

THE SIXTEENTH CONFERENCE

On the Topic of New Foundations (v1, n1)

Amidst all the praise that the Saints give to Abraham, Saint Paul ranks him above all the others (v2) in that Abraham hoped "against all hope." God had promised him that his posterity would be multiplied like the "stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore" (n2), but in the meantime he received the command to kill his son, "Isaac" (n3). However, poor Abraham did not lose hope, but hoped "against hope itself" that if he in fact obeyed the command given him to kill his son, God (n4) nevertheless would not fail (n5) to keep his word to him. His hope was so certain, for he saw nowhere else in which to put this hope except the word that God had given him. Oh! There is no more true and firm a foundation than the word of God, for it is infallible. Abraham then left to fulfill the word of God with an unparalleled simplicity, for he no longer gave any consideration or response to it once God told him to leave his "land and his relatives" (n6), and go to the place that God would show him, without being specific. Thus, he set out most simply in the ship of Divine Providence. Then, after walking for three days and three nights with his poor Isaac, who had the responsibility to gather wood for the sacrifice, Isaac "asked his father" where the "victim" was. Abraham answered, "My son, the Lord will provide" (n7). Oh, my God! We should be so happy if we could only accustom ourselves to making this response in our hearts when they are anxious about something the Lord will provide, and that after we say it, we are no longer anxious or troubled or overly eager, no more than Isaac was! For he was silent, believing that the Lord would provide as his father had told him.

How great indeed is the confidence that God asks us to have in his fatherly care and in his Divine Providence. Why shouldn't we have it, seeing that no one has ever been deceived by it? No one ever trusts in God who does not carry away the fruits of this confidence. I am saying this with reference to ourselves, for with reference to people in the world, their confidence is very often (v3) accompanied by presumption. This is why it has no value in the sight of God. Consider, I beg you, what Our Lord and our Mother said to his Apostles so as to root this holy and loving confidence in them: "I have sent you" into the world "without purse," without money and without any provisions either for eating or clothing. "Were you lacking anything?" They said, "No" (n8). He said to them: "Go and do not think about what you are to eat or drink or what you are to wear" (n9), not even "what you are to say" before the great lords and magistrates of the provinces that you will pass through. For in each case your heavenly Father will foresee all "that will be necessary for you. Do not think about all that you will say" (n10). "But I am ignorant," you say, "I do not know how I should behave with people of position. I have no education at all." That doesn't matter. Go and have confidence in God, for he has said (n11): "How can a woman forget her child?" And so he will "never" forget us, for he "carries" us "engraved" on his heart and "in" his "hands." Do you think that He who takes care of providing food for "the birds of the air" and the animals of the land "who neither sow nor reap" (n12) will ever forget to provide all that will be needed by the person who will completely confide in his Providence, seeing that every human person is capable of being united to God our Sovereign Good?

This, my dear Sisters, seems to me to be well-suited to your departure. For, even if you are not allowed the apostolic dignity because of your sex (v4), you are, nevertheless, capable of apostolic merit. But let us not use this word "merit" among ourselves, for I have always had a bit of dislike for

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using this word "merit" to motivate us to do good. I would say to you that you can do a great deal by serving God in such a way and obtain an increase in glory as the Apostles did. Certainly, my dear Daughters, this ought to be a cause of great consolation for you, seeing that God should want to use you for such an excellent work as that to which you are called. You ought to consider yourselves greatly honored by the Divine Majesty. For, what does God desire from you but the same he had ordered his Apostles to do? This is why he sent them into the world, which was nothing other than why Our Lord himself came into this world, and that is to "give life" to humankind. And not only that, he said, but so that humankind might have it "more abundantly" (13), that they have a better life, which he offered them by giving them his grace. The Apostles were sent by Our Lord throughout the whole world for this same purpose, for Our Lord told them: (n14) "As my Father has sent me, I send you;" go and give "life" to humankind. But don't be content with that; make them live a more perfect life by means of the doctrine that you will teach them. They will have this "life" by believing in my word that you will open up to them. And they will have it more abundantly by means of the example that you will give them. And do not worry whether your work will be followed by the fruit that you expect from it, for it is not from you that the fruit will be asked, but only if you have tried faithfully to cultivate well these dry and barren lands. You will not be asked if you have reaped an abundant harvest but only if you took care to sow the seed well.

So, my dear Daughters, you are now asked to go here and there in different places, so that Christians might have life and that they live a better life. For what are you going to do but try to make known the perfection of your community and by means of this knowledge to draw many to embrace all the observances contained and included there? But, tell me, aren't you going to give life to men and women without preaching, without giving the sacraments, and without forgiving sins as the Apostles did? And to speak more specifically to women, because maybe hundreds and hundreds of women, who will be drawn by your example in your communities, might otherwise have been lost if they had remained in the world, but will now enjoy heaven for all eternity in eternal happiness (v5). And isn't it through your life that life will be given to them? Furthermore, will it not be through your lives that they will live a life more perfect and pleasing to God, a life that will make them more capable of uniting themselves to the Divine Goodness, since they have received from you the necessary instruction to attain true and pure love of God, which is this more abundant life that Our Lord has come to bring to humankind? I have brought "fire to the earth, what do I ask or intend but (v6) that it be kindled (n15) unceasingly on my altar (n16)." For that reason, may it never be extinguished so as to reveal with what ardor he wants the fire of his love to always be a light on the altar of our hearts. Oh, God, such is the grace that God gives you! He makes you women apostles, not in the sense of their unique role, but certainly in the responsibility and merit. You will not preach, for women are not allowed to, even though Saint Magdalene and her sister, Saint Martha, did. You will not stop exercising the apostolic office when you reveal (v7) what your community is and the way of life you live, as I have just said.

Go then, full of courage, do what you are called to. But go in simplicity. If you are apprehensive, tell your heart: the Lord "will provide" (n17). If the thought of your weakness troubles you, place yourselves in God and trust in him (v8). The Apostles, for the most part, were sinners and unlearned men. God made them Saints in a way corresponding to the responsibility that he would

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give them. Entrust yourselves to him, lean on his providence and fear nothing. Don't say: "I am not gifted with speaking well." It doesn't matter (v9), go without worry and forever, for God will supply what you have to say and do when the time comes. Even if you have no virtues or if you aren't aware of any in yourselves, do not worry about it. For if you undertake the direction of persons for the glory of God or any other work, whatever it might be, for the glory of God and to fulfill obedience, God will take care of you. He himself has pledged to provide all that will be necessary for you, both for yourselves and for those whom God has placed in your charge.

Truthfully, it is a matter of such great importance and immense consequence that you are undertaking. However, you would be wrong if you did not hope for a great success, seeing that you are not doing it by your own choice but to fulfill obedience. Undoubtedly, we should have great cause for fear if we have sought responsibilities and offices either in the community or elsewhere, and particularly when they have been given to us because of our seeking them. But when that is not the case, let us bow humbly under the yoke and accept the burden cheerfully. Let us humble ourselves, for we must always do that, but always remember to build our generosity on our acts of humility; otherwise our acts of generosity would be worthless.

I have a very great desire to engrave on your hearts and in your minds a maxim which is of unparalleled usefulness. It is to ask for nothing and refuse nothing (v10). Receive what will be given you and do not ask for what will not be given you. In so doing, you will find "peace for your soul" (n18). Yes, my very dear Sisters, keep your hearts in holy indifference to accept what will be given you and do not desire what will not be given you. In a word, desire nothing but leave yourselves and all your concerns, wholly and perfectly in the care of Divine Providence. Allow yourselves to be treated in the same way that children are dealt with by their nurses. Let Providence carry you, as it were, on the right arm or the left, as it pleases her, for a child is not offended by this. Let Providence put you down to rest or lift you up, as it pleases her, for it is a good Mother who knows better what you need than you yourselves do. I mean, if Divine Providence allows afflictions to come upon you or even contradictions and mortifications, do not refuse them, but accept them cheerfully, lovingly and peacefully. If she doesn't send you any or doesn't permit them to come to you, do not desire them in any way, nor ask for them. Likewise, if you receive consolations, accept them in a spirit of thanksgiving and recognition of the Divine Goodness. If you do not have them, do not desire them in any way, but try to keep your heart ready to accept the many events sent by Divine Providence and, as far as possible, with a similar frame of mind (v11). We must always realize that there are two wills and non-wills, one of which must not be heeded in any way, i.e., the one that draws to sensuality. If you are given some obediences in religious life that might seem overpowering, like being a Superior, do not turn them down; if they are not given to you, do not desire them in any way (v12) as well as anything else. You would scarcely believe it unless you experience it, how much profit this practice will bring you. Instead of wasting time on desiring these means for attaining perfection and then possibly others, we should apply ourselves more simply and faithfully to those we will experience along the way.

While considering your departure and the resulting feelings that all of you will have on leaving one another, I have thought that I ought to say some small thing which might lessen this grief. I also don't want to say that you cannot cry a little, for you ought to do that seeing that it cannot be

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otherwise, having lived so gently and lovingly together for such a long time in the practice of the same exercises. This has so united your hearts that they undoubtedly cannot bear separation or division. Furthermore, my dear Daughters, you will not be divided or separated at all, for everyone will go away and everyone will remain. Those who go away stay and those who stay go away. Those who stay go away, not in their very person, but in the persons of those who go away; and likewise, those who go away remain in the persons of those who will remain. This is one of the main fruits of religious life in that this holy union which is formed through charity is a union of such a nature that many hearts become as one and many members become as one body (n19). In religious life all become one so much so that all religious who belong to the same order seem only to be a single religious (v13). For example, all are Superiors in the person of the Superior; all are cooks in the person of the cook; just as all the Sisters in the house are sacristans in the person of the sacristan, and so for all the different jobs in the community. The lay Sisters chant the Divine Office in the person of those who are responsible for it (v14), just as the choir Sisters who chant the Office prepare dinner in the persons of those who prepare it. But why is this so? The reason is very evident, so much so that if those who are in choir to chant the Office were not there, the others would be there in their place. If there were no lay Sisters to prepare dinner, the choir Sisters would be used there. If one Sister were not the Superior, there would be someone else. Likewise, those who go away remain and those who stay behind go away, for if those who had been chosen to go could not do it, then those who stay behind would go in their place.

But, my dear Sisters, what should make us go or stay cheerfully is the almost infallible certainty that we ought to have that this separation is made only with reference to the body, for with regards to the human spirit we will always remain most uniquely one. This bodily separation is rather a small thing after all; it must take place some day whether we like it or not. But the separation of hearts and the lack of unity of spirits is something to be dreaded.

As for ourselves, we shall not only always remain joined together, but moreover, our union will always continue becoming more perfect in the gentle and lovable "bonds of charity," and we will always be growing closer and closer together in the measure that we will advance in the way of our own perfection (n20). As we become more capable of uniting ourselves to God, we will be all the more united among ourselves. And at each communion that we make, our union will become more perfect, for by being united to Our Lord we will always remain more closely united together. Thus, the sacred reception of this heavenly Bread and this very adorable Sacrament is called Communion (v15), i.e., a union in common. Oh, God! How great is the union between each religious of the same community! A union in which spiritual goods are joined together and become common, as in the case of material goods. Religious have nothing of their own because of the sacred vow of voluntary poverty. And by one's holy profession that is made from a very holy charity, all their virtues are held in common; all are sharing in one another's good works and all will enjoy their fruits, provided that they always abide in charity and in the observance of the *Rule* of the religious community to which God has called them. Thus, the Sister who is in the kitchen or involved in some other responsibility contemplates in the person of a Sister who is at prayer; the Sister who is resting shares in the work of another Sister who is working at the command of the Superior.

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This then, my dear Daughters, is much like those who go away remaining and those who remain going away, and how all of you ought to embrace obedience equally, lovingly and courageously on this occasion as well as all others. Since those who remain will share in the labor and in the fruit of the journey of those who are going away, just as those who are leaving will have a share in the peacefulness and repose of those who will remain. Undoubtedly, my dear Daughters, everyone needs many virtues, or care in practicing them, whether you go or stay. For those who go need to have a great deal of courage and confidence in God to undertake lovingly and humbly what God desires of them, not in spite of all of the little regrets that could arise in them on leaving this community to which God first called them: the Sisters whom they have loved so dearly and whose company has brought them so much consolation in spirit, their relatives and friends; in a word, all the many things nature holds onto as long as we are alive, and the peacefulness of their refuge, which is so dear to them. Those who remain have the same need and demand for courage, both to persevere in the practice of holy submission, humility, and tranquility, and to prepare to go forth from the community when they will be given the command to do so. For, as you see, my dear Daughters, your congregation is growing in every direction and in many different places. So too you ought to try to increase and multiply your acts of virtue and you should grow in courage in order to make yourselves ready to be used according to God's will.

It certainly seems to me when I reflect upon the beginning of your congregation that it resembles the story of Abraham. God had given Abraham the promise that his seed would be (v16) multiplied like the sand along the seashore (n21). He commanded him nevertheless to sacrifice his son to him, through whom the promise of God would be fulfilled. Abraham hoped and persevered in his "hoping against hope itself" and his hope was not in vain but fruitful. Likewise, when the first three Sisters (n22) came together and took upon themselves this kind of life, God had decreed from all eternity to bless their increase (n23) and from them to give an increase that would continue to multiply. Yet, who could have believed it, since having put them into their little home we thought of nothing else but of making them die to the world? They were sacrificed and they sacrificed themselves of their own free will. God was so pleased with their sacrifice that he gave them not only a "life" for themselves but a "life so abundant" that they could even pass it on, by the grace of God, to many persons (n24), as we see it now.

It certainly seems to me that these three Sisters are very well represented by the grains of wheat that were found among the straw that was on the chariot of Triptolemus, which served to shield his weapons (n25). For while this straw was being carried to a country where there was no wheat at all, these three grains were taken and placed in the soil, and they produced others in such quantity that within a few years all the fields were sown with wheat. The providence of our good God has sown from his blessed hands these three Daughters in the soil of the Visitation. After remaining there awhile hidden in the eyes of the world, they bore the fruit (n26) that we now see. It seems that in a short time every country will be sharing in your community. Oh! How happy are they who dedicate themselves truly and without reserve to the service of God, for he never leaves them barren or unfruitful! For everything that they abandon for God, he will give them an incomparable reward both in this life and in the next. What a grace, I pray you, to be used in the service of people whom God loves so dearly and (v17) for whom he suffered so much to save them! Certainly, it is an honor

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unsurpassed and one which, my dear Daughters, you ought to value highly. To do this faithfully, you should not complain about the trouble, the pain, or the labor involved, for you will be richly rewarded for everything. Even if this motive might fail to encourage you on the one hand, at least it will make you more pleasing to God and increase his glory even more.

Go, then, and remain courageous (v18) in the practice of your exercises. Do not waste time trying to see whether you have within yourselves what is necessary (v19). I mean the virtues needed for the responsibilities that will be given you. It is better that we do not see these in ourselves, for that keeps us humble and leads us to mistrust our strengths and ourselves and makes us place our confidence more totally in God. As long as we have no need for the practice of some virtue, it is better that we should not possess it (n27), so that when we do need it, we may rest assured that God will provide each thing in its own place and time, provided that we are faithful in those matters which have to be practiced at the time. We must not waste time in desiring anything or seeking anything. We should leave ourselves completely in the arms of Divine Providence to do with us what pleases him. For what use is there in desiring one thing rather than another? Shouldn't we be indifferent to everything? As long as we are united to God and love his Divine Will (v20), that should be sufficient for us to be pleasing to him. As for me, I wonder how we can have a greater inclination to be used for one thing rather than another, especially since we are religious, in which one office, responsibility or work is as pleasing to God as a thousand others. Obedience is what gives value to all the works of religious. When we are given (v21) a choice of more humble works and those that are not as pleasing to us, we must embrace them more lovingly. But if there is no choice, let us embrace either one or the other with the same type of heart. When a responsibility is given us that is honorable in the eyes of the world, we must be humble in the eyes of God. When it is lowly in the eyes of the world, we must consider ourselves honored in the eyes of God. Finally, my dear Daughters, remember lovingly and faithfully all that I have told you, whether it be for our interior or exterior life. Desire only what God wants for you; embrace lovingly all the events and the differing effects of his Divine Will, without wasting time on anything else.

After this, what more can I say, my dear Daughters, since it seems that all our happiness consists wholly in this loving practice. I will offer you the example of the Israelites (n28), with which I will end the Conference. Having remained for a long time without a king, suddenly one day they wanted to have one. What a reality the human spirit is! As if God would have left them without any direction, or as if He would not have had come to rule, govern and defend them! They ask the prophet Samuel, who promises them that he would ask God what he should do. God, angry at their request, responded that he would give them one, but he warned them that the king that they would have would assume such power and authority over them that he would take their children from them: with reference to their sons, he would make (v22) some cooks, others soldiers and captains; with reference to their daughters, they would be made kitchen maids, others, bakers and still others, perfumers. Our Lord does the same here, my dear Daughters, with persons who are dedicated to his service; for as you see, in a religious community there are various responsibilities and offices. What am I saying? Nothing other than it seems to me that his Divine Majesty has chosen you to go out as "perfumers"! Yes, indeed, for you have been commissioned by him to go out and pour out the sweet odors of the virtues of your congregation. Young women are so caring about their perfumes, for the

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sacred lover in the Canticle (n29) says that the "name" of her well-beloved is an "oil" or balm pouring out infinitely pleasing odors everywhere. "This is why," she adds, "the young" women have followed the attractions of these divine perfumes. My dear Sisters, do the same as the perfumers of the Divine Goodness; you should go forth pouring out everywhere the incomparable odor of a very sincere humility, gentleness and charity so that many people will be attracted to follow after your perfumes. And in this way they will embrace your way of life through which they like yourselves will be able to enjoy in this life a holy and loving peace and tranquility of mind and afterwards enjoy eternal happiness in the next.

Your congregation is like a holy beehive (as you were told so well the other day in a sermon) which has already sent forth various swarms, but with this difference: that when the bees go forth to settle in another hive where, having begun a new household, they choose in each swarm a particular king, under whom they live and make their home. But for yourselves, my dear Daughters, if you do in fact go into a new hive, i.e., you are going to begin a new community of your congregation, you have in fact only the same King, Our Crucified Lord, under whose authority you will safely live everywhere you will be. Do not fear that you will want for anything, for he will always be with you as long as you do not choose anyone else. Take great care to grow in your love and faithfulness towards his Divine Goodness, keeping as close to him as possible, and then all will go well for you. Learn from him everything you will have to do; do nothing without his advice, for he is the faithful Friend who will guide, govern and take care of you. So, with all my heart I beg him to accomplish this (v24).

NOTES

1. The occasion is the departure of Mère Claude-Agnès Joly de La Roche and several other Sisters from the Visitation of Annecy, leaving in July 1620 to found the Monastery of Orléans. This afforded Francis de Sales the opportunity to give this conference.
2. Rom. 4:18.
3. Gen. 15:5; 22:17.
4. Gen. 22:2.
5. allow.
6. Gen. 12:1.
7. Gen. 22:6-8.
8. Lk. 22:35-36.

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9. Lk. 12:22-29.
10. Lk. 12:11; Matt. 10:19-20.
11. Is. 49:15,16.
12. Matt. 6:26; Lk. 12:24.
13. Jn. 10:10.
14. Jn. 20:21.
15. Lk. 12:49.
16. Lev. 6:12.
17. Gen. 22:8.
18. Matt. 11:29.
19. Acts 4:32.
20. Eph. 4:2-3; Col. 3:14.
21. Gen. 22:17. We note that this comparison is used for Yahweh only after proof of the sacrifice and not before the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 16:10).
22. Mère Jeanne de Chantal (1572-1641), Marie-Jacqueline Favre (1591-1637), daughter of president Antoine Favre, the close friend of Francis de Sales, and Jeanne Charlotte de Brécard (1580-1637) who, on Trinity Sunday, June 6, 1610, founded the Order of the Visitation in the small house called the Gallery at Annecy.
23. Ps. 110:1.
24. Jn. 10:10.
25. Ovid., *Metamorphoses*, Book V.
26. Jn. 12:24,25.
27. See the *Eighteenth Conference, On the Subject of the Sacraments*.

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28. ISam. 8:5-13.
29. Cant. of Cant. 1:2.

VARIANTS

1. E1629. *The Sixth Conference, On the Departure of the Sisters of the Visitation who were leaving to found a new community of their congregation.*
2. E1933. *The Sixth Conference, On the Subject of Foundations (on Hope).*
3. E1629. "...the others: that he believed in hope against hope itself, God..."
4. E1629. "...you are nevertheless capable in some way of receiving the apostolic office and you can undertake many services for God by obtaining to a certain extent the advancement of his glory." The text of this edition resumes with "Certainly, my daughters..."
5. E1629. "...unimaginable happiness, and is it not through your means that life will be given to them and that they will have life more abundantly, i.e., a life..."
6. E1933. "...that it be kindled? And in another place, he commands that the fire burn incessantly on his altar and..."
7. E1629. "...by the communication of your manner of life..."
8. E1629. "The Apostles were sinners and ignorant for the most part. God rendered them learned so far as it was"
9. E1629. "...go without speaking, for God..."
10. E1629. "refuse nothing. No, my dear Daughters, receive what will be given to you and do not ask for what is not offered you or what will not be..."
11. E1629. The text then skips down to: "...If you are given..."
12. E1629. "And so with all other things. I am speaking about things of the earth, for as regards to virtue we can and ought to desire and ask for them from God. The love of God includes all of them. You would not believe unless you had the (experience).

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13. E1629. "all the religious of an Order seem to be one single religious. The lay Sisters...." The example in the new text has been omitted in the 1629 text.
14. E1629. "...do it just as the latter performs the domestic responsibilities in the person of those who do them. And why..."
15. E1629. "...like a union."
16. E1629. "multiplied like the stars of the firmament and as..."
17. E1629. "...and for whom Our Lord suffered so much to save them."
18. E1629. "...courageously for this purpose and do not waste any time at all in trying to see whether you have the talents..."
19. E1629. "I mean the talents necessary for the work in which you will be employed. It is better..."
20. E1629. "...will, it should be enough. As for me..."
21. E1629. "...are given a choice the most lowly would be the most desirable and then it would have to be..."
22. E1629. "...he would make them sergeants, others..."
23. E1629. The material in the parentheses is not part of this text.
24. E1629. "I beg him to do so. May God Be Blessed!"