

THE FIFTEENTH CONFERENCE

On the Subject of Self-Indulgence (v1)

Before doing anything, we must make the sign of the Cross and then we will say a few things about the two questions that have been given me. Yes, only a few, so as to allow time for the Sisters to ask me what they would like.

The first (v2) is whether being attached to one's own opinion is something that militates against perfection. I would say that being accustomed to holding on to one's own opinion or not is something that is neither good nor bad, inasmuch as it is completely natural. Each of us has opinions. However, that should not stop us from attaining perfection, provided that we are not so attached to them or that we cling to them stubbornly. This kind of attachment is the major obstacle to perfection. I have often said that this love for our own judgment and the esteem in which we hold it is the reason why there are so few perfect people. There are many people who renounce their own will, some for one reason, others for another. They are not all religious. Some are found even at court. If a prince gives a command to a courtier, he will never refuse. But to admit that it is a wise one happens very rarely. "I will in fact do what you command me and in the way you tell me to do it but..." People dwell for a long time on the "but," which means that they know in fact that it would be better done another way. No one can doubt, my dear Daughters, that this kind of thing is very contrary to attaining perfection, for it produces, generally speaking, anxiety of mind, disputes, murmurings and finally, it feeds our self-esteem; whereas our own opinion ought not to be so loved or overly esteemed.

However, I must tell you that there are persons who must form their own opinion, such as Superiors who have the care of others, Bishops and also those who have the duty to govern. But there are others who ought not do so unless obedience demands it. Otherwise, they would waste time that should be used to rest faithfully in the presence of God. Such people should be considered less attentive to their own perfection and, therefore, uselessly occupied if they would stop to form and consider their own opinion. However, Superiors ought to be considered fulfilling their duty less faithfully if they will not give some resolution to things proposed to them and put forth some considerations in support of their own opinions. It would be unfitting to see them always lacking in resolution about their own opinions. However, it is not acceptable if they cling to or are overly attached to their own opinions. This is what is contrary to their perfection.

The great Saint Thomas, who had one of the greatest minds that a person could have, when he formed some opinion, he rooted and supported it with the weightiest of reasons that he could find. Nevertheless, if he found someone who would not approve of what he set forth or contradicted it, he did not dispute with the person nor was he offended by it. He took it all in good heart. Thus, he showed clearly that he did not overly love his own opinion even though he could not abandon it. He left the matter alone so that others could discover if it was good or not. Having done his duty, he did not trouble himself any further. The Apostles were not so attached to their opinions, not even in such important matters as the government of the Church. If, after they had determined some matter by a resolution they had made, someone (v3) disagreed with them or refused to accept their opinions for good and just reasons they were not offended. They did not give in when their opinions had a

The Fifteenth Conference

sound base, and yet at the same time they did not look for ways to force them on others through disputations or debates (n1).

If Superiors would change their opinions at every turn, they would be held as weak and lacking in prudence in their governing responsibility. But if those who do not have this responsibility should be so attached to their own opinions by wanting to formulate them, root them and force others to accept them, they should be considered as obstinate. For it is well founded that the love of our own opinions degenerates into obstinacy if a person does not mortify it or restrain it. We see an example of this among the Apostles. It is most remarkable that Our Lord permitted many things done by the Apostles and truly worthy of being written down to remain hidden with a profound silence. However, the fault which both the great Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas committed to each other was written down. Without doubt, this is a special Providence of Our Lord, who had wanted it so "for our" particular "instruction" (n2). Both would be going out together preaching the Gospel and they would be taking (v4) along with them a young man named John Mark, a relative of Saint Barnabas. These two great Apostles got into a dispute as to whether they should take him along or not. Seeing that they couldn't agree, they went their separate ways (n3). Tell me now, shouldn't we be troubled when we see some such faults within ourselves upon seeing that the Apostles committed the same? (v5) They were attached to their opinion to the point of becoming obstinate by both wanting to do what was best.

Certainly, there are some great minds who are very good but who are so taken up with their own opinions and who hold them in such high esteem that they never want to change them. We must take special care not to ask their views (v6) for fear that they do not base them on sound reason. Afterwards, it is nearly impossible to make them see and admit they were wrong, all the more so because they are already so deeply involved in looking for good reasons to support what they had said was right. Because they are striving for such great perfection, there is no longer any way to take back their position. On the other hand, there are those who, while they have great minds and are very capable, are in no way subject to this imperfection. They willingly take back their opinions even though these are very good ones. Moreover, they do not get defensive when something opposite or a contrary opinion is placed next to theirs, though their opinions have been judged correct and well founded, as we have already seen with Saint Thomas. So, do you see that it is perfectly natural to have your own opinions?

Sad people are ordinarily more firmly attached to their own opinions than those who are more jovial and light-hearted. The latter are more easily guided and ready to believe what they are told. The great Saint Paula was obstinate in holding the opinion that she formed on the necessity of great austerities rather than (v7) submit (n4) by refraining from them. The same is true of many other Saints who believed the body had to be greatly mortified to please God so much so that they refused to obey the doctor and do other things that were necessary for their frail and mortal bodies. Even though this was an imperfection, this did not prevent them from becoming holy and very pleasing to God. This should teach us that we must not be troubled when we discover within ourselves some imperfections or inclinations opposed to true perfection, as long as we do not become obstinate by our wanting to cling to them. For Saint Paula and the others who became obstinate even in small things were blameworthy for it. As for us, we must never permit ourselves to form our opinions

The Fifteenth Conference

suchwise that we will not give them up when needs be whether we are obliged to form them or not (v8). Those who are so given over to their own judgment are going to be continually challenged to look for good reasons to support what they once stated. This is natural, but allowing ourselves to become that way (v9) would be a serious fault. Tell me, isn't it a useless waste of time, especially for those who don't have such a responsibility?

You ask: "Why must we mortify this inclination?" We must stop feeding it. If a thought should occur to you that someone was wrong in making you do something in a specific way and that it would have been done better in the way you thought it should be done, reject the thought immediately, telling yourself: "Why am I so concerned about this, since it was given to me to do?" Thus, you have rejected it. It is always much better to reject such things quite simply and not look for reasons in our own minds to make us believe that we are wrong. Instead of doing this, our understanding, which is always concerned with its own private judgment, will make us change our minds and, instead of getting rid of and disapproving of our own opinion, will supply some reasons to hold onto it and make it seem like something good. It is always better to do as I have told you, to disregard it without wanting to consider it, to drive it out very quickly when you are aware of it, before you have the time to know what it wants you to say (v10).

O my Daughter, we must not be overly hard on ourselves with reference to preventing the first movement of pleasure that happens when our opinion is approved of and adopted. It just can't be otherwise. However, we must not dwell on this pleasure. We must bless God, then move on without troubling ourselves about it. The same pertains when we feel a bit sad when our opinion is not approved or adopted. When we are asked, we must give and state our opinion on a question that has come up, either through charity or obedience. Having done so, we must remain indifferent as to whether it will be accepted or not. We must do the same sometimes when it concerns the opinions of others. Simply state again the reasons upon which our own opinion is based. But we must do this moderately and humbly, without looking down on the opinions of others or challenging them so that our own will be accepted.

You ask whether this imperfection would be fed by looking for others to speak to, who agree with us when there is no longer a question of resolving an issue, since what is to be done has already been decided upon. Undoubtedly, my dear Daughter, this would feed our inclination; consequently, a fault would be committed. For it would truly be an acknowledgment that we have not accepted the opinion of others, but we always prefer our own. Once something has been settled, we must no longer speak or think about it unless this would be manifestly evil. Only then, if it is possible to find some way to prevent it from being carried out, or to remedy the situation that has already been decided upon, may we do so. But it would have to be done in as charitable and sensitive a way as possible so that no one is upset or looked down upon (v11) with reference to what has been found or judged good by them.

The better approach to this is still, as I have already said in different ways, the rejection of all thoughts in this regard, turning our minds to something better. For if we want to allow ourselves to pay attention to all the opinions that our own judgment will suggest to us in our different experiences and encounters, what will happen is that we will be continually distracted from more profitable matters that relate to our own perfection. We will become (v12) incapable and unfit for holy prayer.

The Fifteenth Conference

By giving our mind the freedom to waste time considering such deceptions, we will become much more taken with them and we will produce thought after thought, opinion after opinion and reason after reason, which will be most unfortunate at the time for prayer. For prayer is nothing other than the lifting of one's whole mind with all its faculties to God. Thus, we are to leave behind the pursuit of useless things, for we will be less capable or ready to consider the mysteries on which we should want to base our prayer.

This, then, is what I have to say to you about the first question. We have learned that to have opinions is not opposed to our perfection, but to love them and, thus, to hold them in high esteem is. For if we do not hold them in high esteem, we shall not be so in love with them. And if we do not love them, we shall not be so concerned that they be accepted and we shall not be as ready to say: "Others may believe what they want, but as for myself..." Do you understand what "as for myself" means? Nothing other than I will not submit, so that I am firmly entrenched in my resolution and my opinion. As I have said many times, the last thing we give up is our own judgment, and yet it is the most necessary step that we give up and put aside our own judgment so that we can attain true perfection. Otherwise, we will not acquire humility, which prevents and forbids us to so esteem ourselves or anything connected with ourselves in any way. Moreover, if we do not practice this virtue very seriously, we will always think ourselves better than we actually are. Also, it will seem that others owe us much consideration. We have said enough about this.

If you have nothing else, we will move on to the second question, which is whether the care that we take of ourselves is much of a hindrance on the road to perfection. To better understand this, I must remind you of what you know very well, i.e., that we have in our persons two loves: affective love and effective love. This is also true with respect to the love we have for God as well as the love that we have for our neighbor and for ourselves. However, we will not speak about the love we have for God, but about the love we have for our neighbor and then we will come back to the love of ourselves.

Theologians are accustomed to making a distinction between these two loves, by using the comparison of a father who has two sons. One is still a dear, lovable little child with all the traits of childhood; and the other is a grown man, a brave and generous soldier, or indeed any other profession that one would like. The father greatly loves both his sons but with a different love. He loves the child with an extremely tender and affectionate love. See, I pray you, how he will not allow anything to happen to the child when around him (v13). He allows him to pull his beard with his little hand as well as to brush and comb it. He keeps him and holds him with an unequalled gentleness, so much the more for the child than for himself, and kisses him over and over again, whether in his arms or on his knees. If the child is stung by a bee, he does not stop soothing the sore spot until the pain disappears. However, if the older son had been stung by thirty bees, he would pay no attention to it, while loving him with a most deep and lasting love. I ask you now to think about the difference between these two loves. Even though you have seen the tenderness that the father has for his little child, this does not stop him from planning the future when he will send this child away and make him a knight of Malta, while intending his older son to be his heir and inheritor of all his possessions. The older son is loved with an effective love and a bit of affective love. Both are loved, but in different ways.

The Fifteenth Conference

The love we have for ourselves is both affective and effective. Effective love is that which determines the great personages of the world, those seeking honors and wealth, those who gain as much worldly goods as they can and who are never satisfied with what they have obtained. I say that such people love themselves with an effective love. But there are others who love themselves more with an affective love. These are the people who are very indulgent with themselves and who do nothing but coddle, pamper and take care of themselves. They are so afraid of everything that could be harmful to them. This is very pitiful. If they are sick, when it might well be only a sore finger, no one is more sick than they are. They are so miserable! No sickness, however great it might be, is comparable to what they are suffering and no one can ever find enough medicines to cure them. They do not stop taking medicine, thinking that they are preserving their health, when in fact they are destroying and ruining it. If others are sick, it is nothing. Then, there are those who complain and who cry tender tears over their sufferings so that they might move others to look on them with compassion. They do not care if they are thought to be patient as long as they are considered to be sick and suffering. This is certainly an imperfection found in children and, if I dare say, in women, and even among men who have little courage or an unmanly courage. This imperfection is not found among generous people. Well-balanced people do not waste time with such foolishness and tasteless indulgence, which can only hinder us on the way of our perfection. Not being able to endure the thought that we are such, isn't it a powerful sign that we are?

I have a story in mind about the time I returned from Paris to a religious community that is apropos to what I am saying. Certainly, I had more consolation when it happened than I had had in my whole journey even though I met many very virtuous people. This consoled me most of all. And it was in this community, as I have said, that it happened. There was a young woman in her postulancy who was marvelously gentle, flexible, submissive and obedient, who in a word, fulfilled all the necessary conditions to be a true religious of the Visitation. Something unfortunate happened where the Sisters found in her an imperfection, a physical ailment, which caused them to begin to wonder if they ought to send her away because of it. Mother dearly loved her and was upset about doing it. However, the Sisters were very troubled about her physical ailment. Then, when I was passing through, the difference of opinion was given to me to decide and to judge what ought to be done about it. So then, this good young woman, who came from a good home, was brought to me; once there, she went down on her knees and said to me: "Sir, it is true that I have such an ailment, which is certainly very humiliating." (She told me what it was very clearly in a spirit of great simplicity.) "Sir," she said to me, "I admit that our Sisters have very good reason for not wanting to believe me, for I must be intolerable with my ailment; but I beg you to decide in my favor and I assure you that, if they would receive me, thus showing charity in my regard, I would take great care not to be a bother to them. I would gladly take care of the garden or be useful in other things that would keep me far from their presence so as not to upset them in any way" (n5). Certainly, this young woman was hardly overly indulgent toward herself! I could not help saying that I would like to suffer the same natural ailment and have the courage to admit it in public with the same simplicity that she had with me.

She had no fear of not being thought well of, like many others, and she was not so indulgent toward herself. She didn't make a great deal of trouble and form useless considerations such as: "What will the Superior say if I tell her this or that? And if I ask her for any medicine, she will say or

The Fifteenth Conference

think that I am overly indulgent toward myself." Yet why, if it is true, wouldn't you want her to think so (v14)? "But when I tell her about it, she will look at me so crossly that it will seem to me that she is displeased about it." It could well be that the Superior has a great deal on her mind and will not always smile or speak very graciously when you tell her about your ailment. You say that this is what bothers you and makes you lose confidence to go and speak to her about your ailments. My dear Daughters, this is childishness; you must go to her in a spirit of simplicity. If the Superior or the Mistress on one occasion, or even on several, does not receive you the way you would like to be (received), you must not be offended or judge that she will always act the same. Oh! No! Our Lord will perhaps touch her heart with his own spirit of gentleness so that she will treat you more kindly when you come the next time.

You must not be so indulgent as to want to talk all the time about all your minor ailments: a slight headache or toothache that will soon pass. If you would put up with it for the love of God, there would be no need for you to go and talk about it so as to arouse a little sympathy. You say that you have not mentioned it to the Superior or the Infirmarian but you did very easily to the Sisters because, as you say, you want to put up with it for God. Oh! My dear Daughter, if you really wanted to put up with it for God, as you say, you would not go and tell anyone that you know well who will feel obliged to tell the Superior about your ailment. In this way, you will receive, indirectly, the remedy which, all in good faith, you are asking for but which would have been better done by asking very simply the person who could have given you what was needed. For you know perfectly well that the Sister whom you talk to about the headache that is making you sick has no power to tell you to go to bed. Even though you may have not planned it, it is clear that there is no other intention but to get a little sympathy from this Sister and this gives a great boost to one's self-love. But if you accidentally mention it, the Sisters will perhaps ask you how you are at that very moment; there is nothing wrong, provided you tell them very simply, without exaggeration or complaining. Outside of that, you must tell no one except the Superior or the Mistress (v15). You say that if you tell it to the Superior you are afraid that you will be labeled as overly indulgent by doing so. Well, then, say nothing if the ailment doesn't demand it. I mean that it is not something serious. I agree largely with the custom of the Carmelite Sisters not to complain or mention their ailments except to the Superior, and the Novices to their Mistress. Furthermore, you must not be afraid if they are a bit strict in giving a correction on such a fault. So you should not lose confidence about telling them of your ailment or talking about it with the Infirmarian.

Oh! I can easily believe that you like to talk about it with those Sisters who do not have the responsibility of helping you. After you do it, each one will complain to the Sister Assistant and she will be put on the spot to find (n6) the remedies. If you were to go and tell the Sister who has that responsibility, you would have to submit yourself to do what she prescribes. Thus, it is this blessed submission that we always avoid with our whole heart, always guarding our self-love so as to govern ourselves and be mistress of our own will. "But if I say that I have a headache, the Superior will tell me to go to bed." Well, what does that matter? If you are not really sick enough for that, it should not be too much of a burden to tell her: "My Mother, or my Sister, I don't think I am sick enough for that." And if she then tells you you are not allowed to do otherwise, you should go very simply (v16).

The Fifteenth Conference

For we must have a great simplicity in all things. To walk with simplicity is the most true and most assured way pleasing to God.

Now, you ask, my dear Daughter, if on seeing a Sister who is depressed or has some other ailment and who does not have the confidence or courage to come to speak to you about doing something about it and you also notice that she has become sad because she doesn't have the strength to deal with it, should you go to her or leave her come to you herself? It depends on the circumstances. Sometimes you ought to reach out by calling her and asking what is the matter. At other times you ought to ignore these little moods by leaving her alone, as if you were saying: "You will not overcome this by simply asking for the proper remedy for your ailment, so bear it as well as you can; you will in fact merit by it."

This type of self-indulgence is harder to deal with when it concerns spiritual matters rather than bodily ones. Unfortunately, it is found and developed more by the "more spiritual" persons who would like to be Saints in an instant and who do not want it to cost them anything, not even the struggles that our lower nature causes by resisting those things that are opposed to it. Still, like it or not, we must have the strength to put up with and fight these forms of self-indulgence that arise in many small ways throughout our lives unless we want to be a failure at the perfection we have undertaken. I really wish that you would always distinguish the effects of (the superior part of our nature from those of) our lower nature and that we never become surprised (v17) at the movements of our lower nature, bad as they may be. They are incapable of stopping us on the way, provided that we hold firmly onto the higher part, always moving forward in the way of perfection without indulging ourselves and wasting time to complain that we are imperfect and need compassion, as if we ought to do nothing other than bewail our misery and misfortune in being so slow to reach our goal.

This young woman of whom we have spoken showed no emotion in speaking of her ailment; she also spoke to me with a firmly fixed heart and composure, which pleased me greatly. Many of us make a big thing of shedding a few tears over our faults, and that satisfies our self-love! My dear Daughters, we must be more generous and not be surprised in any way on finding ourselves subject to a thousand kinds of imperfections but also have great courage in overcoming our inclinations, moods, whims and emotions by faithfully mortifying all of them as they arise. But if it still happens that we fall from time to time into some faults, we must not pay much attention to them but rise up courageously so as to be more faithful the next time and move on along the way that leads to God and self-renunciation (v18).

But, you ask, my Daughters, if the Superior on seeing you with a sad face should ask you what is the matter and you, with your mind confused with thoughts that trouble you, can you tell her about it or must you do it? You must, then, reply very simply: "I have many things on my mind and I am not sure what it is." But you say that you are afraid the Superior will think that you do not trust her enough to tell her about it. Moreover, why should you care what she thinks or does not think about you? Why trouble yourself as long as you are doing your best? What will they say if I do this or that, or what will the Superior think? Such thoughts greatly oppose our perfection when we dwell on them. You must always remember in everything I tell you that I am not talking at all about what our lower nature says and does. For I am taking no note of it. It is our higher nature that I am speaking about when I say that you must disregard what others will say or do.

The Fifteenth Conference

This might happen to you when you have given an account of yourself, because you have not said enough about specific faults. You say that you think that the Superior will say or think that you do not want to tell her everything. It is the same as when you give an account of yourself in Confession. In both, you must have an equal simplicity. Tell me, should you say: "If I confess such a thing, what will my confessor say or think about me?" No, he will think and say what he wants. Provided he has given me absolution and I have fulfilled my responsibility, that is enough for me. And just as Confession is not the time to examine myself to see if I have correctly told everything that I have done, so it is the time to remain attentive and calm before the Lord, with whom we have been reconciled, and thank God for his benefits without any need to recall what we may have forgotten. It is the same after having given an account of yourself. You must say simply what happened to you; afterward you must not think about it any longer. However, just as we are not well prepared to go to Confession by not wanting to examine ourselves for fear of finding something needing to be confessed, so we must not neglect to enter into ourselves (v19), or distract ourselves so as not to remember what we have done, and thus just give a general accounting of ourselves.

Furthermore, you must not form an overly delicate conscience so as to want to tell everything or run to your Superior, shouting "Stop what you are doing" at the least little ache you have, which will probably pass in fifteen minutes. You must learn to put up a bit more generously with little things that we can do nothing about, since they are ordinarily only manifestations of our imperfect human nature; such as an immoderate temper, moodiness, desires that sometimes produce a bit of sadness, sometimes a longing to speak, at other times thoughts that make us hate the idea of doing something, and similar things to which we are all subject as long as we are part of this transitory and finite human life. But with regard to this trouble that you say you have that prevents you from remaining in the presence of God unless you go immediately to tell the Superior about it. I am telling you to examine yourself as to whether this trouble does in fact disturb your attentiveness to the presence of God or rather the consolation which is part of your recollection. For, if it is only that, if you would have the courage and the conviction, as you say you have, to put up with it without looking for help, I say that you are doing well in doing just that, even though it might make you a bit uneasy, but only as long as it does not become overpowering. But if it would interfere with the means for your reposing in God, you must then go and tell the Superior, not to relieve yourself so much but to find once again the way to the presence of God, though it would not be a great fault to do it just to get some relief (v20).

Certainly, it would be most shameful if the Superior would say: "Do whatever you want," when you are asking to speak to her about it. If she would tell you to follow your own will, you must consider which is better, to do it or not to do it, and then make up your mind, for you must not waste time.

But you say, my dear Daughter, what if the Sisters have an aloof Superior who does not cordially welcome the Sisters in a spirit of gentleness when they come to her either because they need to speak to her or they want some permission on the spot, should she always answer in a disagreeable tone and so take away the confidence of coming back to her for their real needs? Would it be all right to talk to the Sister who takes her place and assumes her authority when she is not there, under the plea of not wanting to bother the Superior, and so receive the permission that the Superior perhaps would not give? Oh! Certainly not! My dear Sister, that must not be done except when the

The Fifteenth Conference

Superior would be so preoccupied that you would be really bothering her by speaking to her. For I know well that when she is not in the community room, you must not go looking for her to ask permission to go out. Isn't it being overly sensitive not to want to speak to the Superior because she is aloof? If she should continue to receive so poorly the Sisters who come in simplicity of heart to speak to her, I do admit that she has committed a fault and is being imperfect. However, the Sisters must not for that very reason stop carrying out their responsibility by addressing her as their Mother with a totally filial trust. "But she generally refuses everything I ask for." You must, however, not stop asking her about what would appear to be the proper, good thing to do. With reference to the thought that she might be upset with you, that is ridiculous. You must cut short on that. "But she doesn't do it to the others. And so I think she doesn't love me very much." Oh! That is what I was expecting you to say, since that is always where we generally wind up and find ourselves. We are never loved enough or thought well enough of by the Superior, which is such an important thing for our consolation. Why should it matter to us whether she loves us or doesn't love us, as long as we fulfill our responsibility in her regard? Oh! Yes! My dear Daughters, I am not saying that nothing should be said about the scornful attitude of a Superior and that it isn't necessary that she love us. Rather, I am speaking about our own humility with the intention of stripping ourselves of this vain affection that we have about being loved. Should we want to mortify ourselves except on the occasions that arise where we meet opposition? My dear Daughters, we must strip the victim if we want to be pleasing to God. In the Old Law (n7), God only wanted the holocaust if it were first stripped of its skin. Likewise, our hearts will never be as ready to be immolated and sacrificed for the honor of the Divine Majesty than when they will be stripped of their old skins, which are our habits, our inclinations, our dislikes, our vain affections that we have about ourselves and our own will.

"This is a great state of affairs! For I have a very strong dislike of going to speak to the Superior at this time because my presumption is that she will mortify me." It is precisely here where there can be some good; for an act of mortification joined to a serious dislike is infinitely valuable in moving along the way of perfection. It would be a most pleasant thing if it were possible for a Superior always to have honey on her lips so as to pour its sweetness and gentleness into the heart of those who would want to speak to her and that this would be for always. "But whatever she would say to me now would not be in my best interest, since I am bitter and perhaps things are the way they are because she does not speak to me graciously enough, which is what I want." Oh! Undoubtedly, it is that! But what must be done? We ought to be laughed at for all that because we are acting like little children. Are we consoled? Let us praise God. What if there is no consolation? Let us praise God all the same, and we should not be overcome by such whinings.

But if the Sisters ought not lose confidence to speak to their Superior even when they have a dislike for her, so in the same way the Superior ought not stop commanding or ordering them to do something even when the Sisters show their dislike for her. However, if she would become aware of a great and overwhelming dislike in a Sister, she might find it better to postpone for a while the giving of an act of mortification, for she shouldn't always be overly strict. But, my Lord, how can Sisters be happy if they have a Superior who does not love them? There can be good reason, for a Superior always loves the Sisters with an effective love, which we have already spoken about, by obtaining for them every good that she can through the exercise of her office which obliges her to do so. But with

The Fifteenth Conference

reference to affective love which is so tender and delicate and which we want so much, this is what I want to say: "The Superior might love us less with this kind of love; but likewise we should spend less time fantasizing about this kind of love so that we will have more time to spend reposing in the presence of God, which ought to be our specific goal.

Don't you see that a spirit of jealousy has become part of your disposition for such and such a Sister who is very close to the Superior and shows overly tender signs of affection? "But," you say, my dear Daughters, "that isn't so." You only have a dislike for pointless tokens of affection. With reference to that, you must not have a dislike, or at least you should not allow it to become so. But turn your mind to something else so as to divert attention away from it. If the Sister indulges her inclination a bit much this time, perhaps you might want to do pretty much the same shortly afterward on a different occasion, but you must learn to put up with it. We must use the same remedy to divert our attention away from these little tricks of our moods, of our annoyances, of our dislikes that we have spoken about when treating the first question on the giving up of our own opinions, by simply turning our minds from them so as to speak to God about something else. For the love of our own opinion, when it concerns matters of faith, can make us fall into heresy and make us unhappy (as happened to the Angels, who on being so attached to the opinion that they had formed that they ought to be something more than what they were, made them through their stubbornness hold onto and love their opinion, thus making these glorious Angels devils eternally damned and eternally joined to evil so that they can nevermore change it). On the other hand, the Angels who were submissive are so united to God that they can never be lost, for while possessing the subtlety of mind and penetrating at once the foundation of some truth, they can never release their grasp on it. Likewise, if we do not learn to turn away from and laugh at the variety of thoughts that enter our human minds, we will waste time by tormenting ourselves on seeing ourselves so far from this equanimity of spirit toward which we aspire. We are never in complete possession of it while we are in this life. This grace is reserved for the just in heaven above. And even though we, as I have said, cannot have this equanimity of spirit completely in its perfection in this life, we ought to strive to possess it to the greatest degree possible.

But haven't we said enough on this self-indulgence that we have for ourselves both with reference to our interior life, which deals with our spirits, and material things, that deal with our bodies? Persons who are more spiritual love themselves in fact with an effective love. We have already said that worldly people love themselves mostly with this kind of love, seeking with a self-centered ambition both material things and honors, so much so that they are never content with what they have. People who enter religious life so as to serve God as most faithfully as they can are not free from ambition, but they use it in their desire for the interior life, wanting the virtues in the highest degree possible for their perfection. But they can have a self-indulgent and affective love, which has more power over them than over people in the world. It distracts them from their desires so that they do not apply themselves carefully and ardently in their quest to achieve the goal of their desire because it costs them very dearly to renounce themselves on such occasions. To act against our dislikes, to oppose our inclinations, to control our emotions, to mortify our own judgment and to renounce our own will are realities that an affective and self-indulgent type of love that all of us have cannot allow without crying out: "Wait! This is causing me too much pain" (v21).

The Fifteenth Conference

My dear Daughters, are you asking whether you must pay attention to accepting all the little wants that we experience now and then so as to practice holy poverty? I have talked about this in *Philothea* (n8). Those who have vowed poverty ought to accept them for an even greater reason. It is to be poor most cheerfully, or rather, it is not to be poor when we lack nothing. Undoubtedly, we must not complain about such experiences, for if we do (v22), we do not love them and, therefore, we are not fulfilling our responsibility toward poverty. It is not being poor to have no money when we have no need for it and when we want for nothing. Our glorious Father, Saint Augustine, says in our *Rule* (n9) that a person who doesn't need much is happier than the person who needs many things that others pass up. There are certainly people who always need something because they need so many things to content themselves, which is very pitiful. There are those who are poor as long as they do not obtain too many things because their poverty is from what they do not have but which it seems they ought to have.

What I have said in *Philothea* can well be practiced by religious with the exception of certain chapters, i.e., those regarding marriage, dances, games and so on. All the rest is very good. I encourage her also to lay hold lovingly the times that she will experience to practice real poverty (n10). If we always make sure that we are well provided for with the things that seem to be so necessary, we will not feel the effects of holy poverty. As far as I am concerned, I would not want to specify what I could well pass up, as long as it doesn't involve a serious threat to one's health. I wouldn't even mention being a bit cold or wearing a garment a bit too short or wearing a garment that isn't just well made enough for me. But if I were given a pair of shoes that were too narrow so that it took me a half hour to put them on, I would ask for another pair rather than waste time on them every morning. I have nothing to say about wearing a garment that doesn't fit well or is a bit uncomfortable. However, with reference to being exposed to the cold, we must be very careful not to put up with excessive cold that is a threat to our health. We must not do that.

I have spoken (n11) about something in two or three convents in France that I am now going to tell you about: in order to obtain perfection, we must want very little and ask for nothing. Truthfully, a person would be very poor by observing this. However, I assure you there is a great secret about acquiring perfection and, if it is nevertheless a secret, there are few persons who know it, or if they know it, they might assuredly profit from it. As far as I am concerned, if I were a religious I would ask for nothing, at least if I were in the state of mind that I am enjoying right now, for I ask nothing from Our Lord, nor would I ask for anything. There are some people who ask for crosses and it never seems that Our Lord gives them enough to satisfy their fervor. Me, I would ask for nothing at all; my only desire is that I be ready to bear with as much patience and humility that I can muster those that it pleases his Divine Goodness to send me. I would do the same if I were in a religious community; I would ask for absolutely nothing unless I were ill, for it is necessary that the sick ask confidently for their small needs. I would not even ask to receive Holy Communion except on certain days when custom seems to oblige us to do so, as on the taking of the habit, on Profession day, and on the feast of the community's patron. I would also ask for a needle and thread when I am commanded to do certain jobs, for the command that is given me to do the job obliges me to ask for what is necessary to do the work. No, my dear Daughters, I would not ask for mortifications. I

The Fifteenth Conference

would be very ready to accept those that you give me, but I would not ask for them at all. I would be happy simply to be always on my way without even entertaining a desire for anything.

You were right in asking how to be docile because you feel the need for it very strongly. For myself, I would do something cheerfully when I was ordered to do it, but otherwise I would not worry about it. In a word, I would love more bearing a small cross of straw that is placed on my shoulders without my choice and not one like going out to chop a pile of wood in a forest, involving a lot of work, and carrying it back with difficulty. Truthfully, I believe I would be more pleasing to God with the cross of straw and not with the one that I might bear with more sweat and pain, because I might bear the latter with more satisfaction for my self-love, which is pleased by so many of its own devices and so little by allowing oneself to be led and directed in simplicity, which is what I want most for you. To do very simply everything that we are commanded, either in the *Rule* or *Constitutions* or even by our Superiors, and then to be at rest with regard to everything else is to be as close to God as we can be.

But you ask, my dear Daughters, about what I have said just now concerning the necessity of being faithful about mortifying ourselves: whether you must abstain from eating meat that you like very much. As for myself, I wouldn't do it, for we are obligated by the holy word of Our Lord about eating "what is put before" us (n12); and that it is done without choice. When I am given what I like very much, I should eat it in a spirit of thanksgiving; when I am not given it, I should not be upset by it. But you say: "There are two kinds of meat in your portion." I would always eat whatever I would find on my plate and according to my appetite and my need, and then I leave the rest even though this would be what I would like. But if I did not like it, I would choose what I could eat easily. Outside of that I would take what is given me and even ask that it should be given me without choice.

On poverty, I said that it is good to put up with some small needs, not complaining about them or desiring them, and even less, demanding what we want. Those who would do it can do it (v23) as long as the *Rule* allows it and it is not against poverty, as you have said, but it is also not in accord with poverty or perfection. By trying to suit yourselves you are not committing a sin, provided that you do not give in too much in looking after your comforts and that you stay within the limits of the observance in this matter. But acting in this way you lose the practice of virtue that we need in our condition. No, my dear Sisters, charity doesn't require that the Sisters pay attention to observe and note if some of them are lacking something, because they do not have that responsibility. However, if they discover some need that a Sister has, they ought to make the Superior aware of it very simply, without adding or subtracting any more than if it were themselves.

You now ask if it is to fail in one's observance and to commit a fault by choosing a more fancy napkin for the Superior and not give her what falls to her without choice, like is done with the other Sisters. My dear Daughters, I would say that what has been done in this regard up to the present has not been wrong, but it is, however, now, since it must no longer be done from now on. The Superiors have their own honors and things that single them out. She is called Mother, she has the power and authority to command and order and the Sisters are to obey her; outside of that, there is no need that she be singled out unless it is stated in the *Constitutions* (n13), but only in case of necessity, as for the other Sisters.

The Fifteenth Conference

We must now end and close this conference by recommending simplicity and generosity of spirit: walking always in the way of our own perfection, without wasting time on ways that oppose it, and that we can be the cause of such, either by our own imperfections, dislikes, unmortified emotions or other things that originate elsewhere. On our part, this is what should be: we should not tire of suffering for Our Lord, to whom thanks, glory and praise be forever given throughout all ages.

Amen.

NOTES

1. Acts 15:7,12,13; ICor. 11:16.
2. Rom. 15:4.
3. Acts 15:37-40.
4. Saint Jerome, Letter 108 to Eustachius in the *Epitaph of Paula* #20.
5. This story took place at the Visitation at Bourges. The example was a Sister with the name Sister Anne Marie who received the religious habit. Her family was either Tillier or Tellier or Le Tellier. Cf. P. de La Riviere, *La Vie de L'Illustrissime et Reverendissime François de Sales*, Book 4, Chapter 65, (Lyons: Simon Regaud, 1624).
6. obtain.
7. Lev. 1:6.
8. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 3, Chapter 15.
9. *Rule of Saint Augustine for the Sisters*, *Oeuvres XXV*, 36.
10. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 3, Chapters 15, 16.
11. Cf. *The Last Conference*.
12. Lk. 10:8.
13. *Constitution 29*, *Oeuvres XXV*, 87-88.

The Fifteenth Conference

VARIANTS

1. E1629. *The Fourteenth Conference, Against Private Judgment and the Attentiveness Which We Show Ourselves.*
E1933. *The Fifteenth Conference, On the Subject of the Attentiveness That We Show to Ourselves on Private Judgment.*
2. E1629. The beginning of the *Fourteenth Conference*. "The first question is whether to be governed by one's own private...."
3. E1629. "...if anyone differed with them regarding it and if any refused to accept their opinions, however well-founded they might be, they never sought to force them...."
4. E1629. "...and even taking with them a young...."
5. E1629. The next sentence is not part of this text.
6. E1629. The remainder of this sentence is not part of this text.
7. E1629. "...not submitting to the advice of those who advised her to abstain from them."
8. E1629. "...form them or not. It is, then, perfectly natural that we should hold our own judgment in high regard and carefully search for reasons to support what we have once understood and found to be right."
9. E1629. "...swayed by it and to be so attached to it, would be a great imperfection. Tell me, isn't it a useless waste of time, especially for those who have no authority at all, to trifle about this?"
10. E1629. The next paragraph begins: "It is very true that we cannot prevent...."
11. E1629. "...nor looking down on what they have found to be good."
"The one and only remedy which can cure our private judgment is to reject what pops into our mind by turning ourselves..."
12. E1629. "...weak and incapable to make holy prayer."
13. E1629. "...He coddles him; he kisses him, he holds him on his knees and in his arms with an unparalleled gentleness, so much more for the child than for himself. If the child is stung by a bee, he does not stop soothing the sore spot until the pain disappears. If the older son had been stung by a hundred bees...."

The Fifteenth Conference

14. E1629. "But when I tell her about what I need, she will look at me so coldly that it seems...."
15. E1629. "You must no longer be frightened even though they might be a bit severe in correcting such a fault. For, my dear Daughter, you have lost confidence in them by the way they have corrected you; but still go simply and tell them your fault.
I will believe that you would have more pleasure and confidence in telling your fault to a Sister who doesn't have the authority to make you take your medicine than to a Sister who has this responsibility and authority. For while you are doing this, such a one is pitying my Sister and is put on the spot."
The text resumes in the next paragraph with: "...put on the spot..."
16. E1629. "Very simply, this is the true path for the Sisters of the Visitation which is pleasing to God...."
17. The Rouen Manuscript: "...the effects of the inferior and that we should not be surprised."
We have supplied the omissions in the Manuscript from the *Colloquies*.
18. E1629. The next paragraph begins with the words: "You now ask if the Superior upon seeing you a bit more sad than usual, asks you...."
19. 1629. "...self-introspection before giving an account of yourself for fear of finding something that would make it painful to tell." The text resumes with the next paragraph.
20. E1629 gives after this paragraph the passage which, in the Rouen Manuscript, ends *Eleventh Conference, On Condescension*, and omits the rest of this conference that we give from the other manuscripts.
21. E1933. "...trouble. And this is why we do nothing."
"My dear Daughter, are you asking...."
22. E1933. Add the phrase: "do, it is a sign that we...."
23. E1933. "Those who want to do it can ask for what they will need as long as"