



11 February 1877

Straightforwardness with Others

Saint Marie Eugenie of Jesus

My dear Daughters,

There is little to add to what I have already said on straightforwardness and simplicity, two special characteristics of the spirit of our Congregation.

I have shown you that straightforwardness has something of the arrow-like directness with which a soul takes its flight to God and I have explained how this directness or ardour comes into the practice of Faith, Hope and Charity as well as of Obedience, Humility and the other religious virtues. It only remains for me to tell you now how it comes into our dealings with one another. There will not be much to say on this subject, you are all familiar with it.

Simplicity is a form of straightforwardness. It applies more to our dealings with creatures, and straightforwardness to our dealings with God. Straightforwardness is like a beeline, that does not twist or turn or swerve, but makes directly for Heaven, aiming at Our Lord and at truth.

Simplicity is a virtue with a savour of the Gospel. What could be more sublime and at the same time simpler than the Gospel? Every word of that divine book is marvellously simple. Our Lord teaches us to speak simply and not to beat about the bush, to answer, “Yes, yes,” and “No, no”. This recommendation was not made to you. Nonetheless, you would fail in simplicity if you made as though you were aiming at another. A good subject for self-examination would be the aim we have in all our action. One does nothing without an aim. We can have two aims: one is the sovereign aim, God, to whom all we do ought to be directed. The other is some finite, created aim that we try to attain in any given action.

Even with the children, never give them a reason for your actions but the real end which you seek. When you answer them say: “This is how it is”, the truth. You can and should not tell them certain things and you always have the right of not answering indiscrete questions but when you answer them, it must be truthful. Do not use cunningness. Do not say: “I make the children think that to obtain something”. It is not Evangelical.

I would say the same thing for our relationship with the teachers. One is in charge of maintaining order and discipline. Another is specifically in charge of the supervision of studies. Be very simple with them. You do not have to enter into their ideas, saying: “that is how I see it”, and keep your own. Deep down you can differ from the view on how to teach, to supervise, to relate with a particular child. Say it frankly or at least reply: “For the moment I cannot see it that way. I will think about it, I will give it some thought”. I myself have told Fr. d’Alzon when I did not share his way of thinking: “Father, for the moment it is impossible for me to see as you see but I will pray, I will reflect and perhaps I will get to understand it in the same way.” No one can be surprised by this process. It does not depend entirely on us that our mind be moulded on that of another. The Book of Maccabees says “Let us all die innocent”¹ In life and in death we must have this simplicity, this straightforwardness which is proper to us.

There is another demand of simplicity which is usually more painful to nature and which we must always go back to, that is to simplify what is ours, to transcend and not to dwell either on our reflections and our inner thoughts or on our words, on what costs us; what contradicts us, what has pained us in the past, what is actually hurting us or will hurt us in the future. Self-love lives a lot on this.

See the people in the world who do not do much to destroy their self-love, how they complain, excuse and recriminate unceasingly! How imperfect that is! If you have had to do with people of saintly life you will have noticed how easily and quickly they take everything to the foot of the Cross, and how they reserve their strength for doing God’s will with true great heartedness and generosity.

Dear Daughters, we have to try to be like them as unlike worldly people as possible. Remember that self-love lives on grumbling and thinking and talking about self which are things we should try to rid ourselves of if we are to go straight to God and enter into the power of the Lord.

Perhaps someday in your spiritual reading you will learn about the principles of Mystical Theology, and you will see that the first step of the spiritual life consists in getting rid of sin, but that immediately after that, the soul has to be freed from all attachments that remain. You might think that you have done a lot when you have no affection left to venial sin and imperfection. But you are then only just ready to begin.

Active and passive purifications follow to free the soul from any impressions the world has left in her. With the help of God who does three quarters plus half the work, and by grace and suffering, the soul becomes what St. John of the Cross calls a blank page on which God can write what He wants to. What then is the use of all that nature would like to scribble on it? The simpler the soul and the more detached, the better it is prepared for whatever God wants to write on it. What God wants to write on it, says Cardinal de Berulle, is His only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. This expresses a true Assumption devotion.

Our aim must be to make our Lord our principle of activity, so that in everything, we see Him and make Him known. That is why we need so much simplicity and straightforwardness with the children. Success is not the point. The point is to form Our Lord’s image and likeness. Ask Him to paint His portrait both in us and in the children.

¹ I Mac 2:37

You can see how simplicity in its deepest aspect, helps God's work, Who, in place of our human personality, wants to put His own Divine Personality, that of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He was made flesh for us: and now by Holy Communion He wants to extend the mystery of the Incarnation, and put Himself in the place of everything that is not in keeping with His image and likeness.

After speaking of such sublime realities I have little left to say about the simplicity that you should have in dealing with one another. St. Francis of Sales wants us to remember that we were liable to commit all the faults that we see in others. Though we ought not to do things to hide our imperfections, we ought not to make a show of them either, but when we have fallen into a fault we should own up and accept the abjection it brings. For example, you are touchy. Ought you to make a parade of this? No. But when you have fallen into this fault do not offend against simplicity by excuses and explanations.

A true daughter of the Assumption must rise ever higher and higher, and strive to do ever better and better. What we have to do is to put up with each other and not defend self nor be concerned about the impressions we receive. And there is another thing I must add. If you are wholly simple Our Lord will live in you and produce His special characteristic of loving kindness, a virtue that grows like a flower from the root of charity. What is a soul like without charity? Sounding brass and tinkling cymbal². One might all the same give one's lessons well and devote oneself to the point of exhaustion, but what good would that be without charity? Charity in the heart produces loving kindness in the mind, so that one's judgments of others are kind.

If we need simplicity not to ruminate about ourselves we need it even more not to ruminate about others. If one has charge of others it is a duty to consider in the presence of God what can be done to correct their faults, and how to find a remedy. But if one is not in charge, one simply has to remember that Superiors are there to see such things. Now if it is your duty to speak of the faults of others, do so simply instead of rumination on them.

To worry about the faults of others is generally more harmful than to worry about our own, and we are not generally given to worrying about the faults of others unless they touch our self-love. We may be tempted to make comparisons, to think, for instance, "So and so is impatient. I am less so." Such comparisons are not to be tolerated. It is extremely harmful to let the faults of others breed self-complacency in our mind. The worst kind of introspection consists in being pleased with ourselves and thinking ourselves better than others.

Dear Daughters, pray to God to grant us grace to rise above all this folly by simplicity and to cultivate the Gospel spirit in everything. Franciscans undertake to practise poverty, chastity, and obedience in the spirit of the Gospel, and this spirit is most remarkable in the Order. It may strike us as somewhat uncouth in its form, but it is simple and straightforward and the Franciscans' Rule has produced very great saints. You and I did not make our vows according to the Franciscan formula, but we are bound to pursue perfection, and the Gospel is the code of perfection. So we must live according to it and strive to make it come alive in us.

At the last Chapter I told you that I prefer simple books to more learned ones. But the Gospel is the greatest of all books, the one that has inspired all other books, whether learned or ordinary. It is that one that teaches both the heights and the elements of perfection. Treasure the Gospel then, in such a way that you will always be simple and straightforward. I can think of nothing more befitting a Daughter of the Assumption than the straightforward simplicity of the Gospel.

² 1 Cor 13:1

