

THE THIRD CONFERENCE On Confidence and Abandonment

It was asked whether a Sister having a deep awareness of her basic unworthiness can go to God with a spirit of great confidence (v1)

Response

Not only can the person who knows of her basic unworthiness have such a great confidence but one cannot have a true confidence in God unless she knows her basic lowliness (v2). It is only the acknowledgement and confession of our lowliness that brings us before God. For all the great saints, like Job and David, would begin their prayers with a confession of their lowliness and unworthiness; thus it is a very good thing that we acknowledge ourselves to be poor, imperfect, lowly and unworthy to appear in the presence of God. This saying, so celebrated among the ancients, "know yourself," even though it means to know the greatness and the excellence of our human spirit so as not to disparage and profane ourselves by matters unworthy of our nobility, also means (v3), "know your very self"; that is to say, know your unworthiness, your imperfection and lowliness. The more we know our lowliness, the more we ought to be able to place our confidence in the goodness and mercy of God. Between mercy and lowliness there is so great a bond that one cannot exercise one without the other. If God had not created us, he would still have been perfectly good but he would not have been actually merciful (v4) because he would not have been merciful to anyone. How can anyone be merciful except to those who are basically lowly?

You see then that the more we acknowledge our lowliness, only then do we have occasion to confide in God because we have nothing within ourselves in which to place this trust. Distrust of ourselves happens by a knowledge of our imperfections. It is very good to distrust ourselves, but what good does it serve except to trust in God wholeheartedly and wait for his mercy? (v5)

Moreover, I understand that there are other things which happen that are not doubts or expressions of mistrust about what concerns our salvation. There is a shame and embarrassment that we should have on approaching Our Lord. We commit faults and we have read that there are great saints, like Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Theresa, who, when they fell into some fault were overcome with confusion, especially when our self-love makes us believe that we should have the confusion. We say "Oh! Dear Lord, I will never come near you, I am so unworthy!" All that this is, is only a small way to satisfy our self-love which fools us. I am not saying that these embarrassing moments (v6) are not very good when they really hit the mark. Truthfully, it is more reasonable that while being near to God, we should withdraw with some humility and dwell on our confusion, because if we have offended a friend, we would be embarrassed to come near the friend. But it is not necessary to dwell there for long because the virtues of humility, self-abasement and confusion are the intermediate virtues by which we ought to ascend to the union of our spirit with God. It would be no great thing to be humbled and stripped of ourselves, which happens through acts of self-abasement, if the goal of these acts was not to give oneself totally to God. Saint Paul teaches us this when he says: "Strip yourself of the old man and put on the new" (n1). For we must not remain stripped but must

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clothe ourselves with God. This slight inward step is only done so that we may leap ahead and rush toward God by an act of love and trust. We must never let this humbling of ourselves be done in a spirit of sadness or anxiety. It is self-love that causes the confusion because we are troubled that we are not perfect, not so much through our love for God but through our love for ourselves.

You may very well say that you do not experience this trust. When you have no feeling, (n2) make acts of trust and say to Our Lord: "Even though I have no feeling of trust in you, nevertheless I know that you are my God, that I am wholly yours and I have hope only in your goodness. Therefore, I place myself totally in your hands." It is always within our power to make such acts. Whatever difficulty we experience, these acts are not impossible. It is on occasions such as these, even amidst our difficulties, that we must show our faithfulness to Our Lord. Even though we would do these acts without the feeling of fervor or satisfaction, we should not worry about it because Our Lord loves them all the more. And don't say: "I do say them but only with my lips." If your heart did not want to make the act of trust, you wouldn't say a word. When you do them, be at peace, pay no attention to what troubles you and speak to Our Lord about something else.

This brings us to the conclusion of our first point. It is very good to experience confusion when we know and feel our lowliness and imperfection. However, we must not stop there or be overcome by discouragement. We must lift our heart up to God in holy trust, whose foundation is in him and not in ourselves. And inasmuch as we change, he never changes but always remains loving and merciful when we are weak and far from perfect as well as when we are strong and perfect. I often say that the throne of God's mercy is our basic lowliness. Even though our basic unworthiness appears to be so great, we must have the greatest trust (v7), for trust is the life of the human spirit. Take away trust, you kill the human spirit.

Now let us go to another question which concerns the abandonment of oneself and what a person who has abandoned self (v8) should be doing. There are two virtues, one of which is the goal of the other: to forsake oneself in order to become abandoned from self. We should know that to be abandoned from oneself and to forsake ourselves is nothing other than to renounce and get rid of our own will that we might give all to God. I have already said that it hardly makes sense to renounce and forsake ourselves if it is not done in order to unite ourselves to the Divine Goodness. This is why it becomes necessary to abandon oneself. Otherwise, it would serve no purpose but would resemble the acts of two ancient philosophers who made an admirable renunciation of all things as well as of themselves under the pretense of devoting themselves totally to philosophy. Take for example Epictetus, one of the great and renowned philosophers, who had been born a slave. Because of his great wisdom, he won his freedom. But by the most extreme renunciation of all things, he did not accept his freedom and remained voluntarily in slavery. He lived in such poverty that, after his death, nothing was found except for a lamp which was sold at a very high price, almost like a relic, because it had belonged to such a great person. As for ourselves, we renounce ourselves so that we might give ourselves totally to the mercy of the goodness of God.

There are many who tell Our Lord: "I give myself totally to you and want to hold back nothing." But there are few who truly take on the practice of this self-renunciation, which is nothing more than a perfect indifference toward all the events that happen to us through Divine Providence. To accept equally, affliction as well as consolation, sickness as well as health, poverty, contempt and

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shame as well as great wealth, honor and glory, belongs to the superior part of our human spirit. There is no doubt that the inferior part of our human spirit and our natural inclination would always seek honor over contempt, great wealth over poverty. However, no one can ignore the fact that contempt, lowliness and poverty are more pleasing to God than honor and the possession of the greatest wealth.

To make such an act of abandonment, one only has to obey both the signified will of God and the will of his good pleasure. The first is done through resignation and the latter through indifference. The signified will of God is found in the commandments, counsels and inspirations, our *Rule* and the commands of our Superiors. The will of God's good pleasure is found in the events that we cannot foresee. For example, I don't know if I shall die tomorrow (v9); if I should become seriously sick, I should see that it is God's good pleasure and, moreover, I should abandon myself to God's good pleasure and die with a peaceful heart. Likewise, I don't know if during the coming year all the produce of the earth will be destroyed (n3). If it should happen (v10), it is obvious that it is the good pleasure of God. There are more familiar and agreeable examples in our own life. It will happen that you will not have consolations doing your exercises. It is evident that this is God's good pleasure and you must remain indifferent between desolation and consolation (v11). Or better, you have been given a habit that is not as nice as the one you are used to wearing. The person in charge of habits did this in good faith. It is totally certain that the good pleasure of God has given you this habit and, thus, you ought to accept it with indifference. In the refectory, you might be given some meat which is not to your liking. Without doubt, this is God's good pleasure and you must eat it with indifference. This refers to your will. Again with signs and proofs of friendship, if some person does not show any sign of friendship, you ought to consider that this is God's good pleasure. Perhaps, she is busy with something more important. Why should you expect her to take the time to stop and offer a sign of her friendship? But if she does do it, you must also believe that this is God's good pleasure and bless him for this small consolation that he is giving you.

There are also some matters in which we must join the signified will of God to the will of his good pleasure. For instance, I might become sick with a fever. I should see here that the good pleasure of God is that I should be indifferent to either sickness or health. However, the signified will (v12) of God is that I call the doctor and that I use all the medicines I can (I do not say the extraordinary (v13) but those that are ordinary). For God points out to us those herbs and medicines that he has given the power to heal. Holy Scripture teaches us this in several places and holy Church wants this act of the signified will of God put into practice. Whether the illness overpowers the medicine or vice-versa, one must be in perfect indifference, suchwise that if sickness and health were put before us and Our Lord would say to us: "If you choose good health, I will not deprive you of a single ounce of my grace; if you choose sickness, I shall not in any way increase that grace. But in the choice of sickness, there is a little more of my good pleasure." Then the person who has completely forsaken and abandoned herself into the hands of Our Savior will undoubtedly choose sickness, solely because there is a little more of God's good pleasure. Yes, even when that good pleasure means to spend one's whole life in bed doing nothing but suffering, one should not desire anything in the world or any other state than the one in which one finds oneself. And the Saints who are in

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heaven have such a union with the will of God that if there were a little more of his good pleasure in hell, they would leave Paradise to go there.

This state of our self-renunciation also includes (v14) our being abandoned to the will of God in all temptations, barrenness, dryness, and natural dislikes that occur in our spiritual life. In all these things we see the good pleasure of God when they do not happen through our own fault and there is no sin in them (v15). For even though we do not favor our dislikes, they do disturb us and we must put up with them like anything else. However, we must look at the source of our dislikes from the beginning. Often we find that they come from our imperfection. This is because when an evil is known it is much easier to fight it off. When we recognize it we must mortify the feeling or passion which gives rise to it.

In all our dislikes, we must be careful not to lessen our acts of love toward the person for whom we have the dislike. We must wait on her, speak to her, show affection to her, not only as if there was nothing between us, but more. By doing that, we show our fidelity to God and we obey his signified will, which is even in the face of our dislike that we rise up and offer her signs of friendship, as I have already said. Would one sin if you would say that you love her as you love your own self and that you suffer a great deal by having a dislike for her? I am speaking as if it is one of our own Sisters and toward one who is professed, because a novice could not be able to know that you have a dislike for her. It would certainly be seriously wrong if an older Sister would not receive with an open heart and with compassion the poor Sister who has spoken of her suffering and dislike to her, because she comes to her with so much trust. She knows that she cannot overcome it but would like to be free from it, if it would be the good pleasure of God. Having applied these remedies you should not be troubled but suffer in good heart without looking to be delivered from your affliction, all the while remaining submissive to the good pleasure of God, which is what you are, in fact, practicing.

Sometimes it happens that we have dislikes not for the persons of our Sister but for their actions. These are not seriously wrong because they always arise from imperfections. If some Sisters do something which isn't good, we must look upon them with compassion and not give birth to a dislike for them. Take for example, there are those who have such an excessive tendency to neatness that they easily give birth to a dislike toward an untidy person. They will give a most bitter correction for this impropriety and not for some great sin. That is a great imperfection. But if a Sister had a dislike equally as strong for all that the others might want to do that would offend God, this would come from zeal. Nevertheless, it would be even more dangerous to pass from a dislike for a particular action to a dislike for the person. In this case, even though charity would not ordinarily be lost, gentleness would disappear.

This is not to say that when a dislike is less intense we can always speak with the same cheerfulness as if we had a deep friendship. For if it is well within our power to speak and do other things, it is still possible for us to do them with as gracious a countenance as if we did not have this difficulty. It is the same with a sad person. For it is within her power to sing, to walk and to speak at recreation. But such a person cannot do all this with the same spirit and grace that she could bring if she were not sad. Furthermore, neither one nor the other is required, for it would not be proper. If nothing else results from our dislikes except that on speaking to this person we are not totally cheerful

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or that we turn our eyes a little away from her, this is not a big thing. This is only a matter for self-renunciation and self-denial but not for Confession. Likewise, if I am obliged to correct and admonish this person for some fault and have fixed my intention on doing it with charity, and nevertheless a bit of this feeling (n5) arises within me, it is not a sin and is merely unavoidable for all. A simple humbling of the self before God suffices to repair the fault. But if our like or dislike continues and we do something or speak with this feeling behind it, then there is something wrong. Since the heart empowers the tongue (n6), it is a sign that the will is at fault and that the first movement has not been curbed.

You ask what should a religious who is totally abandoned to God be concerned about interiorly. She should do nothing else but remain before Our Lord (v16) in a holy repose without any concern either for body or spirit. Because she has set off under the Providence of God, why should she worry about what will happen to her? Our Lord, to whom she has wholly abandoned herself, will think of everything for her. However, I don't mean to say that we should not think about those things that become part of us because of our responsibilities (v17). For example, if the care of the garden has been given to a Sister, she should not say: "I do not want to think about it. Our Lord will take care of everything." Likewise, a Superior or a Mistress of Novices should not say in pretense: "I have abandoned myself to God and I rest in his care," but neglect to read and learn the instructions that are necessary for the exercise of her responsibilities.

Now, you might say to me: "Consequently, we should have a great trust so that we might abandon ourselves without reserve." Yes, but also when we give up everything, Our Lord takes care of everything and leads us everywhere. But if we hold something back rather than confide in him, he leaves it to us, saying as it were, "You think that you are wise enough to do this thing without me; I will let you take charge, but you will see how it will turn out for you." Those who are consecrated to God in religious life must give all without reserve. Saint Mary Magdalene, who was totally abandoned to the will of Our Savior, rested at his feet and listened while he spoke (n7). When he stopped speaking, she also stopped listening and she did not move away from him. It should be the same with the person who has left everything; she should do nothing else but rest in the arms of Our Lord like a child on his mother's breast. When she puts her child down to walk, (n8) the child walks until the mother lifts him up. When she wants to carry the child again, he lets her do so. He does not know and does not think about where he is going, but he allows himself to be carried and taken where his mother pleases. The religious allows herself to be carried, in all that happens to her, when she loves the will of God's good pleasure and then walks, when she does with great care everything that belongs to the signified will of God.

Now you ask if it is possible that our will be so dead in God that we no longer know what we want or what we do not want. It never happens, however, no matter how much we have renounced ourselves; we do not own the movements of our free will so absolutely that we do not feel some desires and some acts of the will stirring within us. These, however, are not absolute acts or completed desires, for as soon as a person who has abandoned herself to God perceives some stirring of the will in herself, she immediately puts it to death within the will of God.

Furthermore, I would like to answer your question, whether a still very imperfect person can profitably remain before God in prayer with this simple attention to his holy presence. If God puts

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you there, you can profitably remain there. It often happens that Our Lord gives this repose and peacefulness to some people who have not been completely purified. However, they still must be purified. They ought to make the reflections and considerations necessary for their amendment outside the time of prayer. For when God holds them in recollection, there still remains enough freedom to speak intelligently on many indifferent things. Why then shouldn't they consider and make resolutions for the practice of the virtues? There are some very perfect persons to whom Our Lord never gives this sweetness and repose, who do all things in the higher part of their spirit. They put to death their own will in the will of God by the sheer power and concentration of their higher reason. And this death is the death of the cross (n9), which is so much more excellent and noble than the other, and should be called a slumber rather than a death. For the person, who has set out in the heart of God's Providence, lets go and moves forward gently, much like a person who, though asleep in a boat on a quiet sea, continues to move toward her goal. This kind of death, indeed gentle, is given as a free gift, while the other is merited.

Now you want to know what the foundation of our trust should be. It must be grounded in the infinite goodness of God and the merits of the Passion and Death of our Savior, Jesus Christ, with this condition on our part, that we have made a part of ourselves a complete and firm resolve to belong totally to God and abandon ourselves totally without any reserve to Divine Providence (v18). For if one should say, "I entrust myself to you but I do not want to be totally yours," this would not be done through one's reason. But I want you to notice that I do not say that we must feel this resolution of belonging totally to God but only that we must have and have made it a part of ourselves. This is so because we must not concern ourselves with what we feel and do not feel. The greater part of our feelings and satisfactions are only movements of our self-love. We ought not suppose that in all these things dealing with abandonment and indifference that we never have desires contrary to the will of God and that our nature will not pull back in matters involving his good pleasure. This can always happen. These virtues are found in the superior part of our spirit; the lower part, generally speaking, has nothing to do with them. We must have no concern and pay little attention to the inferior part of our spirit. We must embrace the Divine Will and be united to it no matter what this involves.

There are very few persons who reach this degree of perfect abandonment of self. However, we must all aim toward it, each according to one's capacity and ability (v19).

May God Be Blessed!

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NOTES

1. Col. 3:9-10.
2. When you do not feel it – Addition for the meaning of the French text.
3. ravaged, destroyed by a storm – Addition for the meaning of the French text.
4. The year 1629 stood out precisely because a plague ravaged the city of Annecy.
5. of resentment, of impatience – Addition for the meaning of the French text.
6. Matt. 12:34; 15:11, 18-20.
7. Lk. 10:39.
8. She puts her on the ground. – Addition for the meaning of the French text.
9. Phil. 2:8.

VARIANTS

1. E.1629. *The Second Conference, in which it is asked if a person may go to God with a great trust, even with the feeling of our basic lowliness and how this may be; also of the perfect abandonment of self.*
E.1933. *The Second Conference, On Trust and Abandonment.* It treats of how a person while having the feeling of her own basic lowliness can go to God with a great trust.
2. E.1629. "You ask me, my dearest Daughters, if a person having the feeling of her own lowliness can go to God with a great trust. I reply that not only..."
3. E1629. Adds: "This also means knowledge of our unworthiness, imperfection and basic lowliness: the better that we know our basic lowliness the more we will trust in the goodness..."
4. E1629. "...merciful, since mercy can only be exercised toward those who know their basic lowliness."

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5. E1629. Continues: "The faults and infidelities that we commit every day ought to cause us shame and embarrassment when we would like to come before Our Lord; and we also read that there are..."
6. E1629. "...embarrassments." Go down to: "...It is also very reasonable."
7. E1629. Go down to: "...let us now pass on to another..."
8. E1629. Go down to: "... We should know that..."
9. E1629. Go down to: "...I should see."
10. E1629. "...or that there be a plague or such events, it is fully evident that this is the good pleasure of God. Moreover I must accept it."
11. E1629. "...it should be the same in all things that might happen to us, the habits which are given to us, the food which is offered to us." It resumes with the next paragraph: "...I must demand further, that there are some matters in which we must join the signified will..."
12. E1629. "...the signified will for me is that, while I am not under obedience, I call..."
13. E1629. "...but the common and ordinary and that religious, who are under a Superior, should accept the medicines and treatments offered to them in simplicity and submission." Go to: "For God points out to us..."
14. E1629. "...also includes abandonment to the good pleasure of God."
15. E1629. "... and there is no sin in them. Truthfully, abandonment is the virtue of virtues. It is the cream of charity, the secret odor of humility, the merit, it seems, of patience and the fruit of perseverance. This virtue is so great and alone worthy of being practiced by the most beloved children. `My Father,' our gentle Savior says on the cross, `I place my spirit into your hands.' It is true, he wanted to say that all is accomplished and I have completed all that you asked me to do. However, if it is your will that I remain on this cross and suffer more, I am content to do so. I place my spirit into your hands; you can do with me whatever you will. We ought to do the same, my beloved Daughters, whether it be that we should suffer or that we should enjoy some consolation, always allowing ourselves to be led by the will of God, according to His good pleasure, without letting ourselves be preoccupied with our own particular will.
"Our Savior loves with an extremely tender love those who are so willing to abandon themselves totally to his Father's care, allowing themselves to be guided by Divine Providence without allowing themselves the time to consider whether the effects of this Providence will be

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profitable or damaging to them; also being totally assured that nothing will happen to them from this paternal and most lovable heart which will not be for their well being and profit. This will happen if we have placed out total trust in him and that we say wholeheartedly: 'I pledge my spirit, my body and all that I have into your blessed hand in order to do what is pleasing to you.' We are reduced to such a point that we are unable to pour forth before the Divine Majesty the perfumes of a holy submission to his most Holy Will and of a continual promise not to do anything to offend him. Sometimes Our Savior wills that those chosen for the service of God content themselves with a firm and unchanging resolve to persevere in following him in the midst of the dislikes, dryness, aversions and harshness of the spiritual life, without consolation, delights, tenderness or relish, all the while believing themselves to be unworthy of such things. They follow our Divine Saviour in the highest point of their spirit without any support except that of the divine will which it desires. This is how I want us to walk, my dear Daughters."

"But now you ask me..." (This passage from "In truth, this self abandonment..." to "...my dear Daughters" is taken from the Sermon for Good Friday, April 17, 1620.)

16. E1629. "Our Lord." Go down to: "without any concerns."
17. E1629. "...because of our responsibilities," add, "It is not right for a Superior to pretend to be abandoned to God and to remain in his care and neglect to read and understand the instructions that are necessary for the exercise of her office. It is quite true that we must have..." Go down to the next paragraph.
18. E1629. "...to divine Providence"; go down to: "...but I always want you to notice."
19. E1629. End of the *Second Conference*: "each according to one's ability and capacity."