

WORK

21st September 1879

My dear Daughters,

You have heard so many good things on the Religious Life lately that I shall speak to you today about what is coming to us soon, I mean work.

Work is one of the great means of sanctification in the Religious Life. In the Gospel, Our Lord speaks about winning the Kingdom of Heaven under the simile of work. You know the parable -- one that gives me great devotion - of the Father of the family who calls labourers to work in His vineyard, some at the first hour, some at the third, some at the ninth, and even at the eleventh hour. Work is what he called them to, by their work they earn wages; and in his goodness the Master gives as much to the latecomers as to the first. (Mt.20:1-10). You know the word: "Work while you have the light. The night is coming when no man can work¹." Besides that, in several parables Our Lord gives the name of "good and faithful servant" to the soul who wants to win the Kingdom and to the one whom the Master finds working. (Lk.12:37-38). The good and faithful servant is attentive to his Master's every wish. He works hard, and with the talents he is given he must earn more.

You may think that the work in the vineyard and the talents earned, represent the work each of us does in her soul. It is that of course, but it is not only that. In purely contemplative orders where not exterior work is undertaken, manual work is held in high esteem. Trappists and Carmelites arrange for the work to be done in the

¹ Jn.12:35; 9:4

house, and for everyone to share it, so that while the Religious work at the sanctification of their souls they also work with their hands.

In the beginning even before the Fall, God placed man in an earthly paradise to look after it and work in it. (Gen.2:15). The work was pleasant and there were all sorts of flowers and fruits to be picked and the work was that a master might do for his pleasure to make a beautiful garden more beautiful. It gave pleasure and no trouble. But that happy of things do not last. By his own fault man was turned out of the Garden of Eden and given work to do as a penance. God said expressly: “You shall eat your bread in the sweat of your brow.” (Gen.3:19). That penance is now part of man’s lot. I cannot imagine what life would be like for anyone who served God by good sentiments and words and who did no work. That is not the service that God wants. God requires us to work for Him like good and faithful servants and at the same time to work at our perfection by good thought and sentiments, trying to sanctify everything we do.

But what work are we to do? I answer without hesitation the work we nuns are to do is the work sent by Divine Providence. You see, if we chose that work we like, that would be self-will and it would not be doing penance, nor should we be carrying out the orders of the Fathers of the family who called labourers into the vineyard. If the workmen said: “You give me employment in your vineyard, well, what I want to do is the grape-gathering.” And another, “what I want to do is prune the vines.” And a third, “I want to dig trenches.” Everything would be topsy-turvy. Every man had to do what he was told according to the season, the hour, the Master’s plan.

There is a thing that strikes me forcibly and that I don't mind telling you. It may happen even in Religion, even in the life of obedience, that a sister will say: "That is the work that would suit me, and I am sure I would succeed in it." And as Superiors are inclined to give Sisters work that suits their aptitudes, this sister may be listened to and believed. But I have often noticed, first that no improvement follows, and secondly, that where there is personal choice there is less grace. I have sometimes asked myself why there was a cooling down, a less influence of the Holy Spirit in the soul, and I have ended by discovering that a lack of humility and obedience, nothing very shocking to human eyes, but enough to drive away the Divine Dove. As a dove may be shy and timid and easily driven away, so it is with the Holy Spirit. He only comes to a soul where He sees these dispositions grow less in a soul, when pride and self-will and natural inclinations are given into, the grace and foundation of the Holy spirit and the interior life also grow less. There is no greater treasure than peace. And the peace Our Lord promised consists in having the Holy Spirit in us to rule over us. So, a warning for your Superiors and yourselves: do not choose for yourselves: be prepared for hard and difficult and troublesome work - and some of the work in our life is very troublesome - and take from the hands of Providence whatever is given to you.

Msgr. d'Hulst said something a few days ago that edified me intensely. He was telling me how his time is eaten up, and the things that fill his days are visits, requests for information on this or that, business details, letters that have to be written, an answer that has to be given. And when I said how trying it must be, he answered: "If that is the form my daily duty takes, I am content."

Now this must be added. Since our work is a penance it must give us trouble. We all have to take trouble in one way or another

because we all have to work in the sweat of our brow. Cooking gives trouble, cleaning out a room gives trouble. And note this well: a person who does not take trouble does her work badly. We must take trouble and try to put all possible perfection into our work because we do it for God and because it is the form our daily duty takes. Word is God's explicit commandment given in the beginning, and it is also commanded by our Lord in the Gospel. He must be able to count on us to prove ourselves good and faithful servants.

In the work of teaching one cannot succeed without taking trouble. One has to take trouble to study and learn, to prepare lessons and to give them well, and also to watch over the children efficiently, and one must have an immense desire to do them good. We must also take the trouble to correct our natural inclination, our inclination to impatience, over our work, for instance. Then amusing ourselves by chatting or in any other way is not at all supernatural... in fact, it is not even working. The right things to do is to put kindness and devotedness into your work, to practise patience and charity, and to be intent on your duty; then your work will be really meritorious, at the same time as it gives you more trouble.

There you have a description of a real apostolic work such as was recommended to you during the Retreat, a work in which you spend yourself generously and in which you have no choice of your own. That kind of work is of greatest worth, and you are going to take it up again soon. So prepare your soul to be ready to do it seriously for our Lord's sake. And try to understand this well: You have to work in the corner of the vineyard where God wants you to be and not let your thought stray to other tasks. It is not for anyone of you in particular that I say that. I do not think you do that. But it is a temptation sometimes to say: "How I wish I was a contemplative!"

Supposing you were, with two hours a day for mental prayer - that is what the Carmelites have -- you might have work afterwards that would not be at all to your taste: making bread, doing the washing, for instance. You understand, Sisters, that in the contemplative life as in the active life you would always have to work. Take your work from God's hands just as He gives it, and take it cheerfully, heartily, with goodwill. Take the annoyances that come with the work, because they are part of our God-given penance. St. Jeanne de Chantal says that women of the world may be slack about work but that nuns must work like the poor.

Those who teach have enough work and enough troubles if they do it well. It is not unlike digging trenches and getting rid of stones, which is not light work! Other tasks in the house may be less continuous and less definite. Infirmarians, for instance, may have time when they are not nursing the sick. In convalescence, too, Sisters may be able for useful occupation. They should try to do something in proportion to their strength, work that is not like that of the earthly paradise but like the work of this poor world, where one has to take trouble, so as to be useful to the service of God and the Community.

It is to each of you to see what you can do, and this will help you to keep your retreat resolutions. A busy person keeps silence better, whereas one who has not enough to do more easily says useless words, thinks frivolous thoughts, and in wasting her time wastes something of her soul.

But a Sister who is busy in the school, who goes to her cell to prepare her lessons and from there to the class to give them as well as she can, who spends as much time as she can in the chapel, who sometimes rests in her cell - because rest may be necessary

sometimes. One who does all that in silence, in a quiet, well-ordered and well-regulated way, will find it easy to live in the Presence of God. A sister who minds the children in the dormitory can accustom them to keeping silence by keeping it herself. There is a way of saying, “Hush”, and of speaking in a low voice that makes the children quiet. A sister who is quiet will go to bed and get up more devoutly than another who in spite of good intentions makes a lot of noise, more than the children.

In any case, be intent on God and on what you are doing. That will help you to keep your retreat resolutions whether of charity or patience or regular observance, or whatever resolutions you have taken according to your special needs and graces.
