

*18 August 1884*

## Put the retreat under the protection of Our Lady

**Saint Marie Eugenie of Jesus**

My dearest daughters,

It's time for the retreat, and I recommend you very specially to remember that Mary is your mother. Of course we have to remember it all the year round, but I want you to put the retreat that we are going to make very specially under her protection, in confidence, prayer, and a generous resolution to imitate her uprightness and the fidelity of her heart in responding to the grace of God. We must obtain from Our Lady a retreat that is really holy and makes us holy.

Everything can be got by praying to Our Lady. There are so many graces for example at Lourdes, so many cures and conversions! But you will find that these graces are granted only after persevering prayer – as soon as prayer relaxes the miracles stop. If our prayers are ardent, we will obtain more graces.

Even spiritually, I think we need cures, to be put straight, graces of strength and renewal, gifts of every sort? Because after all, we too are wounded, sick, a bit twisted, and we feel that we are in need of so many things. We will receive all those things from Our Lady by ardent, trusting, persevering prayer. Make a point during your retreat of asking Our Lady to give you what she thinks you need most.

I know that you are all people of good will, and if you could see what God wants of you, you would do it immediately, or rather, you would begin working on it. But we do not always realise what we need most, and as St Francis of Sales says, "A lot of people dress up perfection in the way that suits them." It is a great mistake to dress up perfection in something which is not what God wants for us. God wants us more than anything to have solid things, humble things, the virtues that go with our vows: the perfection of poverty, of obedience, of love of Jesus Christ, patience and the love of charity which we should have as religious.

I think I have already told you that once when holy Pope Urban II was asked to give a talk to a community of monks he specially recommended patience as the virtue more important for religious. We must believe that as Pope he had the grace not to be wrong, and so we too should put patience among our first resolutions.

You can add to patience – as fruits of your retreat – humility, gentleness, regularity, charity, all of them virtues so necessary in community life. Because the retreat should benefit not only ourselves, but also the community, and renew and sanctify the whole Congregation.

I will tell you just one point that I would like you to examine attentively. Notice that in community life, everyone has to pull her weight, so that sisters are happy with the joy of charity to be together and the common life is made agreeable for everyone. Well of course there are little faults which sometimes slip into our relationships and make community life more difficult. First of all, any kind of self-importance. Every time we fall back on ourselves and remember old hurts and difficulties and start sharing them with others, it makes relationships very difficult.

I will also remind you of another little fault, teasing. Oh, please do not tease. Every time we tease, we spoil community life, we open the door to hurt feelings, and sensitiveness. If some people have characters that take up all the space in a community, and they want to dominate, keep silence. We always have the right to drop the conversation by silence. But really try not to tease, and never contradict. If you like to joke, always make your jokes kind, and try to take a joke well and not be sensitive yourself.

Never come to recreation all stiff and blown up - what have your sisters done to make you fall in their midst like great footballs? Go and calm down near Our Lord first, and then come as a servant of God in the midst of the servants of God, thinking only of love of God and love of neighbour.

Always keep, sisters, what I will call our original spirit, the spirit which reigned among us at the beginning. It was a special cheerfulness, simplicity, and kindness. We still have here sisters who remember the early days: we took everything in good heart, we were always happy to meet, and I do not remember it ever being visible that one sister might be a trial to another.

I know that one of our sisters, who is no longer of this world, contributed by her warm heart to put many things right and bring reconciliation: that was our dear Mother Marie-Therese. She was a warm-hearted woman and she always knew how to show her warm-heartedness! Everyone knows she never had any self-importance. She always wanted the good of others, she joked, she could be very witty, but in her joking there was never anything nasty or barbed. She had a warm heart in everything and for everything.

It is this first spirit of kindness, forgetfulness of self, charity, perfect union that you need to try to preserve for the future. But you will never preserve it if, at the end of the retreat, you still want to keep your self-importance, if you don't want anyone to touch you because you are so special. Or if you take every opportunity to talk about your old hurts, and your difficulties. Or again, if you always insist on telling others things that are personal to you. Avoid all the gossip that St Paul was talking about when he said: Avoid always talking about genealogies and fables. (Titus, III 9) Don't tell people your dreams, unless there is something funny: usually that type of conversation is boring, and a burden for others.

So during the retreat, sisters, look and see what makes you personally difficult to live with in community, and whether at recreation, or during lessons, or even in Office, try to be like the rest. I remember that, some time ago now, there was a sister who claimed she could never get the same note as the others, while someone else was always one syllable behind the rest in choir. You will agree that that it was very annoying being beside them, and that such people are a real trial to the community. So try during Office always to be like the rest, as in everything in religious life.

The singing is also a real trial for many people. Some have very beautiful voices, others less beautiful - but if you tell them they are singing too loudly they open their mouths but no one can hear them at all. On the other hand people complain we are going too quickly, or too slowly, or we are off the note! To all that I say to you, sisters, what I said to a sister who disagreed with her superior about the colour of some paint, "It is infinitely better to have a bit of disagreement about the colour of paint or the notes to be sung, than the least disagreement of minds or hearts which were made to agree. There is always someone in charge wherever one is working, let the person responsible have her way and you will be a person of great virtue if you are willing."

Now I want to look at our manual work. If each person pulls in her own direction, if a sister wants to sweep the dormitory beginning from one end when she has been told to begin at the other, if she also refuses to wash the staircase before washing the cell corridor because she says people will get it dirty when they walk on it, and a thousand other reasons of that kind, people's peace will continually be disturbed. To keep this great good which is peace, follow what those responsible want. Give in, be helpful. Everyone, you see, can get on with people who want to be of service.

I want to share a little secret with you, because it is me who has to give sisters for the houses. I have noticed that when there are sisters who are not very helpful, people find all the excuses possible for not having them, although they do not say no because they are being virtuous. Believe me, my dear sisters, be one of those that everyone wants to have and that no one is afraid of getting. And to do that, stop thinking about yourself, put yourself aside, be obliging with those in charge, with the infirmarian, not easy for a lot of people it seems, with the sister in charge of the singing, or whoever is in charge of the choir. Whether you give lessons or whether you are receiving lessons, try to be considerate. Saint Jeanne de Chantal, talking about a little disagreement between her daughters, used to say, "The smallest bit of humility would have solved the whole thing, without them having to come looking for me". And I would say, my dear sisters, in all community relationships, put not just the smallest bit of humility, but a lot of humility and whole mass of kindness.

That should be the sort of character you are hoping to form in yourselves and in the children too. I know very well that one is often obliged to punish the children. But they must feel that you love them, and are only punishing them for their own good. You see, a mother adores her child, and still knows how to correct its faults. That reminds me of the mother of Mother Agnes Eugénie. When Agnes was small, and had done something she should not have done, her mother, who was a saint, used to say to her, "Ninie, that was silly of you, you need a beating this evening." And she got the beating - but that did not stop her mother being as kind and loving as usual for her all that day. That is how we should be. Even if we have to punish, always remain kind, make your kindness felt, and let your kindness be uppermost in your minds and make you see everything from the best side.

If you go abroad, whether you go in this direction, or that direction, always have an open mind for what you see in a country, or a custom, or a way of doing things which is different from ours. Accept it with an open mind. In England, for example, they put their forks on the left, instead of on the right: do the same, and do not be like those ridiculous people who cannot understand that things are not done in another country just as they are done at home, who complain about the beds, and the food, etc. etc.

That reminds of one of the times I was in Germany. I met a French gentleman. He did not know a word of German, and was trying himself in knots trying to make himself understood. I offered to help him. "Can you believe it," he told me, "these idiots don't understand one word of what I am saying to them?" It's rather amazing isn't it to get annoyed that in Germany they talk German and not French? In France, probably more than anywhere else, we find it very difficult to adapt to other people's customs.

I am laughing about it, but, believe me it requires very serious reflection, and fervent prayer that God will give you the grace to be kind and considerate and supportive in everything, and grant you the humility, charity and good spirit you need for that. If you find yourself with a person who is cold and silent, try to be kind and loving. Forget about everything which is not perfection and charity, and meet her beyond, where we ought all of us to live, in the heart of Jesus. Our Lady will guide us.

Was there anyone gentler, kinder, more considerate than Mary? Who has more humility or mercy than Mary? For example, a great sinner has spent all his life far from God. Then, because every

day he has said a quick prayer to Our Lady, or because he has worn the scapular, Mary obtains him the grace of receiving the sacraments and dying in the grace of God! What mercy, don't you think, what goodness!... and, if that is the way she behaves with sinners, what does she not manage to do for people who are good, for those who pray to her? She never refuses them anything, and I assure you that if you pray to her with trust, she will grant you the virtues that you ask.

First of all you need to set yourself the task of acquiring the virtues that God wants you to have, the ones that your superior, or your confessor, think are the most necessary for you. I remember a sister, certainly a good religious but a bit distracted and because of that she did not give enough importance to obedience. She always told me, "Mother, I want to become humble." And I used to say to her, "Yes, humility, but above all obedience." And she went on running after humility, which we all need to go after. But, for the virtues just as for anything else, try and do what your confessors and directors tell you, and not just follow your own ideas.

I have known sisters who imagined that they would find perfection in solitude and who said: "Oh, if I could do a 30-days retreat, I would be perfect!" And God perhaps wants to see them, in humility and charity, at the feet of their sisters, and make them live a life of hard work as the monastery donkey.

So don't look for your own idea of perfection, but choose in preference the one you are advised. Saint Ignatius recommended correcting first one's exterior faults, removing what is disedifying or causes hurt to others. It was very good advice. Saint Ignatius is not just considering the person themselves, but the general good of the community. In any case, if a sister first removed her exterior faults, she would add the interior virtues very easily afterwards. It is impossible in fact never to say disagreeable words, to accept them graciously, to keep silence and obey, to be gentle and patient, without practising great interior virtues.

I took me a long time to find an explanation as to why Saint Ignatius recommended to much applying oneself first to removing exterior faults. And I realised that above all he wanted communities which were perfectly regular, where each member edified the others, and what confirmed this idea was that I found it also in Saint Teresa. She says: "For exterior matters, she should expect people to act promptly, so as to be in harmony with the others, but for interior matters she should allow people time to arrive at complete detachment and perfect mortification."

Sisters, I must stop. I just want to repeat what I said at the beginning: go into retreat with complete confidence in Our Lady. If the devil tries to tempt you, say "I have my Mother." – One of our first sisters, Sister Marie Louise, was full of trust at the moment of death. She said to me, "What is there to be afraid of? In heaven I have my Spouse and my Mother, they will defend me." You also have your Spouse and your Mother: your Spouse who wants you to reach perfection, your Mother who will help you and give you all the best gifts. And if you open your soul to trust, you will find, when we come out of retreat, that you have received from God much more than you asked or hoped for.