

## Working at Perfection

3<sup>rd</sup> May 1874

My dear daughters,

Every time you read a spiritual book or make a retreat or consider the duty of trying to become holy, the first thing to consider is this: What is my idea of perfection?

You know that Religious Life is a state of perfection, that its chief aim is perfection. I am not going into all that. You all know it and you are often told about it. But what I want to say to you is this: there are two questions that we do well to ask ourselves often. First: Am I working at my perfection? And second: How am I doing so? In view of all that theologians say about this it seems to me that perfection should be our constant aim. The Religious Life is said to be a state of life in which one works at one's perfection; the life whose aim is perfection; the state of tending to the closest possible union with God; the state in which one is exposed to be perfect, since Our Lord said: "If you want to be perfect... sell all... give to the poor... and follow me".

Now if all this were our constant conviction would we not judge many things very differently?

We ought often to say to ourselves: "The aim, the point of my life, is to attain perfection. That was what I came into the convent for". If St. Paul said to the first Christians: "What God asks of you is that you sanctify yourselves"<sup>1</sup>, it follows that God's will for a nun is that she should strive to grow perfect.

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<sup>1</sup> 1Thess. 4: 3

But there is another truth that must never be separated from this one. We are all sinners; we all sinned in Adam. You know this and I do not need to dwell on it. It is as easy to see as the fact that one day we shall die. The consequence is that the work of perfection is impossible without mortification. Our natural inclinations that come to us from Adam must be mortified, if we are to have the holy and grace-given inclinations that come from Our Lord. If we are to be clothed in the new life created in holiness and justice we need to be stripped of the old Adam. There you have one of the basic truths that throw light on the whole of life.

I beg you to examine the habits and ways of your daily life and see if they are a constant death to nature, to your inclinations, to self: death to the desires of the flesh – never forget that we have that enemy with us always – death to the desires of the mind, of self-love, of affections that are too natural.

Examine yourself to see whether you carry Our Lord's dying state in your body, so that His living power may be manifest in your body too.<sup>2</sup> That is the way of perfection.

We have a way of often looking for the things we want in the wrong place, where they cannot be found, and we like to dream of high and beautiful things, only to find, alas! That perfection is not there.

Think of all the good people who spend their lives keeping sheep and who succeed by prayer, which is the means, and by the love of God which is the aim we must always strive to increase in our soul, in conquering nature by grace; in hating and despising the corruption of fallen nature as the Gospel teaches us to do; and in living wholly according to grace, following Christ. All those good souls who looked after sheep and lived in their villages like St. Germaine

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<sup>2</sup> 2Cor 4

certainly never read any spiritual treatises nor had many spiritual directors. But they succeeded in becoming saints and in acquiring the truest perfection which consists in knowing God and being united with Him, and that, Sisters, is the sum total of what we have to desire and to seek.

I have often been struck by the great number of canonised lay brothers the Franciscans have. The life of a Franciscan lay brother is of the humblest, the lowliest, the poorest and is given the roughest kind of work imaginable. They go begging from door to door, from village to village; and in the midst of such occupations, they attain perfection. In Rome I have seen the body of a good Capuchin who died two hundred years ago and whose face is still beautifully fresh and pink. These Friars became holy in complete simplicity, because they sacrificed nature to grace, because by mortification they let grace live in them, because they were men of prayer and mortification. According to some theologians the “double spirit” that Elisha asked Elijah to leave him was the spirit of prayer and of mortification<sup>3</sup>. The fathers of the Church in their writings on Holy Scripture ask themselves what this “double spirit” was? Was it the spirit of prophecy and the gift of miracles? The saints lean to the opinion that it was the spirit of prayer and mortification. So that, we can conclude, is enough to get us to heaven without prophesying or working miracles.

You know, Sisters, how I discourage you as much as I can from taking on extraordinary mortifications. I do not allow frequent disciplines, fasts, privations of food, (clearly I am not speaking of small privations at meals) or anything that is beyond our common life. That is not what God wants of us, and it is a thing with which interior mortification can be combined. True mortification makes us

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<sup>3</sup> 4Kgs 2:9

eat what we are given day by day, whether we like it or not, and put up with what goes against our natural inclinations. The common life, regular observance, self-denial every day and every moment, that is what makes us indifferent to the things of this world. It detaches us from them so that we do not hold on to what we like and we readily accept what we do not like. This kind of mortification does no harm to anyone's health, but it makes a character lovable, gracious, and easy to live with. Our Lord himself taught it to St. Catherine of Genoa. It will never kill anyone, but it does kill the evil consequences of the fall. It fosters no illusions. People say sometimes: "If I took a hundred strokes of the discipline... if I got up at midnight... if I could go without breakfast... I should have no more difficulties". No, Sisters, do not believe that. I have known people who tried it and they were not souls of prayer. On the other hand, constant mortification that makes us deny ourselves all the time, detaches us from self and leads without fail to union with God.

It would be a good thing, sisters, often to examine at prayer what the aim of our life really is, and to ask ourselves St. Bernard's question: "Why did I come here?" You came here to work at your perfection, to love God above all things, to acquire the highest possible degree of love. And as in the love of God there are infinite degrees, never be satisfied with the degree of love you have acquired.

Recognise that it is too small, too weak, and rise as if on wings to a higher degree. Set your heart on fire as St. Teresa did, by often making acts of love. What charity must do is to detach you from all that concerns self, so as to make you love God above all things, ardently, perfectly, and so as to fit you for the closest intercourse with Our Lord.

But all this is only possible in so far as one denies oneself, lets go of self, to be attached to God alone. You see how right St. Teresa was

when she said that humility and mortification are necessary at every degree of love. You must make them your daily bread. If you do, you will receive abundant grace and fullness of joy, because true joy, the only true joy, consists in loving God above all things with a love that he himself delights to pour into our hearts. That is real true joy, the joy of joys. The world does not know how to love God and only aims at eternal salvation. That is already something, but it is not enough for us religious. We must tend to perfection, to the perfect love of God, the perfect imitation of Our Lord. Every day, at every moment, we must strive to love God perfectly, to deny ourselves perfectly, and we must soar above life's preoccupations and sufferings by doing our daily tasks with an ardent desire for perfection.

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