If our treasure of Chastity is not to be stolen away, we must watch closely over these portals, and only open them cautiously to meet the claims of necessity, duty, or charity.

Our eyes, our ears, our tongue, stand in great need of mortification. There is a very remarkable passage in the Book of Job referring to the mortification of the eyes. « I made a covenant with my eyes, that I would not so much as think upon a virgin. For what part should God from above have in me. » (Job 31:1,2)

These words show how necessary it is for us to guard our eyes; and they are the more remarkable because Job was a wealthy prince, living in the married state, before the days of Moses, according to the common opinion, with nothing but the law of nature to guide him. What a disgrace to us, living as we do in the heart of Christendom, with so many examples before us, and with far more abundant lights and graces, should we fail to do even as much as he.

There is something terrible about our Lord's words concerning the evil desires that may be aroused by looking on a woman; and the example of David shows us the danger.

Our sense of hearing may cause our death in different ways; whether it be owing to the evil nature of what we hear, or the sound of a voice, or of music. We cannot shut our ears as easily as our eyes, and therefore we must avoid listening to anything that may have an evil effect upon the soul.

We must watch over our tongue with all the greater care because it is so difficult to control. How easy it is to let slip some word hurtful to Chastity, or at least unworthy of the perfection of that virtue.

Bodily mortification is practised by macerating our body, by depriving it of ease and comfort, or even sometimes of the necessaries of life. We macerate the body by means of instruments of penance, hair-shirts, iron chains, disciplines etc. We deprive it of the necessaries of life by means of fasting, watching, and abstinence.

Such practices are holy in themselves and were always followed by the saints, but it is possible to go too far in these matters; therefore we must follow the Rule, and neither undertake nor continue them without advice. Less caution is needed when we only cut off the comforts of life, and there is rarely danger of excess here.

Regular work, suited to each one's age and position, is a great help to the mortification of the body, and the preservation of Chastity. Another excellent means may be found in outward modesty, in a decent appearance, and in the avoidance of anything disorderly either in expression or gesture.

**Flight from the world.** We cannot flee from the world by actual separation from it like the solitaries; but we must only look at the world for the glory of God, and the salvation of mankind. When we are among men, we must be like the angels who watch over our salvation without ever losing the vision of God, in Whom they find all glory and happiness. When asked what we are doing in the world, each one should be able to answer: « Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business »? (Luke 2:49)

Never let us seek our own pleasure in the world. We ought to look upon it with the eyes of Christ; we ought to have compassion on its misery while we hate its wickedness; we ought to detest its pleasures, and despise its rewards and honours, while we dread its contagion and its

dangers. We should never long for its delights, which to us are foolishness. How can we love the world if we bear all this in mind? Let us even beware of making an obligation out of what is no more than foolish and harmful civility; to do so is to waste time which might be spent in more useful work. As far as possible we should be careful to stand aloof from worldly amusements, or festivities, or rejoicings; and we should avoid the luxury, softness, or vanity of the world

These things fill our imagination, and provide the devil with arms which he may use against us later on.

**Prayer.** This means includes all that has to do with Divine worship. It is needful to keep us from temptation, and to help us to overcome when we are attacked. There is no better means of pre-paring to meet the ambushes laid for us by the Evil Spirit in the matter of Chastity, than to live a life of prayer; for so we shall conquer Satan in the fight. A life of prayer means a life spent in the presence of God, by often renewing our purity of intention, and by offering our actions in union with Christ our Lord. In a life of prayer, we give a settled time every day, as far as may be, to meditation, vocal prayer, and holy reading, as well as to Mass, examination of conscience, and other pious exercises. Further, we go to confession every week, and receive Holy Communion often. These last two points are especially important. Frequent Communion, for which we prepare with renewed respect and fresh fervour, and a weekly confession made with the needful dispositions, are perhaps the best means of guarding against any slip in the matter of Chastity. The dispositions for confession include great openness of heart in all that concerns Chastity, and great docility in following the advice of a wise director; either by avoiding what he forbids as dangerous, or by despising what he judges should be despised.

There remain certain more general means from which all those that I have hitherto mentioned draw their force, and without which they would soon be neglected. Such are a lively fear of the judgements of God, a great horror of sin, especially of any fault against holy purity, and a conviction of our own weakness. He who wishes to be free from all stain must be on his guard against the world, and especially against himself. This self-knowledge will lead him to avoid all familiar intercourse with the other sex, and to shun every sort of intimacy, even with its least dangerous members. Such meetings should only take place for good reasons, and never for mere amusement, or recreation. Conversations must be prudent and serious, and indiscreet talk should be avoided.

Again, by the practice of Obedience we shall obtain and preserve the gift



of Chastity. God bestows control over the senses upon those who are submissive to the authority of their Superiors; while on the other hand, He punishes the disobedient by allowing the flesh to rise up against the spirit. This, as we learn from Cassian, was the universal opinion of the Fathers of the desert.

One last and most valuable means may be mentioned. This is found in a true and tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Through Mary's intercession we obtain the graces needed if we are to acquire perfect purity of soul and body. The Mother of God can only number us among her most dear children if we possess this virtue. She has our purity at heart; and, if we wish to please her, we cannot fail to strive day by day to perfect ourselves in a virtue which is so dear to the Heart of Mary.



## **TENTH CONFERENCE**

### **The nature and excellence**

## of religious Obedience.

*Factus obediens usque ad mortem*

*Becoming obedient unto death:*  
(Phil 2:8)

By the Vow of Obedience, a man subjects himself to another man, whom he looks upon as holding to him the place of God. He does this in order to renounce his own will, and thereby to make his salvation sure. Such is the nature of religious Obedience.

**Religious** Obedience rests upon the special Vow or promise which has been made to God, and this it is which distinguishes religious Obedience from any type of **natural** or **civil** Obedience. Natural obedience rests upon the dependence which nature has established between men. Civil Obedience rests upon the relations of social order. Both may be termed **Christian** when these duties are fulfilled as in the sight of God, and such virtue is very pleasing to the Lord. It is not merely very meritorious, and of great value, but it is necessary to each man individually, and to society in general. The contrary vice of disobedience, or insubordination, is wholly incompatible with salvation, and is destructive of good order, both in domestic and social life. Both types of Obedience have their origin in the dependent relation wherein man necessarily stands towards his Creator and Sovereign Lord, from Whom all authority of every sort proceeds. «There is no power but from God: and those that are ordained of God. Therefore, he that resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God» (Rom 13:1,2)

By religious Obedience **a man subjects himself to another man**, that is to say, of his own free will, he places himself in dependence upon another, so that he may do what his Superior bids him, and not follow his own will. This dependence is the result of his own choice; it is not forced upon him, as is always the case with dependence upon a natural authority, and generally the case with dependence upon a civil authority. Even when this latter type of Obedience is chosen by ourselves, it is still very different to religious Obedience. Our motive is different, for we desire some sort of worldly advantage; and the extent of the Obedience is different, for it is limited to certain actions, and is circumscribed by the nature of the bond itself. The end and aim of religious dependence never changes; in many cases it is the wish to ensure our salvation. The scope of religious Obedience is also far wider than any other, and the obligation is imposed by Vow.

**We subject ourselves to a man who holds the place of God to us.** God

does not lead men by His own immediate action. He employs other men to lead them, and to reveal His holy will. A man who professes to obey none but God Himself does not really practise obedience; for to act thus is to be our own ruler and guide, and entails great risks. Therefore God has invested men with His authority so that they may rule over their fellows. These truths apply to Superiors in the natural and civil sphere, and also to ecclesiastical Superiors. But their authority is circumscribed within certain limits; and even ecclesiastical Superiors, whose authority is wholly spiritual, are content to command only in such matters as are generally necessary to salvation. Therefore, religious Obedience is a holy practice which the Church has always observed, and which is based upon the words of God Himself. Its object is to show us the will of God, and to lead us more surely in the way of perfection and holiness. If we bind ourselves by Vow, as members of one of the societies which God raises up from time to time in His Church, and which the Church approves by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, we choose the safer and more perfect way: and it is in such action that true Obedience consists.

Submission to a director only concerns our spiritual life, and matters of conscience. Submission to a religious Superior, on the other hand, extends to outward matters, and embraces every action within limits of the Obedience promised.

In order to obey a director, we must be assured of his faith, and perfect submission to the Church. His conduct also must be such as befits a man of God, who will lead us in the way of perfection. If, later on, we were to find him other than what we had reasonably expected him to it might be prudent, or even necessary to leave him.

Before, we promise Obedience to a religious Superior, we can know with greater certainty what he may exact, and the kind of life we shall have to lead; and, further, we must feel a sweet assurance that God has called us to this mode of life.

In virtue of our Vow, religious Superiors, when approved by the Church, have a special authority whereby to lead their inferiors; and it is in this authority that we must find the motive for our Obedience. Here is to be found the merit of religious Obedience, and here is its strength and perfection.

**In order to renounce his own will, and thus to ensure his salvation.** These words speak of the sacrifice of our own will, which is included in the Vow of Obedience, as well as of the reward which we hope to obtain. Herein is to be found the most, perfect form of that renunciation which is so often recommended in the Gospel; and, undoubtedly, there is no

better means of making our salvation sure, since a man can only lose his soul by an evil use of his free will.

From this short sketch it is easy to see the excellent nature of Obedience. We have already said that the Vows are the greatest and most perfect sacrifice that a man can offer to Almighty God; but, among the Vows, Obedience is the most perfect. By the Vow of Poverty, a man sacrifices his body; by the Vow of Obedience, he sacrifices his will; and, in so doing, offers his whole self. No act whereof we are capable can bring more glory to God, or more advantage to man.

The Vow of Obedience exalts man above the level of the other Vows. The Vow of Poverty lifts him above earth and makes him heavenly. The Vow of Obedience makes him in some sense divine; for his will is united to the will of God Himself. « He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. » (1 Cor 6:17)

The Vow of Obedience gives a new merit to every action that is done with the perfection required by our Vow. But Obedience does more than shelter us from the illusions of self-love, and the ambushes of the Evil One; it saves us from the dangers of ignorance, and the temptations of sin. Further, Obedience makes us certain that we are doing the will of God, even in the smallest trifles; and we know that we act thus from the most sublime of motives, which is none other than to do God's holy will. The religious who acts under Obedience always does what is most holy, and most perfect for him; for all his actions are according to the will of God, which is made known by his Superior. How great then is his peace of conscience, how sweet his assurance of salvation, and how vast are the spiritual riches which he amasses in a short time.

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## **ELEVENTH CONFERENCE**

## **Practice of the Vow of Obedience.**

*Qui vos audit, me audit.  
He that heareth you heareth Me.  
(Luke 10:16)*

Whom then does our Lord bid us obey? How must we obey?

Such are the questions called forth by these memorable words of our Divine Master. The answer contains nearly all the essential teaching regarding the practice of religious Obedience.

These words were spoken, in the first instance, to the seventy-two disciples sent by our Lord to announce the coming of the kingdom of God. The knowledge that they were the messengers of their God and Saviour was to give them confidence in their preaching. In a wider sense, but with equal truth, these words are spoken to all who are sent by Christ Our Lord to teach men, and to lay down rules of conduct for others. The promise applies, in the first place, to the Church, and to the Supreme Pontiff her head; all Christians are bound to follow their teaching in matters of faith and morals. Secondly, our Lord's words apply to the Bishop of each diocese, when his teaching is in accordance with the doctrine of the Church, and they have a further application to all who hold authority under the Bishop, according to the measure of such authority. Thus it is that this promise is made to religious Superiors with regard to their subjects, who'll they are bound to lead towards perfection, according to the Rule and spirit of the individual order.

St. Bernard speaks very plainly of our duty towards religious Superiors in the following words: « Whether it be God Himself Who gives us a command » he says, « or the man who takes the place of God, we must obey with the same respect, provided however, that the man commands nothing contrary to the law of God. »

We must be careful to note, one point concerning religious Superiors. All the faithful, without exception, are subject to the Sovereign Pontiff for whatever concerns doctrine, or the duties necessary to salvation. All the inhabitants of a diocese are subject to the orders of their Bishop; but no one is subject to religious Obedience, unless he has freely promised it. The Superiors of religious Societies receive their authority from the Church, to whom all power was given by Christ our Lord. Such authority is given them for the spiritual profit of men, either by a tacit consent, or by a formal approbation of the various Institutes. But the Church does not determine the subjects over whom this authority is to be exercised. Such a decision is the work of the Holy Ghost, Who bestows the grace of

vocation. He it is Who calls men to the various religious orders, He it is Who seems to say to them, as He did to Saul, that « there it shall be told thee what thou must do. » (Acts 9:7)

On the other hand, a religious Superior, when he has recognized this grace of vocation, must look upon himself as another Ananias; and, trusting in the help of the Lord, he should say to all those committed to his charge: « The Lord Jesus hath sent me, He that appeared to thee in the way as thou earnest, that thou mayest receive thy sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost. » (Acts 9:17) It is from the Holy Ghost that the Superior receives his subjects; but the Spirit of God does not command, and, in consequence, it is of their own free will that the subjects submit to a particular type of the perfect life. Such subjection is only made permanent and obligatory by the Vows, and it is limited to the type of perfect life that has been embraced, so that no other obligations can be imposed by the Superiors. With this reservation, religious Obedience reaches very far indeed; it is a perpetual renunciation of our own will.

We shall better understand the practice of Obedience if we examine its different degrees. These are three in number; Obedience of **action**, Obedience of **will**, and Obedience of **judgement**.

Obedience of **action** consists in doing outwardly what we are commanded to do. Such Obedience should be prompt, exact, uncomplaining, courageous and faithful. I only touch upon these qualities; but, however perfect our outward possession of them might be, we should fail in religious Obedience unless, in addition, we practised Obedience of the **will**.

This second type or degree of Obedience requires us to love this virtue, and to carry out the Superior's commands willingly, and with spiritual joy. The more sincere this love is, the greater its strength and perfection, the more meritorious is our Obedience, and the more pleasing we shall be in the sight of God.

But our Obedience will never approach perfection unless we rise to the third degree, that of Obedience of **judgement**. This last degree requires us to submit something more than our affections; we must subject our inspirations to those of the Superior, whenever the evidence is not plainly against him. Obedience of judgement requires us to give up our own opinion, as far as we can, and to persuade ourselves that the command is for the best. St. Ignatius gives an admirable explanation of these three degrees in his Letter on Obedience, and we ought to read his words again and again.

In speaking of religious Obedience, we must be most careful to bear in mind the **motive** for which we obey Superiors. This motive is the authority over us which has been entrusted to them. Our only reason for Obedience must be that the Superior holds the place of Christ our Lord to us, because of the Vow of Obedience that we have made. It is not the man whom we obey, but Christ our Lord, Whom the man represents to us.

Such a thought makes religious Obedience easier and more perfect, while it ennobles this virtue.

It is Christ Whom we obey. Who then would refuse Obedience? Who would complain, either of the person who commands, or of the thing commanded?

It is Christ Whom we obey; it is Christ our Lord Whom we must strive to please. Were our Obedience offered in order to please any man, we should be guilty of base flattery, unworthy of a religious. But, if we hope to please Christ our Lord, how perfect must be our Obedience; perfect in its execution, perfect as regards our will, and perfect in the submission of our judgment; always remembering however that no human command can contravene the law of God.

It is Christ our Lord Whom we obey. Therefore we are certain of doing the will of God and nothing more holy than obedience can be required of the perfect religious. These thoughts show us the beauty of Obedience, of which the Lord Himself has said that « it is better than sacrifice, » while at the same time we understand how terrible is the sin of disobedience, which is compared by the same prophet to « the sin of witchcraft, and the crime of idolatry. » (1 Kings 15:23) All that I have said in this conference refers to our Society, as much as to any other religious Institute. There is no difference except such as may result from the action of an external Superior. But in these cases, the Superiors of the Society are well aware that their commands, must not clash with the orders of an external Superior, unless these orders are opposed to the law of God.

## TWELFTH CONFERENCE.

### Helps to the practice of Obedience.

*Obedite praepositis vestris, et  
subjacete eis. Ipsi enim pervigilant  
quasi rationem pro animabus  
vestris reddituri, ut cum gaudio  
hoc faciant, et non gementes;  
hoc enim non expedit vobis.*

*Obey your prelates and be  
subject to them. For they watch  
as being to render an account  
of your souls; that they may  
do this with joy and not with  
grief. For this is not expedient  
for you.  
(Heb 13:17)*

These words of the Apostle concerning the watchfulness of Superiors, and the account which they must give to God of our souls, can only apply to those who govern us in spiritual things. They refer to all ecclesiastical Superiors; but with even greater force to Superiors in religion. The latter are bound to greater detail in their vigilance, and their charge concerns not only the salvation but the perfection of their inferiors.

St. Paul puts forward this vigilance of Superiors, and the account which they will have to render of our souls, as a motive for our Obedience; so that Superiors may not be overwhelmed by the burden laid upon them, but may even carry it joyfully. For, he says, it would not be expedient for us to add to a burden that is already so heavy. This motive should appeal to us; for how can we fail to recognize the obligations we are under to the Superiors who watch so carefully over our salvation, and our progress in perfection. Superiors act as the head of a religious body; it is through them that the body sees, hears, speaks and breathes. Above all, it is chiefly on the Superiors that the glory, happiness, safety, and holiness of a religious Institute depend. Superiors communicate life and strength to the whole body, as well as the power of motion to its various members.

It is Superiors who direct; it is they who draw down grace from heaven upon their subjects. Superiors make the will of God plain to us, while they guard us against possible danger. Superiors defend us when the enemy attacks, and are bound in duty to provide for the spiritual needs



of their inferiors. The members of a religious Institute will find in zealous and vigilant Superiors a most powerful means whereby to attain to salvation and perfection. By the use of this means, subjects will attain to high sanctity, and the designs of Almighty God will be fulfilled. If such Superiors as these are lacking, or if no recourse is had to them, subjects will soon grow careless; they will be at the mercy of the devil and of their own passions; or, at best, they will drag on an imperfect life, and will fall far short of the designs which Almighty God had their souls.

A good Superior will not find his office easy; for the weakness, misery, sorrows of his children become his own. He can say with the Apostle: «Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is scandalized, and I am not on fire? » (2 Cor 11:29) He must have some part in the charity of Christ, and that charity must spur him on, and keep him always active. His eyes must be always open to the needs of his inferiors; his ears must listen to their words; his heart must be ready to receive them; his mouth must bring them words of consolation and salvation. He must constantly encourage his children by his example, he must support them when they totter, and raise them when they fall. He must dress their wounds, and arm them for the battle; he must enlighten their doubts; and, like the Divine Shepherd of our souls, he must pray day and night for them, while he endures suffering, and sacrifices himself continually on their behalf.

Such are the duties of a Superior, and they will be the more valuable in our eyes when we reflect that, by undertaking these duties, the Superior has incurred a heavy responsibility, which may cause him much spiritual harm, or even the loss of his soul, should he be negligent, and fail to fulfil his obligations. This thought will fill our hearts with love and gratitude towards our Superiors; and the greater our gratitude and affection, the easier will be our practice of Obedience.

The Apostle's words suggest another motive, drawn from the consideration of our own spiritual advantage. « It would not be expedient for us » he says, « were Superiors to watch over us with grief. »

For what would be the result? Superiors would end by growing weary, and would leave us alone as incorrigible. They might even fear to become a stumbling block to us because of our indocility and rebellion. What more miserable position can there be for a religious than this?

What more dangerous for his salvation? Let not the imperfect religious imagine that he can guide himself, when, by his disobedience, he has as it were forced the Superior to abandon him. Let him no longer hope to receive from Almighty God the same grace as heretofore. The means of

communication are lacking, for the Superior was the channel of grace. His spirit is in darkness, his heart grows cold. God has given him over to a reprobate mind; he falls into shameful sin, he walks in darkness, and every step brings him nearer to the abyss. Our love for Obedience will be all the greater because we dread such a terrible misfortune.

On the other hand, think how happy is the lot of the obedient and faithful religious. Think of his peace of soul, and of the lights he receives from heaven. Think of the value of his smallest actions, and of the merits which he amasses day by day. From Obedience he draws the strength he needs to overcome his weakness, and to win the victory over his enemies. He is sure of being led by God in everything, while he knows that God will always give him the grace he needs to attain to perfection. These thoughts, and many others concerning the excellence and advantages of Obedience, will make this virtue dearer to us, and will cause us to practise it with greater joy and facility.

But personal experience of the profit to be gained from Obedience will have more effect than any reflections; and such experience can only be gained by putting Obedience into practice. If you wish then to know and appreciate the wonderful graces attached to this virtue, be always faithful to Obedience; look out for opportunities, and be quick to use any means which may occur. Far from wishing to enlarge your liberty, try to restrict it more and more when possible. Do not be content with a general permission, and be glad when the Superior has an exact knowledge of all your proceedings, so that every action and good work of yours may receive his special approbation. For we know that, by so doing, our works will be more pleasing to God, and will receive a more abundant blessing from on high. We ought even to wish that the Superior could read our hearts, and see plainly into all our intentions, so as to rectify anything imperfect. The obedient religious will act as if for him all wisdom and prudence were in the mind of his Superior. He will be a passive instrument in the Superior's hands; or rather, he, will depend entirely upon the Superior and will obey his lightest wish as easily as our limbs obey the impulse of our own will. But we shall never reach this perfection and facility unless we are convinced of the beauty of Obedience, and strive constantly to practise this virtue most perfectly, while we pray to God, with all possible fervour and perseverance to grant us this grace.

Such conduct is all the more necessary to us in this Society, because we live apart from one another; and it is only by the most perfect Obedience that we can be united in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for the greater glory of God, and can form a religious Institute which will be useful to the

Church, and formidable to the powers of hell.

Obedience will be much easier in practice if we have an inward respect for Superiors. All therefore should strive to cultivate this respect by disregarding the weaknesses and failings of the man, to see only Christ our Lord, Whose place the Superior holds to us, and in Whose name we obey the man.

As regards outward respect, the wholly spiritual character of the Society requires us to be prudent as to any demonstrations in the presence of strangers. It will suffice if we pay Superiors such respect as is due to their station in life. It would even seem unadvisable to give any title of superiority in letters.

Superiors, on the other hand, must try in every way to make Obedience easy to their subjects; not by a weak condescension to the baser instincts of human nature, but by never repelling anyone. They must always be ready to listen kindly, even to complaints that seem to be unreasonable, or to unpleasant reproaches. They must bear with faults and console the afflicted. They must never be haughty or ill-tempered. They must proportion the trial to the strength or weakness of their different subjects; and, when reproof is needed, they must in some way soften the bitterness of their words. Like the Good Samaritan they must pour oil and wine into the wounds of those whom they wish to heal. When the Superior is careful to seek in the Heart of our Divine Lord the feelings which he should have for his subjects, none of these things will seem too hard. Superiors must be most careful to see that, from the beginning, every member of the Society acquires this spirit of Obedience, and is ready to endure the hardships inseparable from the practice of this virtue in its early stages. This is absolutely necessary for all, and especially for any who may be distinguished by their talent, position, high birth, etc. No one will be allowed to make his Vows who has not been faithful to Obedience during the time of probation, or who has shown little love for Obedience by his behaviour and conversation. Later on such a fault might prevent the renewal of annual Vows; and, with even greater reason, permission to make perpetual Vows might be refused, in spite of every other good quality, and the possession of great holiness. Failure to obey would be plain proof that no vocation existed or else that the call was not responded to.

We have purposely omitted much that might be found in St Ignatius' Letter on Obedience, for it will be a great help towards the perfecting of this virtue to read his beautiful Letter again and again. We recommend all who have not yet made their Vows to read it over carefully every

month. Later on it is not necessary to read it so often, provided that we renew our Vows fervently at least once a week, apart from the times of public and solemn renovation.

When Obedience flourishes among us in all its perfection, every other virtue will flourish in the same degree; but if Obedience does not flourish, we ought not to wish for the establishment of our Society, nor for its continued existence after the first beginnings.

Let us then most earnestly beseech Almighty God, in all our prayers, to bestow this virtue upon us and on our brethren. Let us invoke the intercession of St. Ignatius, St. Francis Xavier, and all the saints of the Society of Jesus who were so famous for their Obedience. May the holy Angels, who are the spirits of Obedience, pray for us; and, above all, may we enjoy the intercession of our glorious Patroness and Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Let us imitate Mary by taking for our model of Obedience her Divine Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, being Lord of all things, and equal with the Father, took upon Him the form of a servant, « becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. » Amen.

Finis.

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