

HOW TO SPEAK OF SELF EITHER WELL OR BADLY

21st June 1874

My dear Daughters,

I would like to call your attention to a practice of perfection that all the world can adopt and which indicates progress in self-denial: it is to speak little or not at all of self. St. Francis de Sales insists on this point; he says: “Either you speak well of yourself, and it is vanity; or you speak badly of yourself, and it is show, self-seeking and a humility more put on than real!” Usually the more we eliminate the “I” or the “me” in conversation, the more perfection there is in the soul.

As far as amiability is concerned, this is a fast way of attaining it. We sometimes ask ourselves which are boring conversations? It is those in which we speak of ourselves, in which we tell what we have done, what we have said, what we have thought, the things in which we were successful. In general all this is of no interest to our neighbour, and we should avoid other exterior defects like untidiness, coarseness, disorder. But this is a minor consideration and it is not with it in view that we must act. The great reason we do have to avoid speaking of ourselves is that we see how this habit entertains and develops self-love.

You must have noticed that, in retreats, after having laid down the great principles, i.e. that we belong to God, that all we must do be related to Him, that we must serve God in all things, we come to the middle of the retreat, after having shown all the virtues to be practised, wondering which is the obstacle in us; and we must then

tell ourselves or hear someone tell us that at the bottom the main impediment is self-love.

Now, nothing contributes more to annihilating, self-love than not speaking of oneself or doing so sparingly, not bringing self forward, eliminating those “Me” I say this. Me, I do that. Me, I do this or that thing! - because all this sort of thing develop self-love. Take a little notice of your words and you will promptly sense the inclination you have of saying “I was right, I had seen it coming, I knew that, I prevented this”; in short, all the wonderful things done, said or thought, and in which you believe you have shown much wisdom and prudence.

In fact this is the great topic of conversation of people in the world. For you, Sisters, if you truly wish to advance, to become saints, adopt the practice I suggest. We ordinarily are not physically strong, we cannot practise great austerities, we do not often have the occasion of doing great acts of self-abnegation; but it is in everyone’s reach not to speak of self, and we shall not be more or less sick were we retain the “I” and the “me” and the account of what the “I” and the “me” have done, said or thought of in its sagacity, prudence and inspirations.

As to people who speak disparagingly of self rather than not to mention self at all, they are rarer. And yet, there are some who feel such a great need for speaking that they prefer to say evil of themselves rather than not to mention self at all. St. Francis de Sales is of the opinion that we can commit imperfections when talking badly of self, and he does not esteem nor advise such a type of humility; he believes that to keep silent is preferable. This does not mean that we should not blame ourselves occasionally. On the contrary that is very edifying. I remember one of our Sisters, whom I am free to speak of since she is not present here. When asked

why something has not been done properly, she spontaneously accuses herself, saying: “I am a clumsy person!; I do everything wrongly.” And I repeat it, that edifies because it is sincere; it is not a long peroration wherein one’s miseries are elaborated, wherein we say: “I am a wretch”, and yet it is all prompted by a disguised self-love.

In short, it is always more perfect not to talk of self; but that is so rare that I have given you the example of this Sister. Notice well that I am far from thinking that she be the only one. Were I to look around, I would find others who speak rarely of themselves and never on flattering terms, who avoid telling a story in which they play a leading part; but I do believe that for all of us there is work to be done, progress and effort to be made on this point which could well be the topic of our daily examen for life. We would then see that our self-complacency is manifested by our words, and that were we to eliminate this sort of need we have of turning around self we would give more place to God. Each time we remove the “me”, we make place for God.

Definitely detachment from creatures enlarges the capacity of the soul to possess God; but, of all creatures, it is precisely the “self” which remains most with ourselves. Bossuet expresses this magnificently in his sermon to Mme. de la Valliere. He says: after great sacrifices, and the great work of religious perfection consists in the stripping of a self. We can know this by a sincere examen noticing conscientiously whether we still need to speak of ourselves, and on what occasions we do so; how much we are absolutely detached, without anxiety, without care, of the esteem others may have of us, of what others think of us. Let us abandon ourselves then to God, my dear Daughters, and place in His hands the care of our person. Avoid speaking of self, thinking of self; but let us speak of good things, of the good Lord, of His service of

general topics which precisely because less personal are of greater interest to others and further more draw others better to God.
