

10 March 1878

IV. KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST

We spoke last time of the burning love for the truth which we should receive from the heart of St. Augustine into our own. But deliberately, I have not yet spoken of the One who is Truth itself and the object of our adoration and love, our Lord Jesus Christ. I felt that I had not enough time to tell you what He should be for us.

I do not know exactly how to express it, but therein lies the very life of our Congregation. The love of Christ and of His Church is our chief characteristic. Perhaps you will tell me there is nothing distinctive in this, that along with this love which is the basis of any religious life, we should have a specific quality proper to our Institute. But I do not think this is true for us. Our love should simply be that same love which since the beginning has been enkindled in the Church by Jesus Christ. Thus, all the doctors, religious and saints of all times have something to teach us. Let us therefore, not limit ourselves to the teachings of one particular Order.

This is another of the admirable legacies that St. Augustine has given us, for this great Doctor has a heart great like the Church and a spirit as all embracing as the Church. There is nothing in him that is limited or exclusive. This constitutes another characteristic of our Congregation. We have a catholic and universal element. Monsignor Gay has said that we are a catholic spirit which finds its source in the very broad, generous and ecclesial devotion of St. Augustine who always served and loved the Church with such greatness of heart.

How can I to express to you now what we must be for Our Lord and what Our Lord must be for us? I shall use the terms consecrated by Church usage. Just as the Church teaches that every Christian was created to know, love and serve God, I would say that each of you, when you entered the Congregation, consecrated your life to knowing, loving and serving Our Lord Jesus Christ in a perfect way and to making Him known, loved and served.

Basically, the difference between Christian life and religious life lies solely in this "perfect way." There are not two Gospels.

Religious must live by the same Gospel that is given to all Christians. But religious embrace this Gospel with love and adoration through a merciful choice and call on the part of Our Lord. They put their hand in His and tell

Him that nothing in His service can be too hard or painful. They want to embrace the whole Gospel, to be as poor and obedient, as loving and pure as possible. Placing no limits on their gift of self, they desire to strive for perfection according to the fullness of their Rule and their grace.

God is a Father full of goodness. The Church is a Mother who gives excellent things to all. The Gospel is intended for everyone, but only a small number have the will to do literally what Our Lord said: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all that you have, give the money to the poor, then come, follow Me."¹ This is the religious life that is entirely contained within the Gospel. In fact, an Order in the Church, that of St. Francis, vows to live the Gospel in poverty, chastity and obedience.

How can we know Jesus Christ perfectly? We touched on this when we spoke of our need to seek truth, especially Divine Truth constantly. There are two ways of knowing Our Lord. One is through religious doctrine which we seek and receive with Love. The other is the attentiveness of the soul to Jesus Christ, the wonderful idea and image we form of Him.

Concerning the teaching of the faith, you know very well that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. You also know that from all eternity the Word is the joy of the Father, that God takes pleasure in the knowledge He has of all things in His only Son. The Word is the Wisdom of the Father, His love and It is from this love of the Father and the Son that the Holy Spirit proceeds from all eternity.

You also know that in the beginning of time, the whole Trinity collaborated in the work of creation. The Father is the Creator, but it is through the Son that He created all things. Some scholars think that when He created man He had before His eyes the image of the God-Man, Our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Virgin His Mother, destined to come in the fullness of time, even if there had been no sin. It is in this admirable image of the Incarnate Word that man was created. In creating Him, God gave him a nature whose faculties, not yet wounded by sin, could know Him as God. At the same time, the God of all goodness bestowed grace upon Him, making man the child of God, destined for eternal life and the Beatific Vision.

In our relationship with Our Lord, we must not forget all that He is as God. He is the Divine Word, the infinite joy of His Father,

¹ Mt. 19, 21.

eternal Life, Creator, our first Benefactor, who having given us His Nature, also gave us grace. That is not all! Man fell; sin came and separated him from God. Yet in His infinite goodness God promised that His only Son would come as Redeemer. It was then, not simply Jesus Christ entering into creation who revealed Himself to the knowledge and love of man, it was He who was to ransom man and come to give him hope.

We must penetrate ourselves with these thoughts because the more we understand Jesus Christ as God, the more conscious we are of what He is as man the more His birth, His childhood. His hidden life, His public life, His teaching and His sufferings will touch us deeply.

This is how a person enters into relationship with Jesus Christ as Creator and Redeemer. This is the preliminary knowledge that one must acquire of Him. But it is not sufficient. After the study of Jesus Christ, one must be attentive to Him, intimately absorbed in His presence.

Do you feel you can speak of “knowing” Our Lord simply by having an intellectual knowledge of what He is, what He has been, what He has done, without loving attention, interior recollection and effort towards union? No, this would not be true knowledge of God. After having said that you ought to study Our Lord Jesus Christ, I would say that you should go still further and empty yourselves as it were, of all that is not in conformity with Him.

When many other thoughts and worries try to invade your heart you must say to yourself, “I was created for eternity. God has given me His only Son to be the center of my thoughts and the delight of my soul. Do I want to fill my intelligence for hours and even days and nights with such worries or difficulties? If, having done what is in my power, I entrust all to God will He let me down?” How wonderful it is to fill our heart with thoughts of Jesus Christ! This is a source of strength that helps us put aside the little things that often have such power over us, to take refuge in knowledge of a higher order, worthy of our immortal soul created in God’s image.

Not only must you develop a sense of detachment but you must also have a loving attention towards Our Lord, saying to yourself that He is not far from you. You must try to imitate Him and constantly place yourself in His presence. This is how one must begin in the spiritual life because no interior life is possible that does not start with attention and fidelity to Our Lord Jesus Christ. He is present in our soul by grace and in the Blessed Sacrament by His Real Presence. Moreover, He has given us examples to copy and to have always present before us.

If a sister were going to paint a portrait and looked up in the air instead of at her model, or stood so far away that her vision was only vague and general, her painting would not resemble her model. To know Jesus Christ and to form His likeness within us we must draw near and study Him. I remember when I was a child I had to copy a bust of Sixtus V from five or six different angles so that in the end I knew him by heart. That was completely unnecessary, but we do indeed need to have Our Lord in our minds in order to copy Him.

The Church presents Him to us in the various mysteries of His life: His childhood, His hidden life, His public life and His sufferings and asks us to imitate Him. So when she presents His sufferings to us, as during Lent, she exhorts us to practice mortification. When she shows us His childhood, she suggests we enter into the spirit of humility, and so on. In this way we will acquire a greater knowledge of Jesus Christ. From this constant attention, we should try to go on to interior recollection which is something more. Our Lord dwells in us through His grace and if we are calm and peaceful, if we are withdrawn into ourselves and place ourselves under the action of the Divine Master, and the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of Jesus Christ, we will obtain a still more profound knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ. There is in the depths of the recollected soul, a knowledge that nothing else can give, a knowledge that vivifies everything else and that rapidly goes far beyond anything you have ever learned.

Lastly, there is union with Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the final goal of attention and recollection. Someone who experiences union, at least in fleeting moments, remains in His hand. Our Lord does with her what He wishes and she can then say, "It is no longer I who live. It is Jesus Christ who lives in me."²

This is the end towards which you, as Religious of the Assumption should tend. This is the "perfect knowledge" of which I spoke to you. Every Christian is obliged to know God and Jesus Christ whom He sent. Few Christians in the world practice what I have just said. If they do, their attitude is remarkable for their state. It is true there have been married, royal or humble folk who have become saints. Very few who have not chosen the state of perfection arrive at this knowledge of Our Lord that is the fruit first of setting our gaze on Jesus Christ in preference to all other things, then, loving attention, recollection and finally union.

² Gal. 2, 20.

As Religious of the Assumption, you must strive towards this perfection of your state, union with Our Lord that is real and intimate. This is the fruit of a long and persevering effort. No one arrives at this union easily. No one can arrive at the point where his or her spirit is recollected and entirely dependent upon Our Lord without having worked diligently. God can bring you to this state in an instant through the prayer of quiet or of union. You would still have to work in order to keep this grace.

Those who, just beginning, think that they have arrived, are only living an illusion. Those who, approaching the end have acquired this grace, must consider themselves blessed indeed! It is a great joy, after having worked so hard, to be established in this state where Our Lord Jesus Christ is the absolute and sovereign Master. All that He asks is done. The soul totally docile in the hands of God, rests at His feet, as did Madeleine in that inner sanctuary where God dwells.