

Sensitivity to what is negative

16th February 1873

My dear Daughters,

I want to add a few words to what I said last Sunday about love for Our Lord, and to insist on that sensitivity we should have in all that concerns God's service, also on the fervour, constancy and perseverance that should be established in our souls so that we may never displease Our Lord, and always be pleasing to Him.

What I am going to name as the greatest obstacle to this sensitivity is far from your thoughts - it is our failure to realize how Our Lord values our trust in Him. Our Lord is our best friend; No one can equal Him in tenderness, fidelity, no one else is so attentive to us, so jealous of us. His eyes are always on us; nothing we do escapes Him. Does He find in all your actions a love sufficiently sincere, a trust sufficiently intimate, a faith sufficiently wholehearted, a conviction sufficiently deep? Without doubt, the answer is "no" and that deprives Him of a certain joy - He who says His "delight is to be with the children of men"¹, and who infinitely values our least acts of fidelity, of generosity, of purity, of love.

To acquire this sensitivity in love, the first thing to be careful about - here I come to fundamental ideas, because one must always come back to fundamentals - is fidelity in ridding oneself of anything that displeases our Lord and in avoiding

¹ Prov. 8: 31

the least sin. It may surprise you that I recommend nuns to avoid sin; that is what they left the world for. Such a recommendation seems better suited to people in the world than to those consecrated to God. Alas! if you examine yourselves, Sisters, you will, each one of you, find in your soul the proof that sin exists. As for myself, it frightens me sometimes to see that after so many years in Religion I still fall into many venial sins, and I still keep habits of venial sin. What a frightful thing that is! How is it that one is inclined to impatience, that another is immortified, and another is a gossip? - perhaps that word is a bit strong - call it occupied in pouring out useless words, in looking out for occasions for talking; but "gossiping" expresses my thought better. Why is this sister touchy? What is all this but the habits of venial sin, not mortal certainly, but it is frightful to say that even religious have habits of venial sin.

So it is necessary to have horror of sin and take great care to uproot these evil inclinations that are very contrary to virtues, that give us a repugnance for humility, poverty, patience, zeal and gentleness. You will perhaps think: "But that is not my case." If I have not acquired many virtues I am far from having vices. True, my dear Daughters. But what we find in ourselves is the inclination to evil, the leftovers of sin, so much opposed to the delicacy of love to which we are obliged to tend as consequence of our being called to intimacy with Our Lord and being chosen by Him to console His heart.

I am not saying this to you to make you despair or be discouraged. No, Jesus is patient with us. He knows of what earth we are made, and, as Saint Ambrose tells us, the heart of man is subject to irrational desires. But once we have

decided to work on eradicating the least of our faults, we begin to acquire delicacy. Then we no longer make excuses for ourselves, because we know our weakness. I am going to say something difficult, but which the love of Our Lord makes easy. We accept correction gladly, wherever it comes from, because what we desire more than anything is to remove from our hearts all that displeases Our Lord, all which would hinder him looking on us with pleasure.

Take an artist. He paints a picture, a very fine drawing. But there is something missing from the picture: a shadow, a line – and he does not see it. If he is touchy, you stop yourself saying anything. If on the contrary he is trying to perfect his art, you will be doing him a service in pointing out the fault of this flower or that colour. We can always remove whatever is creating a shadow in our soul. It is not the same as the craftsman: there comes a point where the paper becomes scratched and can no longer be worked on. On the contrary our soul, with the help of sanctifying grace, is capable of every perfection. And so we come back by another route to my first point.

I said at the beginning that what is opposed to delicacy (sensitivity), is the lack of trust in the love of Our Lord for us; and another thing is the lack of confidence that we can reach, if we want to, every possible perfection.

Have confidence, my dear Daughters. Helped by the grace of Our Lord you can conquer all these difficulties and carry off the victory. Fight without being discouraged – first of all your sins, and then all the occasions of sin.

But in Religious Life, you will say to me, are there really occasions of sin? Oh yes, Sisters, they are to be met with even in our life. To speak too much, for instance, is an occasion of sin : to speak you have to be two. Does not Holy Scripture say : *A flood of words is never without fault*²?

So is recreation then an occasion of sin? No, recreation is a good thing, something willed by God and which responds to a need. It is the practice in the most fervent and regular communities and helps us acquire the virtues of humility, of charity, of gentleness, of giving way, of gentleness. M. de Rancé says that among the Trappists where recreation is not customary, they had to look for ways in which the Religious could practise the virtues of mutual relationships.

So speak at recreation, but not in a way that stops others from also speaking. Be lively and likeable. Outside this time keep the most faithful and exact silence, cut out every useless word. And there are a thousand other occasions of sin. Each one of us should examine those that she encounters and see how to avoid them, so as to acquire this sensitivity about what is negative, which purifies, simplifies and leads to a loathing for the least fault.

I must say here that it is easy to deceive yourself. One person will say : “This Sister upsets me, if I were not constantly with her, I would not be so impatient; she is my occasion of sin... If I were not in this job, if I was not teaching, if I did not take such a class, virtue would be easy for me.” The se are not the occasions of sin you have to avoid; they are

² Prov. 10: 19

the order willed by God and will help us greatly to become holy. If we know how to profit from these opportunities we will make progress in virtue.

You know the story that Fr. D'Alzon told us about a young man, one of his students I believe, who to avoid occasions of sin spent his life shut up in his room with his feet up in front of the fire, reading whatever pleased him. The only distraction he allowed himself was to go every Sunday and throw bread to the fish because he thought this was an innocent amusement. But when at the judgment God asks him : " My friend, what have you done with the two, the three, the five talents that I gave you?" What will he reply? "My God, I threw bread to the fish." It is very little.

We must then accept the occasions which come from our neighbour or from our work, because they are, I repeat, willed by God, foreseen by God, and they sanctify us. But we must avoid those which come from our nature. It is so pleasant to grumble a bit, to chat a bit; and then that Sister is so understanding, we work together: I must share with her my little annoyances. And then the Bursar to the wages clerk, one infirmarian to another, the Superior to her Assistant, recount their difficulties, their problems, their disagreements they have met with in the parlour or elsewhere.

These are the occasions of complaining, of self-seeking which open the door to a thousand imperfections. For example to go the parlour and appear gracious when disagreeable or impertinent things are said to you, is to practise humility and patience. But when your visitor leaves

to go back over what was said, repeat it all to another sister, that is bad.

Be on the watch, Sisters, for the occasions of sin which come from yourselves, from nature's need to pour out your feelings, to be consoled, to let yourself go. But on the contrary, accept those which are the object of the service of God and of your neighbour and do not be afraid to expose yourself to them.

I have only spoken today about sensitivity to what is negative. What I have to say to you about a positive delicacy would take too long, so I will keep it for another time.

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