

THE SEVENTH CONFERENCE

On Several Questions (v1)

I am always ready, needing no preparation except making the sign of the cross. Before dealing with the questions that have been given me, I am going to give my opinion on something that often happens to me, namely, that in my sermons I always touch someone without intending to, particularly when I talk about faults. I can understand the notion that the Sisters could have that I am speaking to someone in particular when I treat of some fault that they, perhaps, have committed. Even though that is not my intention, I would be more than happy to do it, and I'll explain why.

Philosophers, especially the great Epictetus, find a great difference between a barber and a surgeon even though they might seem to do practically the same thing. They find the difference as one approaches their shops. If you were to come to the barber shop you would be happy because there is always a child playing the flute. In addition, the barber always makes his shop fragrant, which comes from the lotions he keeps there. However, the surgeon's shop always has an offensive smell even though only ointments and salves are found there. Moreover, you ordinarily hear the poor people crying out: "What are you doing to me? My God, such pain!" The surgeon makes an incision on one, sets what is broken for another, cleans the wound of a third. All of these cause great pain. Everyone knows that bones that are dislocated cannot be set without causing the patient to cry out. But the barber causes no pain when he trims a beard, because it has no sensation.

Sometimes I play (v2) the barber; at other times I play the surgeon, my Daughters. Don't you see that when I preach in the choir (v3) I do not cause pain? Ordinarily, I do not treat of particular faults with the same familiarity as I do in our special conferences because people of the world are listening. I only give lotions. I talk about virtues and things that re-create and in their own way console our hearts. I am playing the flute a little, speaking the praises that we must give to God. But in our informal conferences, I become the surgeon, bringing all the salves and ointments to put on the wounds of my dear Daughters. And even if they cry out a bit, I allow my hand to press a bit on the wound so that the salves will cover it and in this way heal and make them very healthy. If I make an incision, it will not be without your feeling pain. But I am not concerned about the pain, since that is why I am here (v4). My dear Daughters, this is why I apologize to those whom I would like to touch, all the while assuring them that while I do it, I do it from the bottom of my heart.

Now, let us consider the first question you asked me. It concerns our Sisters confessing indiscriminately certain things that confessors do not understand, perhaps, like dislikes and what advice to give. It is true there are some confessors who do not understand what a dislike really is and if it is explained to them, they think that it comes from ill-will. This is not the case; and so I would like to say something about it. It is found among priests who are very learned or who have heard the laity's confessions for thirty years. They do not understand the language of the Daughters of the Visitation of Holy Mary in matters of confession or of people outside the Visitation who profess to be very spiritual. It concerns things so small and delicate that they are only spiritual truths to those who understand them well. What must we do? I find that it is very good if Superiors would instruct the confessors whom they think are incapable of correctly understanding what the Sisters are saying. In light of this, the Sisters who perceive that the confessor misunderstands them, perhaps by his thinking

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that the dislike of which they are guilty is from hatred or will (this is easily known from the correction he gives them), must listen closely and should tell him freely: "Father, this is not what you think. I feel you have not understood me; this is what I mean." And later, they can truly tell the Superior that the confessor does not understand them. However, they must not accuse him of any imperfection, not even of any ignorance, because it might well be that the confessor, while being very learned, is unable to understand them in these very delicate matters that are regarded as an imperfection rather than as a sin. This happened to me once when I was hearing someone's confession. The person mentioned something that I didn't understand that well. Moreover, I couldn't believe that in a community of such great perfection, a person would commit such a fault. I told her very openly that I did not understand her. I asked her to explain more clearly what she had mentioned. She did and I found out that it was nothing at all. Oh! yes. I want the Sisters to take great care in confessing and do it clearly and straightforwardly so as not to cause their confessors such pain. Superiors must humbly inform the confessors about the nature of the faults that the Sisters commit by these dislikes. They come from certain inclinations that are sometimes natural and which excite in us a certain aversion toward those for whom we have these feelings. It makes us dislike their conversation, or at least take no pleasure in it, the opposite of what we do with those who have a gentler disposition or with those with whom we share a certain bond and union between our spirit and theirs.

And to show that it is natural to love some by inclination and not others (v5), philosophers propose the following experience: two men enter a tennis court where two others are playing tennis. When they arrive they experience right off by instinct that one should win rather than the other. And where does this come from, since they have never seen either one before, nor have they ever spoken to them? They do not know if one is stronger than the other. This is why they have no reason to like one more than the other. Nevertheless, it still happens. We must admit that this instinct to love some more than others is natural. We can see it even in the animals, who have no reason. They experience dislikes naturally from instinct. Take the experience of a small lamb who has just been born. Show it the skin of a wolf. Even if the wolf is dead, the young lamb will run away, hide itself under its mother's belly. It will bleat (v6) and make all kinds of noise because it must avoid any encounter with the wolf. But show it a horse which is a very large animal, and it will not be frightened; it will play with the horse. The reason for this is none other than the natural instinct that attracts it to the horse but makes it avoid the wolf.

Must we make a big case about our dislikes? Certainly not, no more than about our instincts, as long as we subject them all to our reason. Do I feel like avoiding talking with one Sister who is very virtuous and from whom I could profit? Must I follow my instinct which would make me avoid meeting her? No, I must subject my dislike to reason, which will tell me to talk with her or at least to remain in a spirit of peace and calm when I meet her. There are some people who have a great fear of having a dislike for those whom they love by instinct so much so that they distance themselves from talking with them out of fear that they will discover some fault that might deprive them of the goodness of their affection and friendship (v7). These likes are called a beggar's friendship because they depend totally on one person in the friendship. I once saw a gentleman who was like this. We were school friends; he liked me very much and yet the more he liked me, the more he avoided meeting me. I was astonished at this because I never did anything to offend him. Finally, our paths

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crossed and he told me quite openly about the plan he had to avoid talking with me. Moreover, he feared not being able to like me as much as he did before. He said that if he discovered any type of an imperfection or fault in those he loved, he would immediately give up any pleasure that he had in his affection. This might happen if they would say an offensive word in a conversation or commit the least impropriety in their behavior (n1).

Is there any remedy for these dislikes, since no one, no matter how perfect, is free from them in one way or another? Persons who are harsh by nature will have a dislike for someone who will be very gentle and will regard this gentleness as extreme weakness even though this kind of gentleness is the most universally desired (v8). However, one sees women who have such a distaste for sugar that even if they would see some benefit in it they would leave it behind rather than eat it. No one is free of dislikes as long as we are in this life. The only remedy for this weakness, as is the case for all other kinds of temptations, is simply to turn away from it and not to think about it any further (v9). How should I act when I have to do something with a person whom I dislike? I must turn my mind away from any attention to my dislike without appearing to take notice. But the misfortune is that we want very much to know if we have a reason or not for our having a dislike for the person. Oh, we must never amuse ourselves with trying to find out! For our self-love (v10), which never dies, will coat the pill so well that we will believe it is good for us. I mean that we will find that it is true that we have certain reasons which appear good to us. And then, with the approval of our own judgment and having the go-ahead of our self-love, there will no longer be anything to prevent us from regarding them as just, right and reasonable.

Oh, how we must certainly be aware of this! I intend to speak a bit about it because it is so important. We never have any reason to have a dislike, much less want to nourish it. When these are simple natural dislikes, pay no attention to them except to turn away from them without appearing to take notice (v11) and so trick your own mind. But when we see that the dislike is getting the upper hand and does not want to be subject to reason, then we must allow nothing that would favor our dislike or our evil inclination for fear of offending God. For when we do nothing to feed our dislikes but speak a little less pleasantly to a person than we might do to anyone for whom we feel a strong affection, this is no big thing. It is scarcely within our power to do otherwise when we feel this emotion. It would be wrong to expect that of ourselves (v12).

This is enough on this point. Let us pass on to the second question, which is whether it is permissible for some Sister to complain a little at times to another Sister about something the Superior or Mistress of Novices or even a Sister might be angry with her about or might not have been overly pleased with her on some occasion. Would it be better to make these complaints to the confessor or Spiritual Father if it is the Superior, or to the Superior if it is the Mistress of Novices or a Sister who has angered us, and not to speak to some particular Sister? O my God! To complain is a very dangerous thing. As we have said in the *Introduction*: "Ordinarily, he who complains, sins." The first example of complaining to a Sister and speaking about the imperfection of a Sister who is not pleased with us is always wrong. The second of doing it to the Superior is tolerable for the imperfect. But for the others, oh, how I wish that we would not be so touchy that we would have to complain about the smallest unpleasantness that we receive from our neighbor who, perhaps, has no

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intention of offending us! It is not necessary to say any more on this subject, suffice it to say that we should know that it is necessary to make amends without a grudge, since this matter is very important.

The third question is: How should we act when we receive the books that are given us to read? (v13) For the Superior will give one Sister a book to read on the *Imitation of Our Lady* (n2), or better *The Mortifications of Arias* (n3), or give another a book which treats the virtues very well but [the Sister] does not like reading it. And because she does not like it, she will not derive any profit from reading it. Also she will read it carelessly (v14) and inattentively so that she will be deprived of all the enjoyment and the pleasure that there is in reading it. The reason for this is that she already has its contents on her fingertips, and moreover, she would prefer (v15) that the *Love of God* or other books that speak about the love of God be given her to read. I say that she is not in the wrong about liking the *Love of God* more than all the books put together, because the love of God must certainly be preferred to everything else. But when we consider the intention of the Sister who has proposed this question, we should say that it is an imperfection to want to choose or prefer another book rather than the one given us to read. It is a sign that we are reading to satisfy the curiosity of our mind rather than to profit from our reading (v16). Our minds have a curiosity all their own, just like our bodies and our eyes. If we read for profit and not for self-satisfaction, we will be equally satisfied with one book or another. At least, we should cheerfully accept all that our Superior gives us to read. More than that, I assure you we ought to be happy to read the same book over again, provided that it was good and spoke about God. If it only contained the name of God, we should be satisfied because we will always find there enough to practice after having read and reread the same book several times. Wanting to read to satisfy our curiosity is a sign that we are still a bit immature and that we are not yet serious about doing the good that has been presented in this small book on the practice of virtues. For the book treats the virtues of humility and mortification very well. They are not practiced, however, when one does not accept them cheerfully.

To say: "Because I do not like a book, I will not get anything out of it," does not follow. And to say further: "Because I know it by heart, I cannot find any pleasure in reading it (v17) nor will I read it cheerfully." All of this is childish. We must be more open than that. Should you be given a book you already know from beginning to end or almost totally by heart, bless God because you will understand its teaching all the more easily. If you are given a book that you have already read several times, humble yourself and assure yourself that it is God who wills it, so that you will be occupied with performing virtues rather than learning about them. His will (v18) is giving it to you for the second and third time because you have not profited from the first reading (v19). I have spoken to you at other times about a religious who asked the way he should follow to become very learned. Saint Thomas Aquinas answered that he should read only one book (n4). But the arrogance from which all of this springs is that we are always looking out for our own satisfaction and not after the highest perfection. If by chance the Superior notices our weakness and (the Superior) offers us the choice of a book that we want, then we can choose it in all simplicity in accord with what we want. But apart from that, we must humbly submit to all that our Superiors ask of us, whether we like it or not, without ever showing the feelings that we might have that are contrary to this submission (v20). We will no longer say: "I do not know how to find enjoyment in reading such a book that the Superior has asked me to read."

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Someone has asked if it is permissible to name the Sisters who have told us something that the Superior or a Sister has said to our detriment. For if one tells everything to the Superior, it can happen that she will ask the name of the Sister who has told us this. You are in doubt as to whether you ought to tell her who she is. I say no. She must not ask you that, because this revelation is a sin, which can be serious depending on the matter, and we are not allowed to reveal the secret sins of our neighbor. When it concerns only an imperfection, one can do it; but in the case of sin, we must not do it. I do in fact make an exception for those who have the charge of correcting and supervising others. For they are able to warn others about things that are sinful in themselves, but not those who do not have this responsibility. But you might say that this would be beneficial for the Superior so as to correct the Sisters more gently if she is told the Sisters who have failed. It would be much better if the Sisters were not named in matters that are sinful, and the Superior should make general corrections. For although all are not guilty, it is not harmful to correct everyone in a general way. Then those who are guilty will assume the greatest portion of the correction.

It is most important that we speak more about this. To go and tell a Sister that the Superior has said this or that about her in her absence is a sin called murmuring. I must tell you what it means in Latin. Murmuring in Latin means babbling, a slight noise or prattling that forms small streams in which there are some stones which, while making the waters form waves, prevent them from flowing noiselessly and so form the big rivers that flow so gently that you hardly see the continual movement of these waters. People in the world make a commotion, not like the little streams but like very rapidly flooding water carrying with them everything they come upon. The people of the world commit slander very freely, they cry out about the sins and the faults of their neighbor, they sow dissension, they show malice and deadly hatred, they pay no attention to dislikes because they are full of hate and they do not stop being irritated or doing evil things toward those for whom they have these dislikes. But truly spiritual persons do not form their dislikes from important things. They arise from difficulties rather than sins. Consequently, they merit more when they do not commit such a sin.

My dear Daughters, why should you be upset with a poor Sister about the murmuring that you have done on telling her that the Superior or someone else has said something about her that could offend her? My God! We should be more careful than that about the peace and tranquility of heart of our Sisters and take better care to keep the faults of our neighbors quiet. You would commit two faults: for in addition to speaking about the imperfection that has been committed, you also take away the peace of your Sister (and more so by speaking about it specifically). Since, by the grace of God, we keep ourselves from committing the great sins that I have spoken about as being committed in the world, we must also be very careful about refraining from this type because we do have the power not to commit them.

Suppose your Sister has committed a sin which is not public knowledge. Do what you can to help her make amends by giving her a fraternal correction which is part of the *Rule*. Outside of that, be careful not to disclose them except with what you will find in the article "On Correction" which you must do. Otherwise, there would be a sin involved by doing it (v21). We can in fact talk about our own venial sins plainly and clearly in public, mainly when we want to humble ourselves. But we

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should not mention our mortal sins because we are not the masters of our own good name. All the more, then, we must not reveal the sins of our neighbor when they are secret.

When a thing is seen by many, there is nothing wrong in speaking about it to Superiors. For example, a Sister has spoken to you in a way that reveals that she is upset and definitely impatient. If she has done this in the presence of another Sister, it is not a secret or a hidden sin. You can indeed tell the Superior about it so that she might correct it like all other faults that are not great ones, such as slight murmuring, abrupt speech or cold looks which are given to some and not to others, of failures in observing the *Constitutions* and other similar small things. In important things, we must do what is contained in the article "On Correction."

The fifth question is concerned with whether we ought to be surprised to find imperfections in each other or even in Superiors. With regard to the first point, undoubtedly we must never be surprised to see them in this religious community or in others, no matter how perfect they may be (v22). They will never be such, not even all the Visitations. We always find that we do not do something here or there, more or less according to what we will be doing. It is no big thing to see a person be very gentle who has nothing to upset her or to try her about (v23). When I am told there is a person who has never been seen committing a fault, I immediately ask: "Does she have an area of responsibility in the community?" If I am told no, I do not consider her perfection very great. My dear Sisters, there is indeed a difference between the virtues of such a one and those of another who will be tried (v24) either exteriorly by contradictions or community concerns, or interiorly by temptations. The strength of virtue is never acquired in times of calm, and while we are not tried by the temptation of its opposite (v25), how happy is she who, while being very vain in the world, is always working very hard against this temptation being in religious life. For, just the opposite, that which was the obstacle will become itself the cause of her becoming humble with a true and genuine humility. Those who are very gentle while there are no contradictions, and who have not acquired this virtue at sword's point, are apparently very exemplary and edifying. But if you put them to the test (v26), you will see them stirred up and showing that their gentleness was not a strong and solid virtue but a virtue more imaginary than real.

There is quite a difference between getting rid of a vice and having the virtue which is its opposite. Many seem to be very virtuous, who in reality are not virtuous at all because they have not tried to acquire virtues. Very often it happens that our passions are sleeping or are drowsy. And if during this time we do not make provision for the strength to overcome and resist them, when they do awaken we will be overcome in the battle. We must always remain humble and not believe that we possess the virtues even though we may not (as far as we know) commit the faults that are their opposites (v27). How I want so much the white-veiled Sisters not to notice the faults of the others but to take great care to pay attention to those faults that they possess, and also that they would not take time to look at those that the professed Sisters commit, at least during their novitiate! Afterwards, or toward the end of their novitiate, they will be distracted from seeing their own. As corrections wind down, their passions will be lulled to sleep. They will not commit great faults and, consequently, they will become so attentive to God that they (will not be as capable) (v28) of seeing those faults of the professed Sisters and they will consider the professed Sisters to have been sufficiently tried. In this

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way, they will have more compassion for those who do fail and not be surprised on seeing them fail. Thus, they will consider them so good, seeing that, notwithstanding the fact that they themselves are so imperfect, the professed Sisters have not stopped desiring for them the happiness of making holy profession and living the rest of their lives in their company.

Certainly, there are many people who are so mistaken in what they believe, such that persons who make the profession of perfection must never fall into imperfections, and more especially religious. It seems to them that for a person to enter religious life she must be perfect, which is not so. For religious orders are not formed in order to gather perfect people (v29), but people who have the courage to want to aim for perfection (v30). Perfection is nothing other than having not only charity, for all those who are in the state of grace have charity, but of having the fervor or ardor of charity, which makes us undertake not only the correcting of our faults but also makes us strive faithfully to acquire the holy virtues that are their opposites. I will tell you what has very often happened to me. I asked some women living in the world if they would speak to me truthfully about what I wanted to ask them. Having said they would, I asked them what the Daughters of the Visitation appeared to be. Some answered immediately that they had found more good in this community than they thought there would be. I blessed God for that. Others to whom I raised the same question told me that there was a great deal of difference between reading the *Rule* and seeing it practiced, because the *Rule* is like honey and sugar. It is sweetness and perfection itself. But they did not fail to find in the community some imperfections committed by the Sisters. Certainly (I smiled to myself), on seeing (v31) that because the *Rule* was so perfect, there ought not be any imperfections committed there.

What must we do when we see imperfection in Superiors as well as in others? Should we be surprised? You say that Sisters should not be appointed Superiors if they are imperfect. Oh, my dear Daughters, if we would want Sisters who are perfect appointed as Superiors, we would have to beg God to please send us some Saints or Angels for the job, for we will not find them among men or women! Certainly, we look for those who do not give bad example. But as to the reality of having no imperfections, we should not be concerned with that, provided they have the necessary human qualifications. Even if we could find the most perfect Sisters, they most probably would not make good Superiors. Tell me, my dear Daughters, didn't Our Lord himself do this when making Saint Peter the Superior of all the Apostles. Everybody knows that Saint Peter was the most imperfect of all the others, and in fact he gave evidence of it even after he was given such an awesome responsibility. How stupid he was at the time of his Master's Passion and Death (v32) by his foolish conversation with the servant girl and his disastrous denial of his beloved Savior who had done so much for him; he showed bravado and then he ran away. But beyond that, even after he was confirmed in grace by his receiving the Holy Spirit, he fell, and his fault was of such moment that Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians (n5) and told them that "he withstood" Saint Peter "to the face because he was blameworthy" (v33). So we among others should not be surprised that our Superiors commit faults, after seeing Saint Peter being blameworthy, especially since he had received the Holy Spirit. And not only Saint Peter but also Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas, who had a slight disagreement among themselves because Saint Barnabas wanted to take his cousin, John Mark, along with them as they would go about preaching the Gospel. Saint Paul was of the opposite opinion, not

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wanting to take him along. Saint Barnabas was not willing to give into Saint Paul's will, and so they separated. Saint Paul went off to one country. Saint Barnabas and John Mark went off to another country (n6). Our Lord drew good out of their disagreement, for instead of preaching only in one part of the world, they sowed the seed of the Gospel in many places.

We should never think that as long as we will be in this life that we can live without committing some imperfections, even venial sins. It is impossible (v34) whether we be Superiors or subjects, since we are all human. Thus, we need (v35) this insight so that we are not surprised at seeing ourselves subject to them.

Our Lord has commanded us to say these words that are in the *Our Father* every day: "Forgive us our sins" (n7). There is no exception to this command because all of us have to do it. It is, therefore, unreasonable to say that so and so is Superior and must be free from anger (v36) and other imperfections. The same can be said about a bishop who must be free from lying and vanity. Perhaps you are surprised on coming to speak to a Superior who says to you: "Oh dear," perhaps because her head is full of ideas about hammers, stones, and mortar owing to her concern to complete the work on the buildings. Whatever she said to you means nothing other than: "Oh, leave me in peace. I have enough other things to think about." She is not talking so much about things, but she is not thinking less of her. Your self-love, which is really upset, seems to say these words to itself: "My God, what a Superior! She has so little virtue that she can't stand it when you talk to her." Oh God! Instead of this kind of talk, you should better consider what your self-love is looking for: that the Superior call you, my dear Daughter, and stroke you a little while listening lovingly to what you came to talk to her about. In short we become very disturbed when we find mortifications where we were not looking for them. Alas! You should have gone away, praying to God for the Superior or praising God for this precious contradiction. In a word, my dear Daughters, we should remember these words of the great apostle Saint Paul: "Charity does not think evil" (n8). He does not say that charity doesn't see evil but that charity does not seek it out, i.e., that though there may be some doubt whether what she sees is not evil, she will not search further into it. She believes in all simplicity that there is no evil present. Saint Paul also wanted to say that when she does see it she turns away from it without thinking or delay on considering it (v38).

You also asked me whether the Superior should show her disapproval when the Sisters reveal their faults and what she ought to say when a Sister comes to her to accuse herself in all simplicity on some judgment or thought she has made that indicates imperfection in the Superior. How should she act if someone had thought that the Superior had given a correction in anger? What must she, the Superior, do in this case? I say that she should humble herself and turn to the love of such a humiliation. But if the Sister was somewhat troubled in telling it, the Superior must act as if nothing happened and turn her attention to something else, treasuring the humiliation in her heart. But she must take note of the detours that our-self love takes so as not to pay attention to the fact that we are imperfect and need to humble ourselves. Even if the Sister's external act of humility is done away with out of fear of hurting the poor Sister who is already upset enough about having such a thought, she cannot omit the interior act of humility. However, if the Sister, on the contrary, would not be the least bit upset on accusing herself, I think it would be quite good if the Superior would freely acknowledge that she has failed if it is true. But if the judgment is wrong, she should say so in all

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humility always cherishing, nevertheless, the humiliation brought on by her being thought to be in the wrong.

Do you see, this little virtue of loving our humiliation must never be one step farther away from our heart because we need it all the time, no matter how far we are advanced in perfection? As I have already said, we need it continually because our passions resurface sometimes after we have lived in religion for a long time and after making great progress in perfection. For instance, a religious of Saint Pachomius named Sylvanus, while in the world, was an actor and comedian by profession. After his conversion and his becoming a religious, he spent his year in the novitiate and several others in the practice of the most exemplary mortification without ever showing any recollection of his former profession. Twenty years later, he thought he could do some of his old tricks under the pretext of providing recreation for his Brothers. He thought that his passions were sufficiently mortified so that they would not have the power to get out of hand during a simple recreation. But the poor man was so deceived, for the passion of jesting awoke in such a way that, after the tricks, folly became license and it was determined that he should leave the monastery. This would have been done except for one of his Brothers in religion who gave a pledge (n9) for Sylvanus, promising that he would make amends. This happened and Sylvanus became a great Saint. (n10) My dear Sisters, we must never forget what we once were, so that we do not become worse, and we must never think that we are perfect because we (v39) do not commit serious faults.

We must take great care not to be surprised if we have some passions, for we will never be free (v40) from them as long as we are in this life. The hermits who wanted to put forth the contrary were censured by the sacred Council (of Ephesus) (n11) and their opinion was condemned and declared in error. We always commit some faults but we must try to make them so rare that there may be no more than two in fifty years, that being the number committed by the Apostles after they had received the Holy Spirit. Even if three or four, or seven or eight should happen in that period of time, we must not be upset or lose courage but take heart and strengthen ourselves to do better.

Now, one more word for the Superior. The Sisters ought not be surprised that the Superior commits imperfections, or even the Mistress of Novices, since Saint Peter, Universal Pastor as he was of Holy Church and Universal Superior of all Christians, even fell into a fault and a serious one that demanded correction, as Saint Paul says (n12). Likewise, Superiors ought not show astonishment when someone sees their faults. The novices might notice those of their Directress, while all the Sisters might notice those of Superiors. However, both ought to notice the gentleness and humility with which Saint Peter receives the correction that Saint Paul gives, notwithstanding the fact that Saint Peter was Saint Paul's Superior. It is hard to say what is to be admired the more, the strength of Saint Paul's courage in correcting Saint Peter or the humility with which Saint Peter accepts the correction that has been given to him, indeed for a matter in which he thought he was doing good and for which he had a very good intention. Now let us pass on.

You ask if it might happen that a Superior would have an excessive inclination to please persons in the world under the pretext of helping them while she neglects her responsibilities toward the Sisters who are in her care. Or again, she does not have enough time to take care of the needs of the community because she spends too much time in the parlor. You ask whether she should not be obliged to curb this inclination (v41) that she has to please people in the world even if her intention is

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good. I would say that Superiors are special persons who are given not only to help those within the community but also those outside of it. They must be exceedingly loving to people in the world in order to help them, and they ought to cheerfully give them some of their time. But you are wondering how much of their time? It ought to be one-twelfth of their time, with the other parts being used in the community for the care of her family.

Bees, in fact, leave their hive from time to time but only because of necessity or profit. They stay out only a short time. The queen bee leaves very rarely, only when the other bees are swarming, and then she is surrounded by her little subjects. Religious life, i.e., the congregation, is a mystical beehive full of heavenly bees who have come together in order (to gather) (v42) the honey of holy virtues. To do that the Superior, who is the queen bee for the community, should be careful to keep the community close to her so as to teach the members the way to acquire and preserve these virtues. With that in mind, she must not, however, fail to talk with people in the world when necessity or charity demands it (v43), e.g., with some lady of the world who wants to be converted and thus give up vanity in order to follow truth and the devout life. To achieve this, the lady would need the help of the Superior to give her much necessary advice and counsel. However, outside of necessity and charity, the Superior must be brief with people of the world. I say outside of necessity, because there are certain persons of importance who must not be offended (v44).

Moreover, with reference to this point that you have raised that the Superior stays in the parlor for a long time because of the need of gaining friends for the community. Oh, certainly! There is not as great a need for that as one might think. For, if she stays there to do good, which is her responsibility, she ought never doubt that Our Lord will give plenty of friends that are necessary for the community. She may be displeased to have to cut short a visit when she hears the bell for the Office, fearing to upset those with whom she is speaking in the parlor. She must not be so weak, for unless they are important people like those who only rarely visit or who come a distance, she must not be absent from the Office or prayer if charity does not absolutely require it. With reference to regular visits of people to whom an excuse can easily be given, (v45) they should be told that our Mother is at prayer or at the Office. They may want to wait or come back another time (v46). And make no mistake about it, if the Superior knows that she will miss the Office or community meditation, she should take the time later to say the Office and meditate when it is convenient for her. She must be very careful about not foregoing the time that the community spends at the Office and meditation for unnecessary things. And this should be a point of observance that not only the Superior but also all the Sisters should not fail to assist at the Office and meditation as far as possible. But if it should happen that a necessity arises, then time should be taken later for meditation, as far as this is possible. As for the Office, there is no doubt about our obligation to say it.

Now, with regards to this last question, whether there should always be some small distinctions made between the Superior on the one hand and the Sisters on the other in the matter of clothing and food that will be easily answered. For in a word, I tell you, there are none except if it comes from a need that might occur in the case of one of the Sisters (v47). You ask if she must have a special chair. Certainly not. It is not necessary except in the choir or in the Chapter room. The assistant must never sit in this chair even though in all other things one must show the same respect for her as for the Superior (in the Superior's absence). Likewise, in the refectory, there must not be

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any distinction with regards to her seat or other things. Even though she must be looked upon as a special person to whom particular respect is due, there ought not be anything to single her out or, at least, as little as possible. Necessity, however, always creates an exception: for instance, if she were very old, then it would be permissible to give her a special chair for relief. All things which might give the appearance of her being above the others must be carefully avoided. I mean what would be more notable or pre-eminent. The Superior must be recognized and distinguished by her virtues and not by any unnecessary distinctions, especially among you of the Visitation, who prefer in a special way a great simplicity (v48). Those honors are very well in religious communities where the Superior is called "Madame." With the Visitation, there is none of that.

Is there any more to be said? What must we do to preserve the spirit of the Visitation and prevent it from deteriorating? The only way is to hold on to it firmly and make it the basis of your observance of the *Rule*. But you say there are some who are extremely jealous of this spirit and do not want to share it with anyone outside the community? With that kind of jealousy, there is an excess which must be removed. I ask you, how could it be fitting to want to hide from your neighbors what might profit them? I do not hold such an opinion, for I want all that is good in the Visitation to be recognized and known by everyone. For that reason, I have always been of the opinion that it would be good to point out the *Rule* and the *Constitutions* so that many on seeing them in practice would derive benefit from them. Would to God, my dear Sisters, that many people might be found who would want to practice them, even men! (v49) We would soon see a great change in them which redounds to the glory of God and the salvation of their persons. Be very careful to preserve the spirit of the Visitation but not in such a way as to prevent your sharing it with your neighbor. Do it lovingly and with great simplicity with each person in accordance with her ability. Do not fear that this sharing will diminish it, for charity never injures anything but perfects all things.

May God Be Blessed!

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NOTES

1. The same anecdote is related in an impersonal way in the *Twelfth Conference, On Obedience*.
2. A work of the Spanish Jesuit, Francois Arias (1533-1605). It was part of a collection entitled *On Spiritual Progress*, Valencia, 1588. The various treatises were often published and translated separately.
3. *Treatise on Mortification*. cf. the preceding note.
4. The same anecdote is already mentioned in the *Sixth Conference, On Modesty*.
5. Gal. 2:2.
6. Acts 15:37-41.
7. Matt. 6:12.
8. 1 Cor. 13:5.
9. Guarantee.
10. *Lives of the Fathers*, Book I, "Life of Saint Pachomius," Chapter 38.
11. *Acts of the Council of Ephesus*, Part II, Act 8.
12. Gal. 2:2.

VARIANTS

1. E1629. *Sixteenth Conference, Treating Natural Dislikes, how we ought to receive books for reading and how we ought not be surprised on seeing imperfections in fellow religious and even in Superiors*.
E1933. *Seventeenth Conference, Given on Different Questions (On Natural Dislikes)*.
2. E1629. The beginning of the *Conference*: "I play...."
3. E1629. "...in the choir before people in the world like a barber, I do not cause pain?" Go to the sentence that begins ..."I only give perfumes..."

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4. E1629. "...that is why I am here. People in the world are not capable of it because of the mistaken idea they have conjured up that religious and those vowed to perfection ought not to have any imperfection. But for us here, my dear Daughters, we know well that this is impossible. This is why we have no fear of scandalizing each other by speaking frankly about our little weaknesses.
The first question is: "What is a natural dislike? Natural dislikes are certain feelings...":
Go down twenty-nine lines.
5. E1629. "...and not others. Isn't it seen when two men..."
6. E1629. "...it bleats, it hides under its mother's belly, but show it a horse."
7. E1629. "...their affections and friendships." Go down to the beginning of the next paragraph, which is introduced by the following: "What remedy is there for these dislikes because no one, no matter how perfect, is free from them. Those who..."
8. E1629. Go down to: "The only remedy...."
9. E1629. Go down to: "But the misfortune...."
10. E1629. "...self love which never sleeps."
11. E1629. "...and also to trick our mind. But we must fight and overcome them when we find them going too far and wanting beyond the bounds of reason, to depart from the submission that we must have to reason, which never permits us to do anything to foster our dislikes."
12. E1629. Skip the next paragraph, and the next one begins: "The second question is: How should we behave...?"
13. E1629. "The Superior will give one Sister a book which treats the virtues very well; but because she does not like..."
14. E1629. "...and the reason is that she already has it on her finger tips..."
15. E1629. "...desire that another book be given her to read. For I am saying that it is an imperfection to want..."
16. E1629. "...reading." Skip the next sentence. It picks up with: "If we read for profit..."
17. E1629. "...in reading it. All of this is childish. Should be given..."

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18. E1629. "His Goodness..."
19. E1629. "...first reading." Skip the next sentence. Pick up with: "But the evil..."
20. E1629. The text does not include the following paragraphs. It picks up with question five in the reconstructed text. However, in picking up there, it speaks of the material as question three.
21. Rouen Manuscript -- "pretending." We are correcting the manuscript according to the *Colloquies*.
22. E1629. "...perfect they may be. You will never be so perfect as not to do some of these from time to time in line with the things you will be doing. It is no..."
23. E1629. "...gentle and leading a faultless life. `When I am told..."
24. E1629. "...tried, either interiorly through temptations or exteriorly through the contradictions that happen to her. For the virtue of strength and the strength of virtue is not acquired..."
25. E1629. "...of its contrary." It then skips down two sentences and picks up with: "Those who..."
26. E1629. "...to the text."
27. E1629. "...which are their opposites..." It then skips to the beginning of the next paragraph.
28. Rouen Manuscript. "...they will not be so incapable." We correct the text according to the *Colloquies*.
29. E1629. "...are not to amass numbers."
30. E1629. "...the courage to aim for perfection." It then picks up with the beginning of the next paragraph with the words: "But what should be done if imperfection is seen..."
31. E1629. Rouen Manuscript. "I inquired about the total goodness on seeing..." We correct the text according to the *Colloquies*.
32. E1629. "...for everyone knows what fault this Apostle committed at the Death..."
33. E1629. "...blameworthy." It skips the next sentence and picks up with: "Not only..."

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34. E1629. "...without committing some imperfections. It then omits even venial sins." And picks up with: "It is possible..."
35. E1629. "...need to believe this truth as very certain so that we are not surprised at seeing ourselves subject to imperfections. Our Lord..."
36. E1629. "...anger and does not have any other imperfections. You are surprised when you come to speak to the Superior that she speaks less kindly than usual because she perhaps has her head full of business and other matters. Your self-love goes away wholly upset instead of thinking that God has allowed this little bitterness by the Superior to mortify your love, which wants the Superior to show you some small sign of affection on receiving in a friendly way what you want to say. But in short..."
37. E1629. "...thinks no evil." It then picks up one sentence down with the words, "wants to say..."
38. E1629. "Touching on this point, you go on to ask if the Superior or the Directress should manifest..."
39. E1629. "...we do not commit any imperfections."
40. E1629. "...free...." It picks up with the beginning of the next sentence, "These hermits..."
41. E1629. "...curb this inclination even though her intention is a good one? I will tell you on that the Superior ought to be greatly affable toward people in the world..."
42. Rouen Manuscript. "...to feed." We correct this in accordance with the *Colloquies*.
43. E1629. "...when necessity or charity demand it." The example given by Saint Francis de Sales is not found here. The text resumes with the next sentence, "But outside of that, the Superior must..."
44. E1629. "...offended. But men and women religious must never waste time with people of the world under the pretext of gaining some friends for their community. Certainly, there is no need for that, for if they remain within the community carrying out their responsibilities, they need not doubt that Our Lord will provide the community with enough needed friends." The text then resumes, "She may be displeased to have to cut short..."
45. E1629. "...be given. The Portress must tell them that Mother or the Sisters are at prayer or the Office..."

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46. E1629. "...come back another time." The text then jumps down three sentences and resumes with: "But if it should happen..."
47. E1629. "...to one of the Sisters. Likewise, she must not have a special chair unless it be in the choir." It resumes with, "or in the Chapter room..."
48. E1629. "...simplicity and humility. These honors..."
49. E1629. "...would want to practice them. We would see..."