

3 January 1875

ON KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND OF ONESELF:  
THE FOUNDATION OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

My dear Daughters,

During this time of the Holy Childhood of Our Lord, it is necessary to apply oneself in particular, to return once to the beginnings of one's religious life. To do so is an advice given by all the Saints.

Not too long ago, I saw a holy religious, the Provincial of his order, a man rather aged, who told me: "Mother, everything depends on the beginnings; if I knew only the a-b-c of religious life, I would be happy." At the beginning of this ecclesiastical year, as Our Lord shows Himself to us, and in a way, begins again His life among us, it is truly the time, it seems to me, to come back once more to the foundations of one's life.

One of the basic foundations of a Christian life, and even more so of the religious life, is to know oneself and to know God. "Know yourself, and you know God," said a great Saint. Indeed, there are two important things that are good to think of often: to know oneself with one's misery, one's imperfections, one's weakness in this fallen nature of ours that Our Lord came to redeem, a state which, if we consider it as such, should not discourage us, since it was in this state that Our Lord found man when He came to save him.

If then, we accept to be sinners, children of Adam, we will be able to draw from this, a sort of sad regret for having offended God; yes, but never any diminution of our hope, which would

be a great evil; and to avoid it, one must pass from the experience of one's misery to the knowledge of this great gift that God gives us: this Savior, Spouse, Master, this God who comes to assume our nature to be in some way, incarnated in each one of us. In considering this gift through which the goodness of God is made known to us, the graces that He pours out and that He has already poured on us, we can look at our weakness, our tendencies to evil, without a letdown in our soul.

A thing which has always struck me in the Holy Liturgy is that we never recite the "Confiteor" without introducing it by "Our help is in the name of the Lord." That is understood as soon as we are able to penetrate the depths of the wound of sin -- knowing we have offended God by our words, our actions, and by our omissions. It is necessary that beforehand, we put ourselves in the spirit that our help is in the name of the Lord, and that we finish by asking that His goodness and mercy give us pardon and forgiveness of our faults.

It is always between these two thoughts: the help that the Lord brings us, and His mercy which comes in forgiveness -- that we must place ourselves. Doesn't God say unceasingly in the Scriptures "Though your soul be black like ebony or red like scarlet dyed twice over, I will make it white like snow"? And besides: "He will relieve us of all our iniquities, He will take all of our sins and throw them into the sea", provided you ask pardon from the bottom of your heart and place yourself under the Blood of Jesus Christ and live in union with Him.

There, certainly, is the basis of a Christian life and of the religious life, adding one thing (this seems strange to say, for everyone believes he has contrition for his sins): the habitual contrition for one's faults, horror of all sin and blemishes. It

is that , my Sisters, that one can never develop too much in oneself; it is one of the characteristic marks of the Saints. All have a deep horror of that which can offend God, displease Him, or stain the soul.

Perhaps you will say that there is a sentiment which leads to perfection. I grant you that; but each day this sentiment must become more alive, more delicate, deeper, more general, and more intimate, to the peaks of perfection. It does not suffice to abstain from sin; there must always remain in us a horror of all sins committed, of those which can still reach us, and a fear; a detestation, a hatred which removes us from this sole and sovereign evil -- sin of any kind. But notice this: I did not say that we will not fall. Because of our fragility, our miserable state, we will fall; but this fall is only a weakness which can exist side by side with a contrite heart and an ever-growing perfection.

I am persuaded, my dear Daughters, that I am only expressing the sentiments which are already yours; but it is good to come to the Child Jesus in the humility, the simplicity that He shows us in the crib, and see if the bases of perfection are perfectly solid in our souls, so as not to expose ourselves to building on straw. For to build on rock is to build on the truths which I have spoken about.

Let us renew ourselves on this subject. Let us examine the a-b-c of religious life -- obedience, poverty, regularity -- on all these things to which we are formed in the Noviciate. If we are still faithful to them, we have made a great progress. The author of the "Imitation" was certainly a great saint. He said: "Please God that I could rebuild the structure of my religious life and make it regular, solid, and fervent!" We must propose this to ourselves at the beginning of this year, in view

of these mysteries of the Holy Childhood of Our Lord, in order to develop this new life that He wants to live in us. And let us apply ourselves with renewed vigor.

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