

Mortification

16th November 1873

My dear Daughters,

The other day I spoke about the spirit of prayer. Now, to progress in this, the great means is the spirit of interior mortification. Great austerities help but little. A person may be very penitent and yet not at all a soul of prayer. I have seen this among our sisters, and also I have heard from people with an intimate knowledge of the most austere Orders, such as the Trappists, that among them great penitents are more often met with than great souls of prayer.

I say that to console those among you who would like to do great austerities and who cannot, and also to show you that it is not in that direction that you should turn your heart's most ardent desires. Do not imagine that by great austerities one necessarily acquires more continual attention to invisible things or a deeper interior life. Often the contrary happens.

Speaking of mortification, Interior mortification is what I specially recommend, and the form of exterior mortification that consists in a constant habit of using the things of time as though one were not using them¹; using

¹ 1Cor. 7:31

them with the greatest possible moderation, only as much as nature needs, and not for one's pleasure or satisfaction.

To deprive oneself of the pleasures of the senses and of the satisfaction they might give, to use things only in so far as nature needs them, would be a sure and immense help towards perfection. Unfortunately this is a thing too many people neglect. Few people mortify themselves day by day in little things, in taste, speech, curiosity etc.. Few pay attention to living is the presence of God and to living like Our Lord.

Our Lord is our model. Notice that His life in this world was quite ordinary. St. John the Baptist is generally given as the special patron of the most austere Orders. His austerity was always very great and quite out of the common. His food was locusts and wild honey, he lived in the desert, he was poorly clad, having just a goatskin to cover him, and he lived quite alone, far from the dwellings of men. Our Lord suffered horribly in His Passion, but all His life He lived just like ordinary people.

He lived with Our Lady and St. Joseph, almost exactly like the other people of Nazareth. Their meals were ordinary, their clothes like those of all other Jews. They worked like other working people. But with these ordinary ways, their life was heavenly, all divine. What use did Our Lord make of the things of this world? We know that He ate ordinary food throughout His life since the Gospel tells us that He ate bread and fish and that He drank wine. But in all His actions

His outlook was entirely spiritual. One could not imagine that Our Lord who had deigned to put on our mortality could ever have taken any pleasure of an imperfect kind in His material food. Even to speak of this sounds blasphemous. He ate food as a thing ordained and willed by His Father, paying no attention to the pleasure it might give. He Himself said: "My food is to do the will of my Father who sent me".

My dear Daughters, there is a wide field of mortification open to us in detachment from what pleases our senses. Sometimes it may cost us more to refuse ourselves a piece of sugar or a little salt than to fast or abstain. But the great advantage of this kind of mortification is that it is a form of poverty and it detaches us from the satisfaction that food can give.

The Visitation is a Congregation where the life is quite ordinary. And yet some of its members have been canonised: St. Chantal, Blessed Margaret Mary; and there was a question of introducing the Cause of Mère de Brechard. Besides, how many Visitation nuns have been very holy! Well, their life is quite ordinary, and their food plentiful, but their Founder, St. Francis of Sales wished them to mortify themselves at all their meals and to take whatever was served, with indifference and without choice. A saying of St. Chantal was: "In a servant of God sensuality is always out of place".

I need not enter into details. You can best judge for yourselves what it is best to do about mortifying your eyes,

your ears and your tongue. But in everything, beware of eccentricity. Cultivate simplicity in your manners, do nothing extraordinary, and do not refuse what you are given. St. Chantal who said that sensuality was unsuitable in a servant of God also used to say to her daughters: "Eat well without mannerisms or affectation. That is what our Blessed Father did, and he was great at practising virtue". St. Francis of Sales had, it seems, a hearty appetite. He often said he had the appetite of a native of Savoy and did not need delicacies. Often there is more mortification in eating than in abstaining and I willingly quote St. Chantal: "Eat heartily, without mannerisms or affectation, without making faces, and do not carry on as though you were unable to eat this or that". Note well sisters, I am speaking of a Saint who spoke of another Saint and gave him as a model.

Do the same about talking. There are times when we must talk. Well, talk simply and without mannerisms and mysteries. Do not seem to be sighing every word you say at recreation. Weigh your words, yes, but in the scales of charity and gentleness, of care not to talk about yourself, nor your own business. In a word, keep self in the background as far as you can. Make sure of that and then talk heartily and simply. Do not answer if anyone speaks to you in silence time. Look amiable, that is enough. What matter if it is said of you: "One can't get a word out of her". Indeed that would be giving very good example. Above all never speak out of human respect, because you do not dare to appear more faithful than another sister. We should know how to be hearty and simple in keeping silence, and in keeping the

Rule. And try to avoid even one useless word. In all this be simple and straightforward, and not like someone who is walking gingerly as though on eggs.

We need a lot of mortification to avoid curiosity. Curiosity is a passion that clings to us and it is hard to rid ourselves of it. Many people are always asking questions and want to know all that is happening. And how often are we distracted from attention to God and to our duty, by thinking about what we have seen and heard! Curiosity is a passion linked up with the senses. First, take the sense of hearing. To know the news we need our ears. Then our eyes. We try to see so as to know what has happened, what is going on. All that disturbs the soul and distracts us.

If we want to become souls of prayer, Sisters, we must first of all give our attention to acquiring exterior mortification which consists in controlling our senses, and driving away the impressions that come from the senses: we have to get rid of memories or preoccupations about what we have seen or heard or tasted or felt, about whatever is done or said outwardly, and also what we ourselves say inwardly....

If we were more faithful to this mortification it would soon lead us to great union with Our Lord, and to continuous attention to supernatural and divine things. I say first, to greater union with Our Lord, because it would make us live as He did in this world. Then our supernatural life would become stronger and more perfect, because the life of our

senses would be more and more purified and so we should have an ever growing light on the things of Faith. And thus our heart would kindle with the love of God because in proportion as it is emptied of the things of this world it is filled with the things of Heaven.

What, in reality, prevents us from seeing God? Isn't it this created world that comes between us and Him? If we would only let go of all that, we should be better able to hear Our Lord, and we could then converse more intimately with the Blessed Trinity who lives in us. It seems like a topsy-turvy miracle that we possess God in us, and that we follow the advice of the Holy Spirit so little. What prevents us from attending to the mighty Voice of God the Father? and the examples of God the Son? and the love of the Holy Spirit? What is it but the noise of earthly things that sound so loud in our ears. Holy Wisdom says: "Who can carry fire in his bosom without singeing the clothes he wears?"² and Our Blessed Lord says: "It is fire that I have come to spread over the earth, and what better wish can I have than that it should be kindled?"³

Then why does the love of God not set our hearts on fire? The answer is that there is another fire strong enough to counteract the fire of Divine Love: our passions, our attachment to created things. Mortification is the thing that can rid us of all this and free our hearts from the bonds of earth and so make us able to converse intimately with

² Prov. 6:27

³ Lk. 12:49

Almighty God.

Just examine and see what it is that makes it hard for you to pray. Is it not the lack of control of your senses and moods? The lack of the habit of silence and attention? You do not know how to get rid of the busy thoughts and memories that throng your mind. Why? simply because you are not mortified. Many people are luckier than I am, I know. But my personal experience is, that few things are more detrimental to peace of soul at prayer than impatience.

So far I have only spoken of mortification of the senses. Now we come to interior mortification. Its work is to overcome moods, the craving for praise, a conceited opinion of oneself, hatred of annoyances and impatience with whatever is a hindrance, refusal to accept humiliation, independence of character, unwillingness to submit, and all the passions that are more or less in every one.

By interior self-denial we mortify all that. We make God's Will our life; we refuse to give in, to His enemies. We drive out sin and the things that prevent Our Lord from being our Sovereign Master. We accept with good will the annoyances and humiliations sent by Him. We make dependence the rule of our life, bending with docility under obedience and all its obligations. We get rid of the inclination to sing our own praises secretly in our heart: "I am fervent...I have a good quality or two...I have been some years in Religion..." And if we are foolish enough to look forward to becoming "somebody", and being treated with

consideration, if we go as far as to adopt an important way of walking, that will drive out all that is the practice of interior self-denial.

There is a quaint little story about the Ursulines of Loudun who were possessed. They say the Superior had seven devils, and when she was under the influence of the demon of pride she affected the mannerisms of a queen and strutted about with imposing and abbess-like airs. Well, the devil puts ridiculous pretensions in us too, though in a lesser degree.

We want to count as someone important, we say things to ward off blame, and we go forward eagerly towards some little success. Now the work of interior mortification is to do away with all that. Self-love has to go, and we become detached from transitory things and ready to be influenced by the Holy Spirit.

Long ago when novices asked to be received by the Desert Fathers they were sent first to the cemetery and told to throw stones at the dead and to call them names, and after that to offer them all sorts of praise and flattery. Then the novices were asked how the dead had behaved and what they had answered. This was to show the indifference a novice had to acquire for all the things of this world.

Well, people who practise interior mortification seriously end by becoming like those dead folk. Say something very disagreeable to them, they will not react. Instead of thinking: "How can she say such things? It is

cruel, and unjust", they do not give it a thought; what may have been said just does not count. But if you say nice things, they will turn away quickly, because there lies danger. It is so easy to give way to vain-glory.

So, take a person who practises interior mortification, who over-rules her moods, and keeps her soul in patience, humility, silence, dependence; who guards herself from curiosity and self-love; who practises exterior mortification with moderation, not injuring her health, but imposing self-denial on all imperfect inclinations and indulgence of the senses, and on all that hinders virtue: there you have a person who will surely become a soul of prayer.

In all I may ever have said to you in the past, there is nothing so essential, so fundamental nor so sure to succeed, as what I am recommending now. It is Impossible for anyone to give herself heartily to this mortification and not to acquire the spirit of prayer. I urge you most strongly to give this your earnest attention and to strive to put it in practice: because it would be a great misfortune indeed if we did not, every one of us, become a saint. True, not everyone is called to the same degree of holiness. As one star differs from another, so each blessed soul in heaven has a kind and degree of holiness that belongs to them alone. Without any doubt God has a special plan for each of you. And the holiness He destines for you is very great and beautiful, since if you reach it you need not pass through the fires of Purgatory and for all eternity you will enjoy a share in God's own happiness and glory.

This is the blessedness, dear Daughters, that you will come to by overcoming two things, the darkness of the senses and the darkness of the soul.

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