

Keeping silence and watching over our Words

16th March 1873.

My dear Daughters,

Yesterday I was saying to some of you that to people in the world who cannot fast every day one can advise mortification of the tongue. That is indeed a good mortification and it can replace many others. One can refrain not only from words that are sinful, but from a lot that are useless. If the recommendation is suitable for people in the world, how much more so is it for nuns?

The hymn for Matins in Lent tells us to be sparing of food and sparing of words. As regards our food, which just suffices for the needs of nature, we can hardly reduce it. It is different with people in the world whose food is more appetising and plentiful, without any harm to their health they can do with less. But for us it would be hard to do with less in Lent, except in the case of someone like our forebears who had the secret of robust constitutions - though they did not hand it down to us.

Silence, however, is another matter and it is possible to talk much less without, in the least, hurting one's health. And, first, at recreation. You may think it odd that I begin by recreation. But it is more important at recreation than at any time to prune our words. All our life long we have to refrain

from words coloured by imperfection, whether as an occasion of imperfection to others or an expression of our own imperfection: all words that are - how can I express it? - tinged with vanity or annoyance or impatience with our neighbour. Our words ought always to be, as St. Paul says, pure, lovely and gracious, and full of the spirit of Jesus Christ¹.

This requires great watchfulness. The saints consider it a great thing to be all one ought to be at recreation. However we are told of a young saint of twenty, St. Aloysius, who had, no doubt, succeeded in pruning away all imperfect words, but who failed to be gracious and amiable and expansive in the way that gives recreation its charm. But now look at St. Teresa. She made recreation delightful for her Sisters. Her presence gave joy to their souls and they were better prepared for prayer after this sweet and gentle relaxation and more united in charity and regular observance. This is an art for everyone to study. The youngest of the Coadjutrix Sisters or of the Novices must try to acquire it as well as the Seniors whose business it is to watch over it. We must then talk at recreation. Ask God to give you the grace to talk aright. But at other times keep the strictest silence.

I advise you to take advantage of Lent to give yourselves a refresher course in the practice of silence.. One can plan to spend an hour without speaking, then add the next hour and so on. Evidently that cannot be done in

¹ Phil. 4:4,5

all employments. For example, when someone comes to the Superior or to the Bursar it would not do if they turned away to show that they could not answer. It is the same for a Sister in the class-room. She must not, under pretext of keeping her hour of silence, refuse to answer a child or neglect to correct her. But when neither charity nor the Rule obliges you to speak, you must keep silence as faithfully as possible.

The Coadjutrix Sisters have a great advantage in this. Most of their work can be done in perfect silence. Sometimes they break it too easily by saying things like this: "What a bad broom this is!" or, "there is always dust here. How tiresome!" All quite useless, my dear Daughters. A habit of speaking like that brings another imperfection with it and I want to draw your attention to this.... Sisters complain of their employment or of one thing or another that is done for them, for example: "My wimple is not as white as it ought to be"; or, "why have you not had my shoes mended? I have been waiting a long time for them".

This is not in the spirit of the Rule Sisters. You should complain to no one but the Superiors. Tell them what may be lacking as regards your meals or your clothes. Tell them if you have holes in your shoes, a thing I am particular about, for fear of anyone catching cold or falling ill. You may also tell them of anything you think faulty, because we have to try to do everything as perfectly as possible, But such remarks must never be made to one another. You have the Sister in charge of your work, you have the

Infirmarian and the Superior and so on. For permission to take coffee do not go to the Bursar. It does not concern her. Go to the Superior. It is her business.

Remember above all that these things are never to be spoken of at recreation. Recreation is not for that. It is a means of union among the Sisters and it is intended to foster charity and the religious spirit... In the Constitutions on Recreations not a word is said which allows employments and their difficulties to be talked about. Wait for the right time, the Obedience at midday or in the evening. That is the time for asking the Sister in charge of your employment for what you want. And you can go to your Superior at any time.

If you are not careful about this you put yourself outside the blessed sphere of obedience and you introduce habits that are contrary to the religious spirit, habits even of bad spirit, because making complaints of this kind to each other is bad spirit and is behaving rather like old maids, who quarrel because one does the cooking badly and another has not mended the linen.

One other recommendation. You are always allowed to ask your superiors for what you think you need. But before asking it is a good thing to ask yourself whether this is really necessary – because it is always better to remain within the common life and to make exceptions only when there is a real need. If on account of an illness you are obliged to have a special regime for two weeks or a month,

try as soon as possible to return to the ordinary community life, and, as St. Augustine says in the Rule: *when they are restored to health, they should return to that happy frugality which so befits a servant of God.* One does not remain ill for ever; maybe for a year, but not for ten or fifteen years. If at forty you had to have something special, it does not follow that you have to continue with it till you are fifty or sixty. Where would we be, if every sister, after an illness, took up her own special lifestyle which lasted for the rest of her days,?

I add just a few more recommendations. First of all, you ought not to find fault with one another. You have no charge for that. And then how can you, who can bear so little, expect your sisters to be virtuous enough to accept reproof not only from the Superior but from you who have no right to give it? This is a thing that gives rise to unpleasantness and arguments. That is why the Rule says: *The Sisters must aim at having no eyes for the faults of their neighbour, no ears to listen when another is ill-spoken of, no mouth, no mind, no will to accuse, to judge or to condemn anyone; and no memory for other people's wrong doings. But rather they should have a merciful heart to have compassion on others and a charitable tongue to speak kindly to and of them, and great patience to bear with them.*

And finally I recommend devotedness in the kitchen work. There is often a lot to do: dishes to wash, vegetables to peel. If everyone does not put good will into it, the work falls always to the same sisters, or it is not finished when it

should be and this causes problems for those who are in charge in this area.

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