

THE THIRTEENTH CONFERENCE

On the Subject of the Intention (n1) That We Ought to Have on Entering Religious Life (v1)

My dear Daughters, the subject that Mother has asked me to talk about centers on the intention that we ought to have on entering religious life. It is the most important, necessary and profitable question that could be raised.

My dear Daughters, many come to religious life without knowing why. They come to the enclosure or to the parlor and they see nuns with peaceful faces, apparently healthy, reserved and very content, in accord with their way of thinking. Suddenly, they think to themselves: "My God, such a happy place! I will go there. The world is frowning on me; besides, my desires are not fulfilled in the world." Another will say: "My God! How well they sing there! It is so beautiful to sing well." They decide to come there so that their beautiful voices will be heard. Perhaps, if they would stay at home, they might sing in a place where no one would hear them and could care less if they sang well or not. But it seems to them that everyone would hear and notice them in the choir. Others come to religious life to find and experience great peace, consolation and every kind of satisfaction and interior delight. They say to themselves (v2), "My God, how happy these Sisters are! They have left behind the authoritarianism of their fathers and mothers who do nothing but complain. Anything we do doesn't satisfy them. One is always starting over again with such parents. Our Lord promises those who leave the world for his service an abundance of consolations. Let us, then, enter religious life!"

My dear Daughters, these kinds of intentions are scarcely good reasons for entering a religious community which is truly the house of God. God is the one who must build the town or city (n2); otherwise, even though the city might be built, it will collapse in ruins. I sincerely believe, my dear Daughters, that your intentions were totally different and, therefore, you have done it with an open heart and God will bless you (v3).

I have thought of two comparisons to help you understand on what and how your intention must be based so as to be a lasting one. However, I will content myself with explaining only one, which will be sufficient. Take the case of an architect who wants to build a house. He does two things: first, he considers whether his building is intended to be used by some private individual or a prince or a king. This will determine how he will proceed. Then he carefully calculates if his means are sufficient (n3) to do it. For if he wanted to build a high tower and did not have the materials necessary for it, he would be ridiculed for having begun something which he could not finish to his credit (n4). Then, he also has to decide how to destroy the old building which stands on the place where he wants to build the new one.

My dear Daughters, we want to build a (v4) strong building in our spirit, which is the dwelling place of God and which makes us living temples. Thus, we must consider in a mature way if we have sufficient strength and resolution to crucify and put to death our old selves or, rather, to allow God himself to put our old selves to death and crucify us so that he can rebuild us into the living temple of his Divine Majesty (n5). I am telling you, my dear Daughters, that our only intention must be to be united with God as Jesus Christ Our Lord is united to God the Father, which was fully realized in his

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dying on the Cross. I am not talking about the general type of union that comes into existence at Baptism, where Christians are united to God by receiving the (v5) divine seal of Christianity, which obliges them to keep the Commandments of God and of the Church, to do good works, to put into practice the virtues of faith, hope and charity. These will deepen this union and enable them to lay claim to Paradise (v6), where they will be united by such means to the Sovereign Goodness who is their God. They are not bound to do more inasmuch as they have reached their goal, which is to be united to God through the general and universal path of the Commandments of God that are truly observed.

But, my dear Daughters, this is not the way for you. In addition to this common obligation that we have by being Christians, God (v7) has chosen you to be his spouses. We must know the means and the necessary dispositions to be a religious. Furthermore, we must know what it means to be a religious. It means being bound to God through the continual mortification of ourselves and living only for God: our hearts always serving the Divine Majesty, our eyes, our speech, our hands and all the members of our body continually serving him without reserve. Religious life offers all of us the means to accomplish this. These means are prayer, spiritual reading (v8), silence, spiritual retirements, continual aspirations to Our Lord. We can only achieve this by the continual practice of mortifying all of our passions, inclinations, temperaments and natural dislikes. We are, then, obliged to watch over ourselves continually so as to put all of these to death. My Daughters, remember that "if the grain of wheat falling to the earth does not die, it remains only a grain of wheat, but if it dies it will bring forth fruit a hundred fold" (n6). These holy words of Our Lord are abundantly clear, having come from his sacred lips. Consequently, my dear Daughters, you who want to take the habit (v9) and all of you novices who want to make your holy profession, take a good look at yourselves from time to time to see if you are sufficiently resolved (v10) to die to yourselves. Consider the whole matter thoroughly. There is still plenty of time to consider it before your veils are dyed black. I am telling you very plainly that if you want to live according to your nature (I do not intend to flatter you), then you must live in the world. Those who are determined to live the life of grace should come and become a part of the community, which is nothing other than a school of mortification and renunciation of self (n7). Religious life, then, offers you several ways of dying to self, both interiorly and exteriorly.

But, My God! You will tell me that is not what you are looking for. I thought that it would be sufficient to be a good religious if I would have a desire to pray well, to have visions and revelations, to see Angels in human form, to be ravished by ecstasies, to enjoy reading good books. What? I was so virtuous, so mortified in the world and so humble that everyone admired me. Wasn't it being very humble and virtuous to speak very gently to my friends about devotional matters, repeating sermons, and when at home dealing very gently with all members of the household, especially when they would not contradict me? Certainly, my dear Daughters, that is good for the world, but religious life requires that we ought to do things worthy of one's vocation (n8); i.e., to die to self in everything, both with reference to what is good in our opinion as well as with things that are bad and useless. Do you think that the desert Fathers who achieved such great union with God attained it by following their own desires? Certainly not. They mortified themselves in the most holy of things and even though they enjoyed singing sacred canticles (v11), they would never do these things to satisfy themselves.

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No, on the contrary, they willingly deprived themselves of these pleasures, though good and permissible, so as to dedicate themselves to some painful and laborious works (v12). Oh! No! My dear Daughters, when your *Rule* (n9) says that you will ask for books at a certain time, it does not mean by that that you can ask for those you like best. No, that is not the intention, and still less for other exercises. A Sister feels, it seems to her, greatly drawn to pray, to say the Office, to be in retreat, and she is told: "My Sister, go to the kitchen or do such and such a thing." Doesn't this seem to you to be bad news for a Sister who is being devout?

I always come back, my dear Daughters, to what I have said so often: we must die so that God may live in us (n10), for it is impossible to attain union with God by any other means than mortification. These words, "You must die," are very hard but they are followed by an abounding gentleness, "that you may be united to God by this death." You ought to know that "no wise person puts new wine in an old wineskin" (n11). The wine of divine love cannot enter where the first Adam rules; we must destroy the "old man." How do we do it? (v13) How, my dear Daughter? By the exact observance of your *Constitutions*. I so want to assure you from God's part that if you are faithful in doing what you are taught, you undoubtedly will attain the goal that you ought to be intending, which is union with God. Pay attention to what I say that you must do, for no one reaches perfection simply by folding one's arms. We must knowingly work to overcome our very selves and to live according to our reason the *Rule* and obedience and not according to the inclinations that we have brought from the world. Religious life does indeed tolerate the bad habits, the passions, and inclinations we bring, but not your continuing to live in line with them. Religious life offers you the *Rule*, which is to act on your heart like a press so that you can leave behind everything that is opposed to God. Live it courageously (v14) and you will be blessed.

But, one of you will say, "What shall I do? I don't have the spirit of the *Rule* at all." Certainly, my dear Daughter, I can easily believe it, for it is not something that you bring from the world to religious life. I will say even further: while in Paris where all kinds of things happen that do not happen in any other city of the world, and especially near the palace, I noticed that lightly-scented gloves (n12), plumes of feathers, sheathes and other niceties are sold. But I have never seen the spirit of our *Rule* (v15) as well as those of other religious communities for sale. This is why I say to you, my dear Daughters, that the spirit of the *Rule* is only obtained by practicing the *Rule* faithfully. I say this with reference to humility and gentleness, which are the roots of our congregation. God will give them to us without fail provided that we have an open heart (n13) and do everything possible to acquire them. How happy you will be if fifteen minutes before you die you find yourselves dressed in the robe of these two virtues. Our whole life will be well spent if we take the time to stitch now one piece, then another to it. This holy garment is not made of one piece only. There must be many pieces to it; i.e., many acts (v16) of these virtues done over and over again.

You have told me, Mother, that our Sisters have good will but lack the strength to do what they should be doing and that they experience their passions so strongly that they fear beginning the journey. Courage, my dear Daughters! I have told you many times that religious life is a school where you learn your lessons. The teacher does not always require the student to know her lesson perfectly; it suffices that you pay attention to doing everything possible to learn it. Do what you can. God and also your Superior will be satisfied. Haven't you ever seen those who are learning to fence?

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They fall very often; the same pertains to those who are learning to ride. They are not considered to be beaten, for it is one thing to fall down sometimes and quite another to be absolutely defeated. Your passions sometimes get the upper hand and because of that you will say, "I am not fit for religious life because I have passions." No, my dear Daughters, that isn't so! Religious life does not consider it a great triumph in itself to fashion a gentle and peaceful spirit, but in itself it does consider it a great triumph when it brings persons strongly steeped in their inclinations back to virtue. These persons, if they are faithful, will surpass the others (v17), winning by the point of the sword what others possess without any difficulty.

No one demands that you have no passions. That is not within your power, and God wills that you should be aware of them even until your death for your greater merit. Nor is it even required that they be weakened, for that would mean that a person who has bad habits cannot be fit for God's service. The world is mistaken on this point, for God rejects nothing in which ill-will is not found. Tell me, I ask you, how can a person help being of such and such a temperament or subject to such and such a passion? The whole point, then, is found in the acts we do through their movement which depend on our will. Sin is so dependent on our will that without its consent there can be no sin. Think about the situation in which anger overpowers me. I would say to the anger: "Come, come back again, come as often as you want. I will do nothing to encourage you, I will not say a single word when I am conscious of your presence within me." God has left us this power; otherwise, in asking us to seek perfection he would be giving us an obligation impossible for us to fulfill. That would be an injustice which can never exist in God.

A thought has occurred to me while speaking on this subject. I am going to tell you a short story which is to the point (n14). When Moses went down the mountain on which he had come to talk with God, he saw the people adoring a golden calf that had been struck during his absence. Filled (n15) with just rage and zeal for the glory of God, he spoke to his brother Aaron while turning toward the Levites: "If anyone is on the side of God, let him take a sword and kill everyone who will come near it, sparing neither father nor mother, sisters or brothers. Let them be put to death." The Levites then took swords and the bravest Levite was the one who killed the most (n16). Likewise, my dear Daughters, take the sword of mortification to destroy and put your passions to death. The Sister who has the most to destroy will be the bravest, provided she wants to cooperate with grace. These two young women who are here before me (n17), one but fifteen years old and the other sixteen, have little to put to death, for their spirits have not yet matured. But the older Sisters, who have experienced many things and have enjoyed the sweetnesses of Paradise, are the ones who are to overcome and put to death their passions.

Mother, with reference to those whom you say have such a great desire for perfection that they want to surpass everyone else in virtue, they do in fact satisfy somewhat their own self-love through their overpowering desires. They would do better to follow the community in keeping the *Rule*, for that is the way that leads to God. You are very happy, my dear Daughters, more than the rest of us who are in the world. For when we search for the way, one person tells us: "It is to the right," and another: "It is to the left," and in the end very often we are misguided; but as for you, you have only to allow yourselves to be carried along. You are like those who travel by sea. The ship carries them and they remain on board without a care (n18) in the world. While they are resting they

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are still moving along and have no need to ask if they are on the right track. That is the responsibility of the sailors who, while keeping their eyes always on the North Star (v18), know that they are on the right course and say so to all on board. Have courage, you are on the right course.

Fearlessly follow the North Star and divine compass, my dear Daughters, for they are Our Lord; the ship is our *Rule*. Those who guide it and are the sailors are our Superiors, who usually and very often say: "Let us proceed, my dear Sisters, by the exact observance of the *Rule* and *Constitutions* and you will come most happily to God." They will lead you on the most proven way. But take note, I am telling you: Proceed by an exact and faithful observance, for Solomon tells us that "the person who neglects his way shall die" (n19) (v19).

If you do what you are taught, my dear Daughters, you will be very happy, you will live contentedly, and will experience in this life at least some small foretaste of the rewards of Paradise. But take note that if you receive some inward taste and kiss from Our Lord, do not become attached to them. It is like a bit of licorice that the heavenly pharmacist (v20) puts into the bitter medicine of mortification that you must swallow to become healthy. Even though the patient takes these sweet grains from the hand of the pharmacist, she must of necessity experience afterwards all the bitterness of such purification.

Thus, you see clearly what your intention ought to be to become worthy spouses of Our Lord and to be wed to him on Calvary. Live your whole life and do all of your actions in accord with it and God will bless you. All your happiness depends on perseverance, my dear Daughters. This is why I exhort you to this, from the bottom of my heart, and ask the Divine Goodness to fill you with his grace and divine love in this life and to make (v21) all of us sharers in his glory in the next. Amen (v22)!

Mother (v23), I have already answered your question elsewhere; i.e., whether a Sister ought to ask permission to receive communion more often and do more mortification than the community does. If I were a religious, I think that I would not ask for things that would single me out: to receive communion, to wear a hairshirt or an iron girdle, to perform extraordinary fasts, to take the discipline, or anything else. I should be satisfied to follow the community in everything. If I were in strong health, I would not eat four times a day, but if I should be told to do it, I would do it and say nothing. If, on the other hand, I was weak and told to eat only once a day, I would eat only once a day without worrying whether I am weak or strong. I desire a few things; what I do desire (v24), I desire for God. I have very few desires, but if I were born again I would have or would wish to have none at all (v25). If God came to me giving me the sensible awareness of his presence, I would then go to him accepting and communing with his grace. But if he should not come to me, I would remain where I was and would not go to him. I mean I would not seek to have these sensible experiences of his presence. I would be satisfied with the simple awareness of him through faith alone.

May God be Praised!

NOTES

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1. Goal.
2. Ps. 126:1.
3. sufficient.
4. Lk. 14:28-30.
5. cf. ICor. 3:16,17; Eph. 2:21,22.
6. Jn. 12:24-25.
7. *Constitution 44, Oeuvres XXV, 113.*
8. Eph. 4:1.
9. Chapter 18, *Oeuvres XXV, 42.*
10. Gal. 2:20.
11. Matt. 9:17.
12. perfumed gloves.
13. courage.
14. satisfies you.
15. seized.
16. Ex. 32:26-28.
17. According to the Book of the Novitiate of the 1st Monastery of the Visitation of Paris, where this conference was given, the two young persons must be Sister Mary Catherine Camus and Sister Helene-Marie Grison, who received the religious habit on November 25, 1619. The first was fifteen years old, while the second was sixteen and three quarters years old.
18. care.
19. Prov. 19:16.

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VARIANTS

1. E1629. *The Twentieth Conference, in which it is asked what our goal should be on entering religious life.*
E1933. *The Twenty-First Conference, On the Subject of the Intention we ought to have on entering religious life.*
2. E1629. "Oh! How perfectly they sing here! Others come to find peace, consolation and all kinds of sweetnesses, saying in their thought..."
3. E1629. "... and that God will bless this little flock in its first beginning."
4. E1629. "... which is to build within ourselves the dwelling- place of God."
5. E1629. "... the divine sacrament and character."
6. E1629. "Those who have united themselves by this means to God as their God, they are not bound to do more. They have attained their goal through the general and universal way of the commandments."
7. E1629. "God by a very special love has chosen you..."
8. E1629. "... silence, the withdrawal of one's heart to rest in God alone, and constant aspirations to Our Lord..."
9. E1629. "... intend to take the habit and you who intend to make your holy profession..."
10. E1629. "...to die to yourselves and live only for God. Consider well..."
11. E1629. "... canticles, in reading, praying and so on, they never did these things for..."
12. E1629. "It is indeed very true that religious receive a thousand sweetnesses and satisfactions amidst the mortification and the works of religious life, for it is chiefly in them that the Holy Spirit distributes his special gifts. But they still must seek in it God alone and the mortification of their temperaments, passions and inclinations in holy religion. If they search for anything else, they will never find the consolation that they seek. But we must have an unconquerable courage so as not to grow weary of ourselves because we will always have something to do and to renounce. The work of religious ought to be to cultivate their spirit so as to root out all the bad growths which spring from our fallen nature so freely that we continually begin this work all over again. And just as the worker must not grumble if he does

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not reap a good harvest, because he is not blamed as long as he has done his best to cultivate and sow the land well. So also the religious is not to be blamed if she does not receive at once all the fruits of perfection and the virtues provided that she has cultivated the soil of her heart with great faithfulness by rooting out all that she perceives to be contrary to the perfection toward which she is bound to aim because we are perfectly healed only when we are in Paradise."

13. E1629. "But, tell me, how to destroy him?"
14. E1629. The remaining phrase is not part of this text.
15. E1629. The text omits the first part of the sentence and resumes with "... the spirit of the *Rule*."
16. E1629. "You think, perhaps, that perfection must be found immediately and that we have nothing to do but put it over our head like any other dress. No, no, my dear Daughters, no, this is not the way it happens."
"You are saying, Mother, that our Postulants are full of good will..."
17. E1629 "...winning by the point of the spirit what..."
18. E1629. "... star, the guide for sailing, know..."
19. E1629. "You are saying, Mother, that our Sisters say it is all well and good according to the *Rule*, but it is a general way. God draws us by special attractions, each has her own special one, we are not all drawn on the same path. They are right in saying this and it is perfectly true. But it is also true that if this attraction comes from God, he will undoubtedly lead them by obedience. It is not for us who are subjects to decide about our special attractions. This is the responsibility of Superiors and for that, individual direction is prescribed. Be faithful then, and you will reap a harvest of blessings. The text then resumes with: If you do..."
20. E1629. "... that the pharmacist sometimes mixes with the bitter potion for the patient. The bitter medicine must be swallowed for health's sake and even though the patient..."
21. E1629. The End of the *Twentieth Conference*. "...May all of us enjoy his glory. Goodbye, my dear Daughters, I bear all of you in my heart. To recommend myself to your prayers would be superfluous. For I believe that your piety never fails me in this respect. Everyday I will send you my blessing from the altar, and now receive it in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit."

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22. This last paragraph constitutes with its variants the beginning of the *Twenty-First Conference* in the 1629 edition on the topic of ask for nothing and refuse nothing. The text of the *Twenty-First Conference* of the 1629 edition was composed (with the exception of the 1st paragraph) from the fragments of the *Last Conference* given at Lyons in 1622 and from two sermons. We have suppressed this in our edition so as to give the authentic text (cf. The *Last Conference*, paragraph one and Variant 1)
23. E1629. The beginning of the *Twenty-First Conference*: "Mother, I was speaking one day to a very fine religious woman who asked me whether one could ask the Superior for permission because she has the desire of receiving Communion more often than the community does. I told her that if I were a religious, I would think over whether I should do this. I would not ask to communicate more often than the community does. I would not ask her to wear a hair shirt..."
24. E1629. "...what I do desire I desire hardly at all..."
25. E1629. The end of the first paragraph. "I would have none at all. If God would come to me, I would also go to him. If he did not want to come to me, I would remain where I was and would not go to him..."