

THE NINTH CONFERENCE

On the *Rule* (v1)

You have posed a very important question when you ask what is the spirit of your *Rule* and how you should understand it. First of all, before (n1) speaking about the spirit, we must know what is meant by having the spirit of a *Rule*, because we often hear it said that such and such a Sister has the true spirit of her *Rule*.

We will take two examples from the Gospels which are very apropos to help us understand this. It is said that John the Baptizer had come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (n2) and because of this, he reprimanded sinners in a very bold and rigorous way, calling them a "brood of vipers" (n3). What then, is the "power of Elijah"? It was the strength that came forth from his spirit to destroy and punish sinners, calling down fire from heaven to confound and remove those who would resist the power of his Master (n4). Elijah's spirit, then, was a spirit of severity.

The other example we find in the Gospels, (n5) which is apropos for us, is when Our Lord wanted to go up to Jerusalem and his disciples tried to dissuade him because some of them liked Capernaum and others Bethany. They tried to lead Our Lord to the place where they wanted to go. You see that it is not only in our present experience that religious want to lead their Superiors in accord with their own will. However, Our Lord, who was always gentle and condescending, became very firm in his bearing (set his face – the Gospel writer uses these very words) in order to set out for Jerusalem suchwise that the apostles did not continue to press him not to go there. On his way to Jerusalem, he wanted to go through a Samaritan town, but the Samaritans would not allow him to do so. Then Saint James and Saint John (v2) were filled with zeal, or perhaps anger (for zeal is sometimes taken for anger and vice-versa), and we should not be surprised at this, since they were not yet confirmed in grace. They were very angry with the Samaritans over the lack of hospitality that was shown to their Master. They said to Him: "Master, let us call down fire from heaven" to consume and chastise them for the insult that they have offered you. Our Lord answered: "You do not know what spirit is in you," meaning: Don't you realize that we are no longer living in the time of Elijah which was characterized by a spirit of severity? Even though he was a very great servant of God and acted correctly in doing what he did, you will not act correctly by imitating him because I have not come to confound and punish (v3), but to spread fragrant ointments and by their odor draw sinners to do penance and to follow me (n6,v4).

There is then what is referred to as the particular spirit of a *Rule*. To understand this better, we ought to take some examples that are outside our experience and then we will come back to our own experience. Every religious community and devout society has a spirit which is common to all, and each has a spirit which is peculiar to it. The common spirit is the intention they all have to attain the perfection of charity. This has been determined and held as certain, even by ecumenical Councils (v5). But the spirit peculiar to each is the means of aspiring to this perfection of charity which is union of our human spirit with God and our neighbor for the love of God. This access with reference to God, by the union of our will with His and with our neighbor through gentleness, is immediately dependent on charity.

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Now we come to this spirit peculiar to each (v6). They are certainly different from one another. For example, the Carthusians have a spirit very different from that of the Jesuits, and the spirit of the Capuchins is totally different from either of them. The spirit of the Carthusians is the means that they undertake to be united with God and neighbor, which is the goal all religious hold in common (the particular goal of being united with God is (v7) through contemplation). To attain this, they live alone and talk rarely with those of us living in the world as well as with one another, and then only on certain days of the week. They are united to their neighbor in prayer by interceding with God for them (v8). On the contrary, the spirit peculiar to the Jesuits is to be united with God and neighbor by means of spiritual action. They are united to God, but by uniting their neighbor to him by teaching, preaching, hearing confessions, giving conferences, and other acts of devotion. In order to better bring about this union with neighbor, they dialog with the world (v9) and do not become monks, who are very different and rigorous. Still, they are united with God through prayer, but their chief aim is, as we have said, to strive to bring men and women to conversion and to unite them to God (v10).

The Capuchins have a strict and rigorous spirit. To define it more clearly, it is a perfect disregard for the material side of life, for the world and all its vanities and sensual excesses. I speak about the material side of life, because all religious have or ought to have a deep interior life. By their example, they want to lead men and women to a disregard for things of the earth. The poverty of their habit testifies to this. In this way, they convert men and women to God. Furthermore, they are united with the Divine Majesty (v11) and also with their neighbor for the love of God. This severe spirit with reference to the material side of life is totally theirs, so much so that if one of them is seen to be somewhat affectatious or shows it in his dress or wants to be treated a bit more delicately than the rest, no matter how small it may be, the friar is told that he no longer has the spirit of Saint Francis. Likewise, if a Carthusian is observed taking a bit of pleasure in talking with his neighbor, no matter how perfect his intention, were it even to convert the neighbor, he instantly loses the spirit of his order. It would be the same for a Jesuit if he wanted to retire in solitude and devote himself to contemplation like the Carthusians, if this would happen at a time that is not set aside for their exercises or arise from a special need of an individual that is provided for by the discretion of his Superiors.

Thus, we must know what the specific spirit of each religious community and devout society is. To achieve this, we must consider the goal for which it was founded and the various means to attain the goal. As we have already said, there is a general goal for all religious communities. But the specific goal is what I am talking about, and we must have such a tremendous love for it that there can be nothing likely to help reach that goal that we would not embrace with all our heart.

Do you know what it is to love the goal of our Institute? It is to be exact in the observance of the means of arriving at this goal, which are our *Rule* and *Constitutions* (v12). It is to be most precise in doing all that they entail and which help to observe them more perfectly. This is what it means to have the spirit of our community. But you ask whether we must undertake the exact and precise observance in simplicity of heart. I mean that we must not want to exceed by trying to do more than what is laid down for us in our *Rule*. It is not through the number of things that we do that we acquire perfection, but it is through the perfection and purity of intention with which we do them.

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We must then focus on what is the specific goal of our Institute and the intentions of the founder and settle on the means that are laid down to achieve them. With reference to the goal of your community, you must not look for it in the intention of the first three Sisters who founded it, any more than Jesuit fathers should find theirs in the original plan that Saint Ignatius had. He thought very little at first about doing what he did afterwards. It was the same for Saint Dominic and others who have founded religious orders. But God, who alone forms these devout communities, made them flourish, as we can see from what they have become (v13). We must never think, still less believe, that men and women by their own ingenuity began so perfect a way of living as that of religious life, because it is not true. It is God through his inspiration who has composed the *Rule*, which is the way proper to each for searching out the general goal of all religious communities, union with God and union with our neighbor for the love of God (v14).

Moreover, each religious community has its own specific goal as well as the specific means for arriving at this union. All have a general way to be united with God, which happens through the vows. Each knows that the riches and the good things of life are powerfully attractive and entice our human spirits partly through the overly great affection which they find there as well as through the inclination to hold on to them and even increase them, because human persons are never satisfied. Religious, then, put all that aside through the vow of poverty. They do the same to the flesh with all its desires and pleasures both lawful and unlawful by the vow of chastity, which is a very great way to be specially united to God. Because these sensual pleasures especially weaken (n7) the power of the human spirit, they squander the power of the human heart and the love we owe God, which we give him totally by this vow. Chastity does not allow us to be satisfied with leaving behind the clay of the world but especially putting aside the clay of ourselves in renouncing all the earthly pleasures of our flesh. But we are much more perfectly united to God by the vow of obedience (v15), since by it we renounce the powers, desires, and affections of our human spirits in order to submit and subject our total selves not only to the will of God but to the will of our Superiors, whom we ought to look upon as being God himself. This is a very special renunciation because of the continual production of small desires which come from our self-love. Thus, being shielded from all these things, we retire to the depths of our hearts so as to be totally and perfectly united to the Divine Majesty (v16).

We must then speak about the goal for which the Congregation of the Visitation has been founded. It is well expressed at the beginning of our *Rule*, and our knowledge of the goal will easily help us to understand the specific spirit of the Visitation. I have always considered it to be a spirit of deepest humility toward God and gentleness toward neighbor. Because there is less bodily austerity, there must be the greatest gentleness of heart. All of the Fathers of the early Church agree that where the rigor of corporal mortification is lacking, there must be more perfection of the human spirit. There must be, then, humility toward God and gentleness toward our neighbor which replaces in our community the austerity of (v17) the Carmelites, the Poor Clares, the Carthusians and others. And even if austerities are good in themselves and are means at arriving at perfection, nevertheless, they are not good in our community because they would be against the goal of the *Rule*.

The spirit of gentleness is principally the proper spirit of the Visitation so that if someone wanted to introduce more austerities here (v18), such as more fasts, more use of the discipline or more frequent wearing of hairshirts that are not here now, it would instantly destroy the Visitation.

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This would be to go against the goal for which it has been established, which is to receive women who are not in the best of health and who do not have bodies strong enough or are not drawn to undertake being united to God through the way of austerities that is found in other religious communities (v19). Likewise, the Capuchins would deviate from their primitive spirit if they should want to leave behind their extreme poverty which Saint Francis professed. Even in the decoration of their churches, they should want nothing superfluous, not even silk vestments. If it should happen that it be found in someone of their convents, it would immediately be said that they lost the spirit of their order.

But you might ask me: "If it should happen that a Sister has a healthy constitution, could she practice more austerities than the others (v20), provided that they do not notice it?" I would reply that there is nothing so secret that does not pass secretly to others. After a while, it would happen that religious communities are created within religious communities and little cliques are formed, and then everything would fall apart. Blessed Mother Theresa (n8) speaks admirably well about the harm that these little practices of wanting to do more than the *Rule* demands and the community in fact does. This is true especially if the Sister is a Superior. The evil is then much greater. She says that the Sisters will immediately be aware of it and will want to follow suit. They will have many reasons that will persuade them that they are acting correctly. Some will be able to do it because of zeal; others will do it to please the Superior; and the whole affair will be a source of temptation for those who cannot and do not want to follow suit (v21). Oh God! These whims must never be tolerated in religious life.

Nevertheless, there may be an exception in some special cases of necessity. It might happen that a Sister would feel overwhelmed by some trouble or temptation; then it would not be out of the ordinary to ask the Superior about performing a small penance over and above what the other Sisters are doing. We must have the same simplicity in the case of those seriously ill. They ought to ask for the medicines that they think might help them. If there would be a Sister who would be so generous and courageous as to want to arrive at perfection in a quarter of an hour by doing more than the rest of the Sisters, I would advise her to humble herself and to extend her desire for perfection over a period of three days and walk in the same path as the rest of the community. If there are Sisters who have a strong and healthy constitution, all well and good. However, they must not want to move faster than those who are weak and frail.

In Jacob (n9), we have an example of someone who is most admirable and well suited to show us how we ought to accommodate ourselves to those who are frail and weak and how we should put a check on our strength so as to be able to keep our pace even with theirs. This is especially so when we have the obligation to do it, as is the case with religious who are bound to follow their community in everything that pertains to perfect observance. Jacob, on leaving the home of his father-in-law Laban with all his wives, children and servants and his flocks so as to return to his own home, was extremely afraid of meeting his brother Esau because he thought that he was still angry with him even though that was not the case. While he was on the road back, he met Esau. Then, poor Jacob was terrified on seeing him because he was accompanied by a great number of soldiers. After greeting him, he found Esau very gentle on his part. Esau said to Jacob: "My brother, since we have met up with each other, let us join company and finish the journey together." The good Jacob

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answered: "My lord and brother (he uses the word "lord" because he was his elder) (v22), it will not be possible, if you please, because I have my children with me and their little steps might try and test your patience. I must measure my steps according to theirs which, of course, is my duty to do. I do the same to my servants. Furthermore, my sheep have newborn lambs which take a longer time to move. The newborn lambs being so tender are unable to move quickly and so we must adapt ourselves to them. All of this would excessively delay you on the road." Look, I pray you, at the good-naturedness of this holy Patriarch (v23). I loved him so much in the past and I shall love him all the more because of this act of loving kindness. He willingly accommodates his pace not only to his little children but also to his small newborn lambs. He was on foot (v24) because he never traveled by horse, and this journey was a truly happy one as we see, especially from the blessing that he received from God all along the way. Several times he saw and spoke with the Angels and finally with the Lord of the Angels and humankind. Thus, he was given more than his brother, who had a great escort (v25) and who had set the pace for the whole escort.

If we want our journey to be blessed by the Divine Goodness, we must willingly submit ourselves to the exact and punctual observance of our *Rule* with a simplicity of heart without wanting to double our exercises, going against the intention of the Founder and the goal for which the Congregation was established. Let us willingly accommodate ourselves to the weak and infirm who can be received into it. I assure you that we will not arrive any later at perfection because of it. On the contrary, that will be what will lead us there all the faster, because by not having too much to do we will apply ourselves to do it with all the more perfection than would be possible for us. This is why our works are more pleasing to God because he does not regard the number of things that we do for his love, but only the fervor of the love with which we do them. I find, if I am not mistaken, that if we are determined to want to observe our *Rule* perfectly, we will have enough to care about without burdening ourselves any further since the fullness of perfection is comprised of them.

The Blessed Mother Theresa says her Daughters were so exact that Superiors had to be very careful not to say anything which would not be good for them to do. To observe their *Rule* more perfectly, they would be so overly exact in carrying out the least details. She tells (n10) how one time one of her Daughters did not understand what her Superior had said and told her that she did not understand (v26). And the Superior, on a whim, (It should not be surprising that they have some) told her: "Go, stick your head in a well and then you will understand it." The Sister was so prompt "to leave to do it" (n11), as Mother Theresa tells it, that if someone had not stopped her, she would have thrown herself into the well. There is certainly less difficulty in being exact in the observance of the *Rule* than to be willing to observe it only in part (v27). For example, the *Rule* prescribes that one does not talk at certain times. It is much easier to abstain totally than if there were some exceptions, because we must not only be careful to keep silence but also to speak on some occasions which are exceptions. Charity, however, shows us clearly enough when we can do this without breaking the precept of not talking at all.

I cannot say enough about the importance of this point, to be exact in the least thing that pertains to the most perfect observance of the *Rule* (v28), even in the least ceremonies, as well as not wanting to do more under some pretext that it is the *Rule*. It is the way to preserve a religious community in unity and in its first fervor. To do otherwise would be to destroy it and make it fall

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away from its original perfection (v29). See how the Jesuit fathers maintain the perfection of their Institute. It is nothing more than the firmness that they have in receiving every kind of obedience without reply. You ask whether there would be more perfection in conforming yourselves to the community in such a way that one would not even ask to go to communion on special occasions. Who can doubt, my dear Daughters, that there is nothing more perfect? This is not the case if it would be the Feast of our Patron or of a Saint to whom we have a devotion all our life or some very pressing necessity. With reference to our little bursts of fervor which we sometimes have that are fleeting and, generally speaking, come from our human nature, but which make us desire to receive communion, we must pay no attention to them anymore than seamen do to certain slight breezes that come at daybreak, produced by the mists that rise from the earth and do not last very long and stop as soon as they have risen and are dispersed. The captain of the ship who knows it well pays no heed to the breeze and does not unfurl the sails because of this breeze that arises from the earth. Likewise, with ourselves, we must not lay hold of something as a good wind, i.e., our inspirations which come to us from our ever-changing desires, to ask permission now to receive communion, then to say more prayers and later something else. Our self-love, which always wants to be satisfied, would rest quite content with that and, more particularly, with its little findings and would not stop offering us new ones. Today, when the community receives communion, it will suggest to you that you must humbly ask to abstain from it (v30) because it is the feast of some particular Saint who used such careful preparation to receive the Blessed Sacrament. You are so poorly prepared, it is not unreasonable that you should not receive, and so on. And when the time to humble yourself arrives, it will persuade you to rejoice and to ask for communion to increase your humility, and so that whole thing will never end. We must not consider things outside the *Rule* as inspirations unless they concern matters so extraordinary that perseverance would show us that they are the will of God. This was found to be the case (v31) regarding communion with two or three great saints whom God wanted to communicate every day. The monks of Grand Chartreuse considered it a very great temptation to want to engage in the salvation of people through preaching. It wasn't permissible for any one of them to think that he would be doing a great service for God by wanting to go, under the pretext that the other fathers would know nothing about it except the Superior, to preach in some village where he thought he would be reaping such fruit and adding to the glory of God by the salvation of these people. No, even if he would be very capable and would allege that he did not want to hide the talent that God had given him for preaching. For notwithstanding that all his intentions were good and holy, the act would still not be good in its realization because it would be contrary to the custom and spirit of their community. I find that it is a great act of perfection to conform ourselves in all things to the community and never to depart from it by our own choice. For besides being a good way to be united to our neighbor, it also hides our own perfection from ourselves.

There is a certain simplicity of heart in which is found the perfection of all perfections. This simplicity makes our spirit look only to God and collects and unifies our spirit so that it can apply itself with all possible faithfulness and perfection to the observance of the *Rule* without allowing itself to desire and to want to do more than that. A Sister of the Visitation should not want to do such excellent and extraordinary things that might cause her to be esteemed by others. Thus, she should keep herself humble and not possess great self-gratifications. For by not doing her own will, and

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nothing more than the others (v32) and the whole community, it will seem that she has done nothing. All her sanctity will be hidden from them. God alone will see her, who alone is pleased with her simplicity, through which she will ravish his heart (n12) by uniting herself to him (v33). Such a person does not seek much self-gratification in what she does because she cuts short all the suggestions of self-love which would take supreme delight in doing great and splendid things and would make us esteemed far above the others (v34). Moreover, she will experience a great peace and tranquility of spirit.

We must never think or believe that because we are doing no more than the others and following the lead of the community that there is less merit. No! (v35) We do not become perfect and we are not more pleasing to God by the multiplicity of exercises, penances and austerities! Yes! We do so by the purity of our love with which we do them. Perfection does not consist in austerities. Even though these are good ways of arriving at it and are good in themselves, nevertheless, they are not good for us because they are not in our *Rule* and are not in conformity with its spirit. The greatest perfection for us lies in the simple observance of the *Rule* and following the community. The Sister who stays within these limits, I assure you, will make great progress in a short time and will bring (v36) many benefits to her Sisters by her good example.

I have witnessed this in two Master Generals of the Grand Chartreuse, one who is still alive and the other who has died. The one who has died, I saw in Paris when I was there. He was very austere and ordinarily ate only bread and drank only water. On the contrary, the other one, who is alive today, did not stand out in anything and did only what his community did. Both are very great servants of God; however, I have been assured that the latter is more loved and thought of by his Brothers than the former. Both his example of gentleness and conformity to their life has contributed much more to the community, and not the rigor that the former exercised toward himself. When we are rowing, we must do it in time. Those who row on a lake are not beaten because of slightly sluggish rowing, but they are indeed if their beat is not in time. Likewise, we must try to teach and train the novices in the same way, all doing the same thing, so that they row together, and even if all of them do not do it with the greatest perfection, we know they are doing it together (v37).

But then you tell me that it is in a spirit of mortification that you stay a little longer in the choir on feast days than the other Sisters because you are a bit annoyed and out of sorts after spending two or three consecutive hours there together. To that I say there is no general rule that we must do everything that is repugnant to us, any more than to refrain from those things that we are inclined to. If a Sister enjoys saying the Divine Office, she should not stop assisting at it under the pretext of wanting to mortify herself. Furthermore, with reference to the times on feast days when you are allowed to do what you would like, it may be spent in accord with each one's own devotion. It is true, however, that having spent three hours or more in the choir with the community you should beware that an extra quarter of an hour that you might spend there might be just the small amount that you are giving to your own self-love (v38). It is true that, by not being able to put our self-love to death completely, it seems that we ought to give it some small morsel.

Now you should want to know whether you will be doing more about conforming yourselves to the community during Mass by saying your rosary or not doing some other type of prayer during

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the time when it is being said. Furthermore, you will notice that the good that you will do by making yourselves attentive to the Mass like the others, since everyone ought to have this bearing in the Visitation, moreover verifies the advice of the great Saint Bernard (n13), who says that in our common prayers, we must join our attention to the purpose for which they are done. To the question whether it might be better for us along with the others who understand what we are saying in the Office to give our attention simply to God or to follow the sense of the words that we pronounce, Saint Bernard answers that he prefers that we apply ourselves to follow the sense of what we say because it is conformed to the intention of the author who has composed them under divine inspiration. I happily share the opinion of this great Saint and follow his advice that we must apply ourselves during the Eucharist by considering the mysteries that are contained there and which are laid down in the "Exercise on the Eucharist." And even though I have given Philothea the freedom of doing or not doing it, through which she will judge whether it is more suitable for her to busy herself with other mental or vocal prayers (n14) during the celebration, I did it because I do not know every *Philothea*. However, it seems to me that this "Exercise" would be better achieved by being conformed to the intention of Holy Church.

Finally, my dear Daughters, we must love our *Rule* because it is the way in which we fulfill its purpose, which is to lead more easily to the perfection of charity, the union of ourselves with both God and neighbor. And not only that but also the reunion of our neighbor with God, which we do in the way we make ourselves present to her, which is gentle and simple. For no Sister is ever rejected for want of physical strengths, provided that she is willing to live according to the spirit of the Visitation, which is a spirit of humility toward God and gentleness toward our neighbor. This is the spirit that unites us both with God and our neighbor. Through humility, we unite ourselves to God by submitting to the exact observance of his will, which is signified in our *Rule*. We ought to regard the *Rule* with a certain sacredness because it was formulated under God's inspiration, received by Holy Church, and approved by the Pope. These are evident signs of their inspiration. Moreover, we ought to love it more affectionately and at least three times every day press it close to our hearts in thanksgiving to God who has given it to us. Through the virtue of gentleness of heart we unite ourselves to our neighbor by an exact and complete conformity of life in our ways of acting and religious exercises, without wanting to do either more or less than those with whom we live, nor what is laid out in the way to which God has called us. Also, we use and lay hold of all of our spiritual powers to do them with all the perfection that is possible for us. Remember what I have said several times that we must not only be exact in the observance of the *Rule*, but almost finicky (n15) in every little detail. This does not mean that you are to be scrupulous in your exactness. Oh No! This is not my intention. I mean the exactness and completeness that characterizes chaste spouses who are content not only in avoiding what displeases their heavenly Spouse but who want to do whatever they can to please him, even in the smallest matters.

It will be very apropos for me to offer you some remarkable examples to help you understand how it is most pleasing to God to be conformed to the community in everything. Listen to what I am going to tell you. My dear Daughters, why do you think that Our Lord and his most holy Mother submitted to the Law at the Presentation and the Purification except out of the love that they bore for the community? Certainly this example should suffice to move religious to follow the

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community exactly, without ever departing from it. Neither the Son nor the Mother were in any way bound by it. Not the Son, because he was God; not the Mother because she was all pure; she was purity itself. They could easily have been exempted from it without anyone having been aware of it. Couldn't the most Holy Virgin have gone to Nazareth instead of to Jerusalem (v39) and given the poor the money with which she would buy the turtledoves that she would offer? Doesn't it seem that she had done enough? Oh God! She does nothing like that, but very simply follows the community. She could have said: "The Law does not bind my Son or myself," nor is she obliged in any way. But because the rest of humankind is obligated and carries it out, we very willingly submit ourselves to conform to each commandment of it and not be different from humankind in anything. Hasn't the apostle Saint Paul said that it was "necessary" that Our Lord be "like his brothers and sisters in all things but sin" (n16)? Tell me, was it fear of being dishonest that made them so exact in the observance of the Law? Certainly not! That is not the case. There was no dishonesty on their part. They were rather drawn by the love that they bore for the heavenly Father.

We do not know how to love the commandments if we do not love the person who gives them. In the measure that we love and hold in high regard the Maker of the Law, so will we be exact in our observing it. Some are chained to the Law with chains of iron, while others are through chains of gold. I mean that people in the world who keep the commandments of God out of fear of being damned observe them through force and not through love. Religious and those who tend to the perfection of their spirit are joined by chains of gold, i.e, through love. They love the commandments and keep them lovingly. And to keep them better, they embrace the observance of the counsels. David said (n17) that God has commanded that "his" commandments be kept very carefully "by those who love him." Do you see how exact he wants us to be in our observance? Certainly, all true lovers are exact, for they avoid not only unfaithfulness to the law but they also avoid any shadow of unfaithfulness. This is why the Bridegroom in the Cantic of Canticles (n18) says that his spouse is like a dove who walks along a gently flowing stream whose waters are crystal clear. You know that the dove rests in assurance by those waters because she can see the shadows of birds of prey that she fears. Suddenly as she sees these shadows, she takes flight so that she is never taken by surprise. Likewise, the Heavenly Bridegroom would say, "So too is it with my Beloved, for while she flies away when faced with unfaithfulness to my commandments, she has no fear of falling into the hands of disobedience." Certainly, anyone who by the vow of obedience deprives herself of doing her own will in indifferent things gives sufficient evidence that she loves being submissive in necessary things and those of obligation (v40). Those who voluntarily give up lawful possessions show that they do not want unlawful things. The apostles, in order to better observe the commandment that Our Lord had given them to give up all created goods, voluntarily gave up not only what was lawful but also that which was necessary.

We must be most exact in our observance of the *Constitutions* and the *Rule*, which are given us by Our Lord himself, especially on this point of following the community in all things. We must be very careful about saying that we are not obliged to observe this particular statute or particular decision of Superiors because it was made for the weak and we are strong and healthy. On the other hand, a decision was given for the strong so much so that we are not obligated by it, for we are weak and infirm. Oh God! Let there be nothing like this in the community. I beg you, if you are strong,

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become weak so as to be like the weak. If you are weak, I am telling you – try to be like the strong. The great apostle Saint Paul says that "he became all things to all in order to save all (n19). Who is weak that I am not the same (v41)?" With the strong I am strong. "Who" among my brothers and sisters is "scandalized" that I am not also the same (n20)? When I am with the weak, I gladly make use of all the remedies necessary for their weakness to give them the confidence to do the same. If I am with the sick, I act like the tender and loving nurse of a sick child, stroking its head so it might fall asleep. But when I am with the strong, I am like a giant so as to give them courage (n21). If I am able to notice that my neighbor would be scandalized by what I am doing, even if it is permissible for me to do it and by doing it I would commit no sin, I nevertheless should be so zealous for her peace and tranquility of heart that I willingly and in good heart abstain from doing it (n22). This, then, is the love that Saint Paul had for God, which moved him to conform himself to everyone so as to win them all for Him.

But, you will say to me that it is time for recreation. I have a great desire to go to prayer in order to be more deeply united with the source of all Goodness (v42). My God, I long to go and say my rosary in honor of Our Lady! Can't I even think that the precept which obliges me to recreation is not binding because my spirit is very joyful? No, you must neither think nor say such a thing! Even if you feel no need for recreation, you must nevertheless go to recreation because of those who do have a need for it.

Are there no exceptions in religious life? Do all the precepts bind equally? Undoubtedly. Most assuredly there are some precepts that are justly unjust. For example, the Lenten fast obliges each of us. Doesn't this law seem unjust to you, since this unjust justice is mitigated by giving permissions and dispensations to those who can't observe it? It is the same in religious life. Precepts bind everyone equally, and no one can dispense himself or herself on their own. However, Superiors mitigate the rigor according to the needs of each individual.

We must take care never to think that the infirm are less useful in religious life than the strong and healthy and that they do less or obtain less merit (v43). Thus, they would not be given a great reward by Our Lord because all are equally bound by the will of God. Bees are an example of what we are talking about, for some are used to taking care of and cleaning the hive. Others are always busy gathering honey. Those who live inside the hive do not eat less honey than those who have the job of picking at the flowers (v44), and with good reason, because those who live inside, while hardly doing anything, prevent spiders (n23) from coming and obstructing the honeycomb from the bees who are busy gathering the honey.

Doesn't it also seem to you that David made an unjust law when he gave the orders that the soldiers who guarded the armor should have an equal share of the booty with those who had gone to battle and returned wounded? Certainly not. It was not unjust because those who guarded the armor guarded it for those who were fighting and those who went to battle fought for those who guarded the armor. So they all merited the same reward because they all equally obeyed the will of the King (n24, v45). It is not the work that makes us merit but the love and charity with which we do it.

Let us say a word about the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple and the Purification of his most Holy Mother. See, I pray you, how this most holy and glorious child allows Himself to be carried, very simply but lovingly in the arms of the most holy Simeon, neither crying nor resisting

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being taken from the most tender arms of his very dear Mother. Such tenderness, I pray you, when the very holy Virgin bared her breast to fill the sacred mouth of her little child with the taste of her most pure and heavenly milk, speaking little sighs afire with love so much so that she touches the heart of the Savior and who, in exchange, opened his little eyes to behold her! And by means of these glances, the heart of the most glorious Virgin quieted, nearly swooning from the fire of his love. What Sister can ever again excuse herself from going to Holy Communion because of her unworthiness, saying, "Oh, my God! How can I dare to receive Our Lord as often as the others do, since I am worthless? Oh, God! How can I dare to come to you in prayer?" Oh, such self-deception! Don't you see that Our Lord moves so simply into the arms of holy Simeon and leaves those of his most loving Mother who was most pure and without sin (n25)?

NOTES

1. Before...
2. Lk. 1:17.
3. Matt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7.
4. 2 Kgs. 1.
5. Lk. 9:51-6.
6. Lk. 5:32.
7. Slacken.
8. Saint Theresa of Avila, *Book of Foundations*, Chapter XVIII.
9. Gen. 33:1-14.
10. Saint Theresa of Avila, *Book of Foundations*, Chapter XVI.
11. The goal of the strategy is used figuratively, to obey instantly.
12. Cant. 4:9.
13. Saint Bernard, *On the Human Condition*, Chapter 6, "On the Way To Live Well," Book II, 122.
14. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part II, Chapter 4.

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15. punctual – overly exact.
16. Heb. 2:17; 4:14.
17. Ps. 118:4.
18. Cant. 5:12.
19. I Cor. 9:22.
20. II Cor. 11:29.
21. Gal. 2:11.
22. I Cor. 8:13.
23. Corrected French spelling.
24. I Sam. 30: 23-35.
25. stain.

VARIANTS

1. E1629. The *Thirteenth Conference, On the Rule and the Spirit of the Visitation*.
E1933. The *Fourteenth Conference, On the Rule and the Spirit of the Visitation*.
2. E1629. "... and Saint John were filled with anger and so much indignation toward the Samaritans.."
3. E1629 "...sinners but to attract them gently to penance..."
4. E1629 "...follow me. Let us now take a look at what is known as the particular spirit of a *Rule*. In order to understand this better..."
5. E1629. This sentence is lacking in the text.
6. E1629. "...they are certainly very different in the various Orders. Some are united to God and neighbor by contemplation and to attain this they live alone and talk rarely..."

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7. Rouen Manuscript. "The general goal is to be united to God through" The material in parentheses has been added from the *Colloquies*.
8. E1629. "...for them. On the contrary, the particular spirit of the others is to be united..."
9. E1629. "...the world." The remainder of this sentence is absent. The text picks up with "...They are united, etc..."
10. E1629. "...souls and unite them to God. The others have a serene and rigorous spirit with a perfect contempt for the world and all its vanities and several attractions. By their example, they want to induce men to the same contempt for the things of earth. Their coarse habits and exercises help them to achieve this. Others have a different spirit and so it is necessary to know..." This is the beginning of the next paragraph.
11. Rouen Manuscript. The bracketed material has been added from the *Colloquies*.
12. E1629. "...*Rule* and *Constitutions* and to be very diligent in doing..."
13. E1629. "...we see what they have become for we must not believe that men by their own ingenuity..."
14. E1629. "...love of God. But just as each religious order has its own particular goal, as well as the particular means to reach this goal and general community goals, all also have a general way to reach this general goal – thru those essential vows of religious life. Everyone knows..."
15. E1629. "...because we renounce our whole soul, all its faculties..."
16. E1629. "...For, to come more especially to the goal for which our Congregation of the Visitation has been founded and to understand more easily what the spirit is..."
17. E1629. "...replace in your communities the austerities of others..."
18. E1629. "...introduce more austerities than there are..."
19. E1629. "that one finds in other religious communities." Begin the next paragraph with the words "Perhaps, you will tell me if it happens..."
20. E1629. "...more than the others, with the permission of the Superior, such wise that the other Sisters do not notice it..."?

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21. E1629. "...do the same." The next sentence is lacking. The following paragraph begins: "We must never introduce, permit or allow these exceptions in our religious community except nevertheless in certain necessities..."
22. E1629. The parenthesis is not found.
23. E1629. The following sentence is lacking.
24. E1629. "...because he never traveled by horse,..." is lacking.
25. E1629. The remainder of the sentence is not present. The next paragraph begins: "If we want our journey to be blessed by the divine..."
26. E1629. "...did not understand it and the Superior answered her very brusquely and inconsiderately: `Go stick your head in a well'..."
27. E1629. The remainder of the paragraph is missing. Go to the next paragraph, which begins: "...I cannot..."
28. E1629. The following phrase "...even in the least ceremonies..." is not present.
29. E1629. The next two sentences about the Jesuits are not present.
30. E1629. The remainder of the sentence is not present.
31. E1629. "...with two or three great Saints, whose directors wanted them to communicate everyday." The example of the Great Chartreuse is also missing. The text picks up three sentences down with the words: "I find..."
32. E1629. The remainder of the sentence is absent. It picks up with "...all her sanctity..."
33. E1629. The first part of the next sentence is missing. The text resumes with "...she cut short..."
34. E1629. "...the others. Such souls especially enjoy a great peace..."
35. E1629. The next two sentences are missing. The text resumes with "Perfection..."
36. E1629. "...will bring much fruit to her Sisters by her example." The example of the Grand Chartreuse is not mentioned. The text resumes with the words, "When we are sowing..."

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37. E1629. Add: "It is the same in every community."
38. E1629. The text then skips down a paragraph and resumes with: "Finally, my dear Daughters..."
39. E1629. "...instead of going to Jerusalem..." It then skips down two sentences and says, "But she does not do it but very simply..."
40. E1629. The text skips at this point to the beginning of the next paragraph.
41. E1629. "...with whom I am not infirm? Who is sick, with whom I am not also sick? With the strong, I am strong. Do you see how Saint Paul when he is with the infirm becomes infirm and willingly takes all the remedies necessary for their infirmities, to give them the confidence to do the same? But when he is with the strong, he is like a giant so as to give them courage, and if he perceives that his neighbor might be scandalized by something he might do, even if it is permissible for him to do it, nevertheless he has such a zealous spirit for the peace and tranquility of his neighbor's heart that he abstains from doing it." The text resumes with the next paragraph.
42. E1629. The next sentence is not part of the text of 1629.
43. E1629. The first part of the next sentence is not part of the text. The text resumes with "...all are equally bound..."
44. E1629. The remainder of this paragraph is not part of the text of 1629.
45. E1629. The end of the *Thirteenth Conference*: "...because they all obeyed the King's will. May God Be Blessed!"