

THE EIGHTEENTH CONFERENCE

On the Subject of the Sacraments Given by Our Most Blessed Father to His Beloved Daughters of the Visitation (v1)

Before knowing how one should receive the Sacraments and what fruit we should draw from them, we ought to know what the Sacraments are and also their effects.

The Sacraments are channels through which, in a manner of speaking, God comes to us, just as we through prayer (v2) cast ourselves into God, since prayer is nothing other than the raising of our minds to God. The effects of the Sacraments are many even though they have one single aim and goal (n1), which is our union with God. Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are united to God like a son with his father; through Confirmation, we are joined like a soldier to his captain, receiving the strength to fight and overcome our enemies in all temptations; through the Sacrament of Penance, we are united with God as reconciled friends; through the Eucharist, like food for our body; through Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick), we are united to God like a child coming from a faraway land who, with one foot already in his father's house, is reunited with his father and mother and whole family. There are many effects, but they all demand the union of ourselves with God.

We will only talk about two: Penance and Eucharist. We must know why it happens that by receiving these Sacraments so often, we do not receive the graces that they are said to offer to persons who are well prepared, since these graces are joined to the Sacraments. Truthfully, they are joined (v3) to them and, provided that we receive the Sacraments in the state of grace (this means in Confession we have no affection for any mortal sin), we always receive the grace conjoined to the Sacrament, which is a hatred for sin and the resolve not to commit them again. But we do not receive the graces belonging to (n2) the preparation, which are the strength to undertake the correction of our evil inclinations, the courage to embrace the practice of virtue and, finally, perfection. We should then know how well prepared we ought to be to receive these two sacraments and all the others as well. The first facet of the preparation is purity of intention; the second, attention; the third, humility.

With regard to purity of intention, it is totally necessary not only for the reception of the sacraments but in everything that we would like to do or that we actually do. For, purity of intention is present when we receive the sacraments or do anything, such that it is, to be united to God and to become more pleasing to him without any tinge of our own self-interest. You will recognize it if when you want (v4) to receive Holy Communion you are not allowed to do so, or if after Holy Communion you have no consolation (v5), and in spite of it, you remain at peace without consenting to any kind of anxiety. I say without consenting because it could well happen that it might overcome you. But if, however, you should give into the anxiety that arises because (v6) you have been refused permission to receive Holy Communion by your Superior or because you had no consolation, don't you see that your intention was not pure and that you are seeking to unite yourself to God for the consolation? But our union with God is based on the holy virtue of obedience. Likewise, if you seek perfection with a great deal of anxiety, don't you see that it is our self-love which doesn't want to admit

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any imperfection in ourselves? If it were possible that we could be both pleasing and united with God while being imperfect, we should want to be without perfection (v7).

The second point of our preparation is attention. Oh! God! How we ought to receive the sacraments with a great deal of attention, both on account of the greatness of the action and on account of what each one asks of us! For example, on going to Confession, we ought to bring a heart that is lovingly sorrowful, and on receiving Holy Communion, we ought to bring a heart that is ardently loving. I am not saying that because of this heightened attention there will be no distractions, for that is not within our power. I mean that we must be very careful not to dwell on them willfully.

The third facet of our preparation is humility. Humility is a very necessary virtue so as to receive the abundant graces that flow through the channels of the sacraments; because waters are used to flowing more swiftly and with greater force when the channels are placed in sloping and low-lying places.

In addition to these three points of preparation, I want to tell you that in a word the principal one is total abandonment of ourselves to the merciful will of God, submitting our will and all of our affections to that power of will without any reserve. I say without reserve inasmuch as our basic unworthiness is so great that we always hold back something. The most spiritual persons ordinarily reserve to themselves the will of possessing some virtues, and when they come to Communion, they say: "O Lord, I am abandoning all to you, but (n3) give me prudence so as to know how to live righteously." They don't ask for simplicity. "I am absolutely submissive to your divine will, but give me great strength to do all things well in your service." They don't mention gentleness so as to be able to live peaceably with their neighbor. Another will say: "Give me the humility I need to give good example." But humility of heart, which makes us love our own lowliness, they seem to have no need of. "Oh, my God, since I am totally yours, grant that I may always have consolations at prayer!" It is true that the goal we ought to have is to be united to God; these people never ask for troubles or mortifications. To reserve certain acts of their wills is not the way to achieve union with God, no matter how good these acts appear to be. For Our Lord in wanting to give everything to us desires that we would mutually give everything to him so that the union of our heart with his Divine Majesty might be more perfect and that we might be able to say truthfully with the most perfect Christian disciple: "I myself no longer live, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in me!" (n4)

The second part of this preparation is to empty our hearts of everything so that Our Lord Jesus Christ might refill it with himself. Most assuredly, the reason why we do not receive the grace of sanctification (since a single reception of the Eucharist well made is both capable and sufficient to make us holy and perfect) arises from nothing other than the fact that we do not allow Our Lord to reign in ourselves as his Divine Goodness truly wants to. This Well Beloved of ours enters within us and finds our hearts full of desires, affections, and petty wants (v8). He wants to be the Master and Ruler of our hearts and to show how much he wants, he says to his sacred bride that she is to put him as a seal on her heart (n5) so that nothing can enter there except with her permission and his good pleasure. Now, I know so well that the center of our hearts is empty; otherwise it would be guilty of unfaithfulness. I mean that we have not only rejected and detested mortal sin but also many kinds of bad affections. But alas! All the nooks and crannies of our hearts are filled with a thousand kinds of things unworthy of being in the presence of this sovereign king. These seem to bind his hands and

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prevent him from leaving for us the goods and graces that his Goodness wanted to give us if he would have found us prepared. On our part, let us do everything in our power to prepare ourselves well to receive this "Superstantial" Bread (n6): by abandoning ourselves totally to Divine Providence, not only with regards to this worldly goods but principally with spiritual ones; by pouring forth in the presence of the Divine Will all our affections, desires and inclinations so as to be totally his. We are assured that Our Lord for his part will accomplish the promise he has made to us about transforming us into him, raising our lowliness up to be united with his greatness.

We can receive Holy Communion for different reasons: to ask God to be freed from some temptation or affliction, either for ourselves or for our neighbor; or to ask for some virtue, provided that this is the reason we want to unite ourselves more perfectly with God, which doesn't happen very often (v9), but in the time of suffering I would be perhaps more united to God because we remember to think of him more often. With regard to virtues, sometimes it is really better for me not to have them habitually. Why should I ask God for virtues that I cannot practice, since the dislike that I would experience in practicing such a virtue, if I have it habitually, would only humiliate me? Humility always has more value than everything else.

Also, in all your petitions and prayers that you offer to God, you must not make them only for yourselves, but make it a point always to say "we," as Our Lord has taught us in the Lord's Prayer, where there is neither "my" nor "mine." This means that you ought to have the intention of asking God that he give the virtue or the grace that you ask for yourselves to all those who have the same need of it and that this should always be done to unite ourselves more closely to him. Otherwise we shouldn't ask for or desire anything either for ourselves or our neighbor because union with God is the reason why the sacraments have been instituted (v10). This ought to be our intention, to receive them for the same purpose.

Furthermore, we must not think that by receiving Holy Communion or praying for others we lose anything such that should we offer this Communion or prayer to God to make satisfaction for their sins, we would not satisfy for our own sins. The merit of Communion or prayer will remain with us. For we cannot merit for others. Our Lord is the only one who can do that (v11). We can ask for graces for them, but we cannot merit grace for them. The charity that we have shown by praying for them increases our merit both regards the reward of grace in this life as well as the reward of glory in the next. And should anyone not pay attention to doing some particular thing as satisfaction for her sins, her intention to do everything for the pure love of God suffices to satisfy for them, because it is certain that whoever can make a perfect act of charity or an act of perfect contrition would fully satisfy for all her sins.

Perhaps you would like to know whether you are profiting from your reception of the sacraments. You will know it if you are advancing in the virtues that are related to them. For instance, you should draw from the sacrament of Reconciliation the love of your basic lowliness and humility, for these are the virtues related to it. It is always by the measure of humility that we can know our progress. Don't you see that this is what Our Lord meant when he said: "Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted"? (n7) To be exalted means to make progress. If you would become more gentle through receiving Communion (this is the virtue that flows from this sacrament, which is wholly gentle, honeylike and sweet), you would be drawing upon its own proper effect and

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you will also be making progress. However, if you do not become more gentle or more humble, you deserve to be deprived of the bread because you do not want to trouble yourself (n8).

I want you to go about simply when you want to receive Communion, asking your Superior in a spirit of resignation and to humbly accept a refusal. If your request is granted, go to Communion with love. Even if it is mortifying to ask such permission, you must not stop doing it on that account, for the Daughters who enter our congregation should only enter to mortify themselves, and the crosses that they carry ought to remind them of this. If a person should have an inspiration to not communicate as often as the other Sisters because of her unworthiness, she can ask the Superior, waiting on the judgment that she will receive, with a great gentleness and humility.

I should also like to see that you are not at all disturbed when some fault or virtue we have is mentioned. We ought to bless God for having shown us how to acquire virtue and correct our imperfection and then to have courage in using these means. We must have generous hearts that belong to God alone, never consenting to what our lower nature wants, always making our higher nature rule, because it is entirely within our power (v12) to never consent to the voluntary urges of our lower natures. Consolation and pleasant feelings must not be sought after because they are not necessary to make us love Our Lord more. We must not stop to consider if these are truly good feelings, but we ought to act as if they are.

Also, you ought not be so scrupulous to want to confess (v13) everything one has done, for it is not necessary to confess venial sins if we do not want to. When we want to confess them, we ought to have a will so resolved to overcome them, otherwise it would be an abuse to confess them. You ought, then, not be tormented when you cannot remember some faults to accuse yourself of. For it is incredible that a person who examines herself often would not remember important faults. With regard to little things (v14), you can speak to Our Lord about them whenever you remember them.

You ask how can you make your act of contrition in a short period of time? I am telling you that it does not take a great deal of time to make one well, since all that is necessary is to prostrate oneself before God in a spirit of humility and repentance for having offended him.

You (v15) want me to speak to you about the Liturgy of the Hours. I tell you that you must prepare yourself to say it. This means that when we hear the clock calling us, we must in imitation of Saint Bernard (n9) ask in our heart what we are going to do, and not only on this occasion but also as we begin all our exercises so that we might bring to each exercise the proper spirit. For it would not be proper to go to the Office the way we go to recreation. We must have a joyful spirit at recreation; at the Office (v16) a seriously loving spirit. When the "O God, come to my assistance," is said, we ought to be thinking that Our Lord (v17) is likewise saying to us: "Be attentive to my love."

To be attentive during the entire Office, we must consider that we are saying the same Office that the Angels are saying, even though in different languages, and that we are in the presence of the same God before whom the Angels tremble. And just as a person who would speak to a king would stay very attentive for fear of committing a fault, and if it should happen despite all his care that he would commit one, he would blush with shame. We should do likewise at the Office (v18), for the prime focus of our attention that we ought to have is to pronounce the words well and to be careful for fear of making a mistake. If we should happen to make some mistake, we ought to humble ourselves without being overwhelmed, since it ought not be at all surprising if we might make a

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mistake there, since we make many of them elsewhere. But if we make many and would continue to do so, it would be apparent that we have not taken our first mistake seriously. Such faults ought to overwhelm us, not because the Superior is there but because God is present along with his Angels. It should be a general rule that when we make the same mistake often, it is a sign that we do not have the intention of correcting it. And if it is something that we have often been corrected about, it would seem (v19) that we do not value the correction.

We must not become scrupulous about missing two or three verses by mistake in a whole Office, provided that it was involuntary. But if you would sleep during a good part of the Office, even if you would say the verses of your choir, you are obliged to say it over again. But when someone does something that the person cannot avoid during the Office, like coughing or spitting, or if the Mistress of Ceremonies should speak about what concerns the Office, then you are not obliged to say it again (v20; v21), not even if it is said that it should be confessed, and certainly not the Sister Sacristan doing her job, provided that she does not leave the choir.

When you enter the choir once the Office has begun, you must take your place with the others and follow the Office with them. After it is said, you ought to say privately what has already been said before you came, finishing (v22) where you began with the choir.

You must not say your Office over again if you were distracted in saying it, provided that this was not intentional. Even if you would discover it at the end of several Psalms without any certainty that you have said them, since you were distracted without knowing it, pass on humbling yourself before God. You must not think that you are negligent when the distraction is protracted. It could happen that it would last throughout an entire Office through no fault of your own. Bad as it might be, we must not worry about it but simply reject it from time to time before God. I want you never to be troubled about any bad feelings that you might have, but make up your mind not to consent to them, since there is a great deal of difference between feeling and consenting (v23).

NOTES

1. goal.
2. which belong to, which depend on.
3. May it please you.
4. Gal. 2:20.
5. Cant. of Cant. 8:6.
6. Matt. 6:11.
7. Matt. 28:12; Lk. 14:2, 18:14.

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8. 2Tim. 3:10.
9. *The First Life of Saint Bernard*, Book I, Chapter IV. *Migne Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 185.

VARIANTS

1. E1629. *The Eighteenth Conference, How We Ought to Receive the Sacraments and Say the Divine Office, with some observations on prayer.*
E1933. *The Nineteenth Conference, on the Subject of the Sacraments.*
2. E1629. "...through prayer we ascend to him, since..."
3. E1629. "...joined to the sacraments. I will tell you in a word: it is because of a lack of due preparation. Thus, we must know how to prepare well to receive...." The text picks up in the latter part of the sentence immediately preceding the last sentence of this paragraph.
4. E1629. "...when you desire to communicate."
5. E1629. "...consolation and because of that you are unable to remain at peace without consenting to the anxieties that can come to you over it. But if...."
6. E1629. "...because you are not allowed to communicate or because you...."
7. E1629. "...so as to nourish within ourselves by this means a very holy humility."
8. E1629. "...petty wishes. This is not what he is looking for, for he wants to find them empty that he might make himself their Master and Lord. And to show...."
9. E1629. "...For in times of affliction, we are usually more united to God because we are more mindful of him. With regards to virtues, no time is more apropos and better for us while not having them habitually than if we would have them, provided that we always make acts of such virtues when the opportunity presents itself. The dislike that we experience toward the practice of some virtues ought to help us to humble ourselves. Humility is of more value than all the rest."
10. E1629. "...Therefore, we must correspond to this intention of Our Lord, receiving them for the same purpose."

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11. E1629. "...we can indeed ask for graces for others but we can do nothing to merit them. The prayer that we offer for them increases..."
12. E1629. "...entirely in our power, by the grace of God, never to...."
13. E1629. "...to want to confess a number of trifling imperfections, since we are not even obliged to confess venial sins...."
14. E1629. "With regard to our many small and slight faults, we can speak with Our Lord about them every time we become aware of them; an act of self-denial, a sigh will suffice for that."
15. E1629. "Secondly you asked me to speak about the Office. I will gladly do it. First of all, I say that we must...."
16. E1629. "...recreation. At recreation, we ought to have a lovingly joyful spirit; at the Office...."
17. E1629. "...Our Lord is saying at the same time: "Be attentive to me. Let those who understand something of what they are saying at the Office use this talent faithfully according to God's good pleasure. He has given this talent in order to help them remain recollected through the good affections that they will draw from the Office. Let those who understand nothing keep themselves simply attentive to God or make loving aspirations while the other choir says its verses and they are silent. We must also remember...."
18. E1629. "...being always on our guard for fear of making a mistake. It is also important that we be attentive to pronounce the words well and to say it according to the manner prescribed, especially in the beginning. If it should happen that we make a mistake, we must humble ourselves without being overwhelmed, because it is not surprising, considering we make many of them elsewhere. But...."
19. E1629. "...it looks as if we have disregarded the admonition...."
20. E1933. "...say it again...nor the Sacristan...."
21. E1629. "...say it again." The text resumes with the next paragraph: "When you enter...."
22. E1629. "...leaving off at the point where you took it up. Or, you must say what the choir has said, then, while paying attention to it, continue with the choir in case it should turn out that your help is needed."
23. E1629. The End of the *Eighteenth Conference*.

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"You would like me to say something about prayer. Many people make a great mistake believing that a great deal of method is necessary to do it well. They are also eager to discover a particular art that seems to them to be necessary to know. They never stop examining and delving into their prayer to see if they are doing it or if they could do it better. They think that they cannot cough or move during it for fear that the Spirit of God will withdraw. This is certainly great foolishness, as if the Spirit of God were so fragile as to depend on the method and bearing of those who pray. I am not saying that we shouldn't make use of the ways that are recommended, but we must not be so attached to them as those who think that they have never prayed well unless they make their considerations before the affections that Our Lord gives them, which is the reason why we make considerations. Such persons resemble those who, finding themselves at the very place where they wanted to go, nevertheless turn back because they have not come by the way that has been taught them.

"However, it is necessary that we should have a great reverence when speaking to the Divine Majesty, since the Angels, who are so pure, tremble in God's presence. But, my God, some will say I cannot always have the experience of the presence of God which brings us such a great experience of our basic lowliness nor this perceptible reverence which makes me prostrate myself so gently and devotedly before God. This is not what I mean. I am talking about the reverence which happens when the highest part and point of our spirit bows low and humbly before God in recognition of his infinite grandeur and our profound lowliness and unworthiness.

"We must also have great determination never to abandon prayer for any difficulty that we can encounter in it and never to go to it preoccupied with desires for consolation and self-satisfaction. This would not be uniting and adjusting our will to the will of Our Lord, whose will is that on entering prayer we be ready to suffer the pain of continual distractions, dryness and disgust, which may overcome us, and that we remain as constant as if we would experience a great deal of consolation and peacefulness. It is quite certain that our prayer will not be less pleasing to God nor less profitable for ourselves due to the fact that it was done with great difficulty. For, provided that we make our will one with the Divine Majesty and that we remain simply attentive and disposed to receive the promptings of the Divine Good Pleasure with love, either in prayer or on other occasions, everything that happens will be profitable and pleasing in the eyes of the Divine Goodness. My dear Daughters, you will be praying well if you keep yourselves in peace and tranquility before the Lord, or in his sight, with no other desire or intention than to be with him and to please him.

"The first way, then, to be used in prayer is to consider some point, like the mysteries of the Life, Passion and Death of Our Lord which are the most useful. It is a very rare thing not to be able to profit from the consideration of what Our Lord has done. He is the sovereign Master whom the eternal Father has sent into the world in order to show us what we ought to do. Therefore, besides the obligation we have to form ourselves on this Divine Model, we ought to be most exact in considering his actions so as to imitate them. It is one of the most excellent intentions that we can have in all our actions to do them because Our Lord has done them; i.e., to practice virtue because our Father practiced them, and as he practiced

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them. To understand this completely, we must faithfully regard, examine and consider them in prayer, for the child who really loves his father has a great love for making himself conform to the ways of his father and to imitate him in all that he does.

"What you say is true that there are persons who cannot pause and make their mind attentive to any specific mystery. They are drawn by a certain wholly attentive simplicity which fixes their gaze on God in a great experience of peace without any other consideration than knowing that they are in the presence of God and that he alone is their only good. They can remain there with great profit, for it is good. But generally speaking, all the Sisters ought to begin with a method of prayer which is tried and which brings about a conversion of life and a change of behavior. This is what we were talking about when recommending meditation on the mysteries of the Life and Death of Our Lord. We can walk there with assurance. We must, then, in good faith focus everything on our Master so as to learn what he wants us to do. Likewise, those who can use their imagination ought to do so, but we must use it soberly, simply and briefly. The holy Fathers have left us many holy and devout considerations which can help us on this subject. For, since these holy and great persons have done this well, who would dare not use them and who would dare to refuse to believe reverently what they so piously believed? We most assuredly ought to follow along after these persons of authority. But someone may not be content with what they have left behind. So many persons have created a great variety of considerations from their imaginations. These are what we must not use during meditation inasmuch as they can harm us.

"We ought to make our resolutions in the fervor of prayer when the Sun of Justice enlightens and incites us by his inspirations. I do not mean that we must have great feelings and consolations there; even though when God gives them to us, we are obliged to profit from them and to correspond to his love. But when he does not give them to us, we must be faithful, living according to reason and the Divine Will and making our resolutions with the highest part of our reason and the superior part of our spirit, not allowing ourselves not to carry them out, but putting them into practice no matter what the dryness, dislike or contradiction that may present itself. So much for the first way of meditating, which many great Saints have practiced very well when it is done as it ought to be.

"The second way of meditating is not to use the imagination but to hold on to the letter, i.e., to meditate purely and simply on the gospel and the mysteries of our faith, talking familiarly and very simply with Our Lord about what he has done and suffered for us without trying to picture it to ourselves. For this way is a much more lofty and better way than the first and so it is more holy and more assured. This is why, even though we may have little attraction to it, we ought to lift ourselves up to it, being careful at every point of our prayer to keep our spirit in holy freedom to follow the lights and inspirations God will give us. As for other ways of more lofty prayer, unless God absolutely gives them, I beg you not to meddle with them by yourselves and without the advice of those who are leading you."

This passage is drawn from the Sermon for the Feast of the Purification, February 2, 1620. (*Oeuvres* IX, 259-60; 262-64). cf. *The Sermons of Saint Francis de Sales on Our Lady*, Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S., ed. Tan Books and Publishers, Rockford, Illinois, 1985, 93, 96.