

## Live + Jesus

### THE FIRST CONFERENCE

#### **In which the Obligation of the Constitutions of the Visitation of Holy Mary is discussed and the spirit of devotion that the Religious of the above said Order ought to possess (v1)**

The *Rule* and *Constitutions* in and of themselves do not oblige under any pain of sin whether mortal or venial. They are given only for the direction and guidance of members of the congregation. But more especially so, if anyone would break them knowingly or willingly or with contempt or so as to scandalize the other Sisters and outsiders, she would, in fact, commit a serious fault. No one can think of herself without fault who happens to disregard the things of God, denies her profession, upsets the good order of the Congregation or disowns and squanders the spiritual realities of good example and devotion that she ought to offer to her neighbor. If such an attitude of contempt would exist, one could expect some type of heavenly punishment and, more particularly, the loss of the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are usually taken away from those who abandon their good intentions and leave the way in which God has placed them. We can recognize contempt for the *Rule* and *Constitutions*, and this holds for all good works, in the following ways:

Anyone who acts through contempt breaks or stops fulfilling some command not only knowingly but also willfully. It is quite another thing to break a rule through thoughtlessness, or forgetfulness or the sudden emergence of some passion (v2). For example, it is forbidden to go outside without permission. But say the Sister who is in charge of the door goes outside inadvertently, not thinking because of what she is doing, or better, she is surprised because she sees her father or mother approaching the monastery. This would not be breaking the *Rule* through contempt. Contempt demands in itself a deliberate act of the will and the person is determined to do what she does on purpose. It follows then that anyone who breaks a rule or disobeys through contempt not only disobeys but wants to disobey. Not only do they disobey but they do it in a spirit of disobedience and with the intention of disobeying. Take another example: you are not allowed to eat between meals. A young Sister eats pears, apricots or similar fruit. She breaks the *Rule* and acts disobediently. But what if she eats them surprised by the momentary pleasure that she thinks she will receive from the fruit? She disobeys not through a spirit of disobedience but more in the spirit of a glutton. But what if she eats because she doesn't think the rule important and doesn't want to be bound by it and submit to it? (v3) Then she would disobey through contempt and a spirit of disobedience.

Furthermore, those who disobey through some momentary pleasure or surprise of passion would prefer to satisfy a momentary pleasure without disobeying, and while at the same time they take pleasure, for example, in eating, they are sorry to do it through disobedience. Those who disobey in a spirit of disobedience and contempt are not sorry about disobeying. On the contrary, they are pleased to disobey. In the one example, the disobedience (v4) follows or accompanies the actions; in the other, the spirit of disobedience precedes the work and becomes the cause and motive even though the act is one of gluttony. Anyone who eats, thus breaking the *Rule*, whether it be after or during the time the command would be in effect, is disobedient because if they could avoid being disobedient, while so eating, they would like not to act disobediently. It is like someone drinking too

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much; the person does not want to become drunk, even though by drinking they do become drunk. Those who eat with disregard for the *Rule* and in a spirit of disobedience want to be disobedient. They would not act nor would they want to do it if they were not moved to do so by an act of the will bent on disobeying. One person then disobeys desiring something that obedience does not allow, another disobeys wanting the same thing because obedience precisely does not allow it. One becomes disobedient in what is desired and wishes that there would be no disobedience; while the other becomes disobedient and only wants the thing with the intention of being disobedient there. The one says I disobey because I want to eat these apricots that I am not supposed to eat without disobeying. The other says I eat because I want to disobey and I will disobey in eating them. The disobedience and fault follow in the first example. They are the basis of what happens in the second.

This formal disobedience and this disregard for good and holy things is never without some sin, at least venial sin, not even in matters that are only counsel. For just as one Sister, by not following out the things advised because of other choices, does not do so without sinning, so more importantly another Sister cannot do the same through contempt or disregard without sin. However, we are not bound to do every good thing but are bound to esteem and honor them and, consequently, not to disregard and disparage them in the least.

Furthermore, (v5) it follows that anyone who breaks the *Rule* through contempt or thinks it contemptible or useless, such a one suffers from a very great presumption and arrogance. If someone believes it is useful but does not want to submit to it, its purpose is destroyed with reference to the neighbor who receives scandal and bad example. Such a person contradicts the promise made to the community and to society and puts a community alive with devotion into disarray. These are very serious faults (v6).

There are some signs that may help a person to be able to discern when a person breaks the *Rule* or obedience through contempt or scorn:

1. Upon being corrected, the Sister mocks and does not repent.
2. The person continues on without any amendment (v7) nor will to amend;
3. The person contends that the rule or command is unsuitable;
4. The person tries to draw others into the same violation (n1) of the *Rule* and rids them of the fear of such a violation, saying that it is nothing, there is no danger.

However, the signs are not always so clear. Sometimes they happen for other reasons than contempt. It can happen that a person mocks the one who corrects her from the fear arising from the seemingly low esteem which that person has of her. Sometimes a person continues in the fault through weakness and is testy because of resentment and anger. Sometimes she leads others astray so as to have company and excuses for her wrongdoing. Nevertheless, it is easy to judge the circumstances when it is done through contempt. Finally, arrogance and a manifest lax spirit (n2) flow ordinarily from contempt. Those who have it in their heart will ultimately speak it with their lips (v8).

I must add a word about a temptation that can arise on this point. Sometimes a person will not think it being disobedient and irreligious if they have contempt only for one or two rules which seem to them of little importance, since they observe all the others. What a delusion! What seems of little importance to one will be of great importance to another. There will be no order in a

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community if one will not respect one rule and a second will disregard another and a third another. When the human spirit is directed only by its inclinations and natural dislikes, what will result is perpetual infidelity and a variety of faults. How happy I was today that silence didn't bother me, but a temptation might suggest that it was useless; tomorrow I might be sad and the temptation might arise that recreation is even useless. Today, I was so full of consolation, the chanting of the Office was delightful. Tomorrow, I am bereft of any consolation, it will displease me and so on.

Moreover, whoever wants to be happy and live perfectly must learn to live the *Rule* and obedience reasonably and not according to whims or dislikes. The good religious holds all the points in esteem and honors and cherishes them at least in the higher part of one's will. If anyone despises one now, tomorrow it will be another, and the next day still another, and in no time the chain of acting responsibly disappears. All that was once joined in a unity is scattered and lost little by little.

God forbid that any Daughter of the Visitation would stray so far on the way to the love of God! God forbid that any Sister of the Visitation would allow herself to have such a contempt of the *Rule* through a spirit of disobedience, a hardness and stubbornness of heart! What greater harm could happen to her, since there are so few rules particular and proper to the Congregation. Practically all of these rules are of such a nature that either they would have had to live by them in their own homes if they wanted to have some self-respect, a good reputation and fear of the Lord. Many deal with the responsibilities and the good order of the religious community.

If at times some dislike for or repugnance for the *Constitutions* and *Rule* of the Congregation should arise, the Sisters shall act like they would in the face of other temptations, correcting the dislike with reason, consideration and resolution in the superior part of their human spirit. They should be mindful that God will send consolations their way and will help them see (like Jacob when he was tired and worn out on his journey) (n3) that the *Rule* and the way of life they have undertaken are the true ladder on which they ought to climb like Angels to God through charity and descend into themselves in humility.

But if, without forethought, it should happen that a Sister would break the *Rule* through weakness, she will humble herself before the Lord, ask him for forgiveness and renew their resolution to observe this very *Rule*. She will be especially careful not to be discouraged and depressed. So with a renewed trust in God, she will have recourse to his holy love.

With regards to violations of the *Rule*, which are not done in a spirit of disobedience or contempt, if they are done through thoughtlessness, weakness, temptation or negligence, the Sister should and ought to confess it as a venial sin. The same would hold in the case of things where there can be sin. Although there might not be any kind of sin in light of the obligation of the *Rule*, there can be, nevertheless, a reason for the negligence, thoughtlessness, or haste or other similar faults. It seldom happens that, on seeing some good that will help us grow and, moreover, being actually asked and called upon to do it, we could act out of negligence or misguided affection or lack of fervor. If we ought to give an account of our idle words (n4), how much more of an obligation do we have when we silence the invitation that the *Rule* calls us to in its practice?

However, I have said that it rarely happens that we do not offend God when we willfully omit doing something necessary for our spiritual growth. It can happen that we do not omit it willfully but through forgetfulness, inadvertence and surprise. There would be no sin then, great or small, unless

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the thing we forget and that surprises us would be of such great importance that we would be obliged to be on our guard so as not to be forgetful or thoughtless. If, for example, a Sister breaks silence because she is not paying attention that it is silence time and, thus, she does not remember that it is because she is thinking of other things; or if she is surprised by a desire to speak and before she has had time to think of repressing it, she would have said something, undoubtedly she does not sin. The observance of silence is not of such great importance that a Sister would be obliged to be so attentive that she could not forget it. However, it is a very good thing to occupy our minds with other holy and pious thoughts. If, however, while focusing on them, silence is forgotten, this forgetfulness, coming from so good a cause, cannot be so bad. The same would apply to the breaking of the silence that accompanies it.

But if a Sister would forget to serve a sick Sister who needs help and who depends on her and would be in danger without her, it would not be a good excuse to say: (v9) "I didn't think about it; it just slipped my mind." No, the thing was of such great importance that she was bound to be attentive without fail. The lack of attention is inexcusable, particularly considering the seriousness of the situation.

We must believe that in the measure that divine love grows in the persons of the Daughters of our Congregation, they will be more exact and careful in observing their Constitutions, which in and of themselves do not bind under pain of mortal or venial sin. If they were binding under pain of death (v10), how strictly would they be observed? The Canticle of Canticles sings, "Love is strong as death (n5) and zeal as strong and firm as hell" (n6,v11). Human spirits on fire with zeal will do more in virtue of their zeal than those who do things for fear of hell. The Daughters of the Congregation through the gentle violence of love will observe more exactly their *Rule* with God's help than if they were obliged under the pain of eternal damnation.

In a word, they will always remember what Solomon said: "One who keeps the commandments watches over one's spirit. One who neglects the way of God will die" (n7). Your way is the life in which God has placed you.

Let the Sisters make a special profession of filling their hearts with an interior, strong and generous spirit of devotion! I use the word interior because their wills should be conformed to their good external actions whether great or small. Nothing should be done through routine but through clear choice and use of the will. If sometimes the exterior action occurs before the interior action through force of habit, at least let the affection closely follow it. If before I bow to my Superior, I have not made an inward bow through a humble choice of submitting to her, at least let this choice closely follow the exterior bow. The Daughters of the Visitation have very few rules for the exterior, few austerities, few ceremonies, few offices. Let them form their hearts willingly and lovingly on these few. Let their exterior acts be born from the interior acts. Let them nourish the interior through the exterior. Fire produces ashes and ashes feed the fire.

This spirit of devotion must also be: Strong to support them in temptations which are never lacking to those who want to serve God with their whole heart; Strong to support the diversity of human spirits which are found in the Congregation, which is a great test (n8) for the weaker spirits that can be present there; Strong in supporting each Sister with her own imperfections so that she might not be depressed on finding them within herself; Strong in overcoming these imperfections,

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for just as it is necessary to have a strong humility in order not to lose courage but to increase our confidence in God amid our weaknesses, so it is necessary to have a powerful courage to undertake the correction and amendment of them; Strong to scorn the words and judgments of those in the world who never stop opposing pious institutes especially in the beginning; Strong enough to maintain an independence from particular friendships and affections so as not to live by them but according to the way of true piety; Strong to maintain an independence from the many forms of kindness, gentility and consolations that come from God and human persons so as not to be attached to them (v12).

Finally, a Daughter of the Visitation should be generous so as not to be overcome by difficulties but to increase her courage through difficulties. Saint Bernard says that a person is not very brave whose heart has not experienced troubles and contradictions. One must be generous to aim for the heights of Christian perfection amidst all the imperfections and weaknesses (n9). She must rest in perfect confidence in the divine mercy in imitation of the lover who said to her Beloved: "Draw me and I will run after you in the sweet odor of your perfumes" (n10). It is as if she wants to say, "Of myself I cannot move, but if you draw me, I will run." Our divine Lord often allows us to be caught up in our own troubles so that we might know that our freedom comes from him and that when this happens, we hold it closely as a precious gift of his goodness. This is why a generous spirit of devotion never stops crying out to God: "Draw me" and never stops speaking out, hoping and resolving courageously to run and say, "We will run after you." We should not be displeased if we do not run at once after our Savior, as long as we say daily: "Draw me," and have the courage to add: "We will run." For even though we are not running, suffice it to say that with God's help, "We will run." This congregation, no more than other religious orders, is not a community of the perfect but rather a community that aims to become perfected; not a community of persons who run but a community of those who aim to run, a community of those who begin to walk with small steps, then increase the pace, then half-run and finally run.

This spirit of generous devotion scorns nothing and allows us, without upset or anxiety, to watch one another walk, run and fly in so many ways according to the diversity of inspirations and the variety of divine graces that each one receives. Saint Paul the Apostle gives us the following advice in the Letter to the Romans. (He says:) "One person believes that he can eat everything; another who is infirm eats vegetables. The former who eats everything should not scorn the latter who cannot, and the latter who cannot eat everything ought not pass judgment on the former who can. Let each one have this mind. The former who eats, eats in Our Lord and the latter who does not, does not eat in Our Lord. But both ought to give thanks to God" (n11).

The *Rule* does not demand that a Sister confess her faults if she does not want to. It could happen that several Sisters will find it acceptable to confess them and others may not wish to do so. Those who will confess them should not scorn those who don't, and those who will not should not scorn those who will confess them. Likewise, it is not required that one must take the discipline; however, it could happen that some will find it useful to take it and others will not want to bear it. There are not many required fasts. It might happen that some will fast more through obedience (n12). Those who will fast should not look askance at those who eat and those who eat should not scorn those who fast. Nevertheless, in all things that are not commanded or forbidden, let each Sister

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abound in good common sense. Let each Sister enjoy and use her freedom without judging or criticizing the others who do not act as she does and without trying to persuade them that her way is better. One Sister can eat with the same or greater renunciation of her own will than if she would fast and another might not wish to confess her fault in the same spirit of renunciation as one who will.

A spirit of generous devotion does not want to have companions in all that it accomplishes, only in its goal, which is the glory of God and the growth of our neighbor in the love of God. And as long as a Sister advances toward this goal straightforwardly, another Sister ought not care what way it is. If you do fast, fast for God; those who do not fast, let it also be for God. A spirit of generous devotion is fully satisfied with either. It does not want to draw others in its wake but to follow, simply, humbly and peacefully its own way. Even if it would happen that a Sister (v14) would not take the discipline out of a natural dislike and not because of God, those Sisters who do the exercises must not judge her. Without condemning her, they should follow their way gently but firmly, not scorning or judging the weak too harshly. They must remember that on these occasions some mollify their inclinations and dislikes; at other times, the others will do the same.

However, the Sisters who have such inclinations and dislikes must be on their guard when speaking and not give any sign of distaste toward those who do more. Such would be very offensive. Rather, considering their own weakness, they should look on those who do more with a holy gentleness and heartfilled reverence. They might be able to draw as much profit from their weakness in a spirit of humility born from this weakness as the others will draw from their exercises. If only this point would be well heeded and lived out, the Congregation would preserve a wonderful peacefulness and gentleness. Let Martha be active but do not disturb Mary Magdalene; let Mary Magdalene contemplate but do not scorn Martha. The Lord will take the part of the one who will be criticized.

Nevertheless, if the Sisters who have dislikes for things that are pious, good and recommended, or even if they have inclinations for less pious things, if they would only believe me, they would use some force and act contrary more often than they do with their inclinations and dislikes in order to become truly mistresses of themselves and serve God through such an excellent form of mortification. They should fight against their dislikes, oppose their contradictory feelings, turn away from their inclinations, overcome their dislikes and above all let the authority of reason reign mainly in those things in which one needs time to make resolutions. In conclusion, they should try to form a heart that is flexible, easy to handle and amenable, easy to yield to in all things that are allowed, and to rise to every undertaking through obedience and charity. If they do so they will become like the dove who receives all the rays the sun gives it. Happy are those pliable hearts, they will never break!

The Daughters of the Visitation will always speak very humbly of their little Congregation and they will prefer all the others to it with honor and esteem. Nevertheless, they will prefer it to all the others in charity, giving witness freely when occasions present themselves on how grateful they are for this vocation, as wives ought to prefer their husbands to all others, not in honor but in affection; just like everyone prefers his native country in love but not in esteem; and just like every seaman cherishes the ship in which he sails more than all others, even though these might be richer and better furnished. Let us openly acknowledge that other congregations are better, more rich and more excellent, but not more lovable or desirable for us, because Our Lord has willed that this be our

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native land and our ship and that our heart be married to this religious institute. Following on what was said to a person who asked what is the most pleasant resting place and the best food for a child, the person replied: "The breasts and milk of her mother." For even though there may be the most beautiful breasts and the best milk other places, for that child there is none more suitable and more lovable than the child's mother (v15). A cradle made of sticks is better for this child than one of aromatic wood.

## NOTES

1. Infraction -- word added for the meaning of the French text.
2. Refusal -- word added for the meaning of the French text.
3. Gen. 27:11-12.
4. Matt. 12:36.
5. Cant. 8:6 (In contemporary translations of Scripture this is known as the Song of Songs).
6. Cant. 8:6.
7. Proverbs 19:16.
8. Trial -- word added for the meaning of the French text.
9. Saint Bernard, Letter 256 to Eugenius III, 1.
10. Cant. 1:3.
11. Rom. 14:2-6.
12. Permission given by the Religious Superior -- words added for the meaning of the French text.

## VARIANTS

1. This Conference is found in its entirety in a manuscript entitled *The Rule and Constitutions of the Congregation of Sisters dedicated to God under the title of Our Lady of the Visitation in the town of Annecy* and belongs to the Daughters of the Cross of Guingamp. It was

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published in Volume 25, p. 211-290 of the Annecy edition of the *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales* with variants drawn from other manuscripts. One will find its description in the same volume, p. 206-209. Written up in July-September 1613, it was given by Saint Francis de Sales himself or by Saint Jane de Chantal to Madame L'Auillier of Villaneuve, foundress of the Daughters of the Cross, who largely inspired her. Article 48 of the Guingamp manuscript reproduces the *First Conference* with several variants. This is the text we follow at the beginning of the *Conference* which is not found in the manuscript of Mans nor that of Bourges: P. 23 to 24, line 23 of the present edition except with what concerns the signed fragment that we reproduce textually, p. 23, line 27 to p. 24, line 17. Cf. Table of Correspondence of the Editions and Manuscripts, p 312.

2. E1629. The text does not contain the examples given here.
3. The end of this line (from "or submit to it") and the two following paragraphs contained is the only signed fragment of the *Conferences* which we have.
4. E1629. "... with a spirit of disobedience, spirit of disobedience."
5. The text of the Guingamp manuscript is given here.
6. The text of the Mans manuscript, which we follow from here on, begins here. It bears the title "Advice of our most Holy Father about the Explanation of the *Rule*."
7. E1629, E1933. Does not include the remainder of the sentence.
8. E1629, E1933. Add: "...then on the lips and they speak as David did: "Who is our Master?" It is necessary that I add..."
9. E1629, E1933. Reads: "...she were to forget to serve a sick Sister who if the service were not present would be in danger and if this service was given to the Sister in such a way that the sick Sister would completely rely on her, there would be no excuse..."
10. E1629, E1633. Adds: "...of death: therefore the attractions of love are as strong as the threats of death to help us make a resolution. Zeal..."
11. E1629. Adds: "God has placed you. I will say nothing here about the obligation we have toward the observance of our vows. It is clearly evident that anyone who absolutely breaks the *Rule* in the essentials of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience sins mortally and such an action would make the Sister a violator of the meaning of the cloister. Let the Sisters..."

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12. E1629, E1933. Adds: "Strong to undertake a continual battle against evil inclinations, moods, habits and dispositions.  
Finally, this spirit of generous devotion..."
13. E1629 skips down to "There are not many rules on fasting, however there might be..."
14. E1629, E1933. "A Sister eats, not for God but through her own inclinations or another does not take the discipline, not for God but through a natural dislike, then it would be necessary..."
15. E1629. "...nothing more lovable" is the end of the *First Conference*.