

THE NINETEENTH CONFERENCE

On the Subject of Generosity (v1)

In order to really understand the nature of that strength and generosity of spirit that you have asked me about, I must first of all answer a question that has very often been raised to me: to know (n1) the nature of perfect humility and, having resolved that point, I shall more especially try to make myself better understood on addressing the second (v2), which is what you want to know about – the nature of that strength and generosity of spirit which ought to characterize a Daughter of the Visitation.

Humility is nothing other than a perfect recognition that we are only pure nothingness and that we must hold onto this estimation of ourselves. In order to better understand this, we ought to realize that there are two kinds of gifts in ourselves: the first are those that are in us and of us, and the second which are in us but not of us. When I say that we have gifts which are of us, I do not mean that they do not come from God and that they come from ourselves. For truthfully, in and of ourselves we are nothing but lowliness and nothingness. However, I do mean that these are the gifts that God has put in us and, thus, seem to be from ourselves. These gifts are health, wealth, the learning we have acquired, beauty and the like. Now, humility stops us from glorifying and overly esteeming ourselves in light of these gifts. Humility no longer has any opinion about all these gifts suchwise that we come to call them nothing, or at best a trifle. In effect, that ought to be done through reason, seeing that they are not stable gifts and do not make us more pleasing to God, and then to regard them as changing gifts and, furthermore, subject to chance. And that being the case, is there anything less secure than wealth which depends on the weather and the season of the year? Beauty is marred by the least thing; it only takes a small blemish on the face to spoil the image. With regard to learning, a small dysfunction of our brain makes us lose and forget all that we once knew. It is then rightly so that humility makes nothing of all these gifts, but it makes us lower and humble ourselves even more by the knowledge and recognition of what we are in and of ourselves as worthless or nothing by the low esteem that it has of what is in ourselves and of ourselves. Humility makes us esteem ourselves more greatly because of the gifts that are in us and not of us, like the faith, hope and the bit of charity that we have, like the certain capacity that God has given us to unite ourselves to him by means of grace. With regards to ourselves, I add our vocation, which gives us an assurance of the possession of eternal glory and happiness insofar as we can have such in this life. And this esteem that humility creates about all these gifts, i.e., faith, hope and love, is the basis for generosity of spirit.

Don't you see, these first gifts about which we have spoken belong to the exercise of humility and the others to generosity? Humility believes that it can do nothing, considering its knowledge of our poverty and weakness as far as it depends on ourselves. On the contrary, generosity makes us say with Saint Paul: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (n2). Humility makes us distrust ourselves and generosity gives us confidence in God. Note well, these two virtues, humility and generosity, are conjoined and united with one another that they are never, nor can they be, separated. There are those who deceive themselves with a certain false and foolish humility that (v3) prevents them from looking upon anything as good in themselves. They are quite wrong. For the things that

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God puts in us ought to be recognized and highly honored and esteemed and not placed on the same level as the low esteem that we ought to have for those gifts which are in us, which are of us. Not only have true Christians recognized that they ought to regard these two kinds of gifts which are in us, the ones to humble us and the others to glorify the Divine Goodness who gives them to us, but also the philosophers who have done the same. Their maxim "Know yourself" must be understood as not only recognizing our nothingness and lowliness but also we ought to acknowledge the excellence and dignity of our persons, which are capable of being united to the divinity by the Divine Goodness who has put in us a certain instinct that makes us always tend and lay claim to this union in which we find our happiness.

A humility that does not produce generosity is undoubtedly a false one. After a person has said: "I am nothing, I am only absolute nothingness," it suddenly gives place to generosity, which says: "There can be nothing that I cannot do, since I have placed all my confidence in God, who can do all things." And with this confidence, the human spirit courageously undertakes doing all that has been commanded or advised, no matter how difficult it might be. And I can assure you that humility would consider it no impossible thing for her to work miracles if commanded to do so. And if the person would begin to act in simplicity of heart, God will work the miracle rather than fail to give her the power to accomplish what she attempts, seeing that she does not do it through a confidence in her own strength but rooted in the esteem that she has for the gifts that God has given her. And so she says to herself: "If God has called me to a state of perfection so great that there is none greater in this life, what can prevent my reaching it, because I am well assured that 'He who has begun this work' of my perfection 'will bring it to completion'" (n3)? Take note that all this is done without any presumption, for such confidence does not make us less on our guard for fear of failing; just the opposite. It makes us more careful about ourselves, more watchful and attentive to do whatever may serve our advancement in perfection.

Humility is not only a distrust of ourselves but also a confidence in God. This mistrust of ourselves and our own strength brings forth confidence in God and the generosity of spirit which we are addressing is born from this confidence. The Most Blessed Virgin Mary has given us a most remarkable example of this virtue when she says: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word" (n4). When she says that she is the "handmaid of the Lord," she is making the greatest act of humility that ever could be made inasmuch as she opposes the praises that the Angel gives her that she will be the Mother of God, that the child that she will bear "will be called the Son of the Most High God" (n5), such a tremendous dignity that one could ever imagine. I say she sets in opposition her lowliness and unworthiness with all this praise and grandeur by saying that she is the "handmaid of the Lord." But note that as soon as she has paid her dues to humility, she immediately makes an act of the most perfect generosity by saying: "Be it done unto me according to your word." "It is true," she would say, "that I am in no way responsible for this grace, considering what I am of myself, but since what is good in me is from God and what you have said to me is his very holy will, I believe that it can and will be done." And then, without any hesitation, she says, "Be it done to me according to your word" (v4).

Very few acts of true contrition are made, because after having humbled and lowered ourselves before the Divine Majesty by reflecting on our serious infidelities, we do not make this act

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of confidence which serves our courage with an assurance that we ought to have that the Divine Goodness will give us the grace thereafter to be faithful and to correspond more perfectly to his love. After this act of confidence, we ought to immediately make one of generosity, saying, "Since I am fully assured that the grace of God will never fail me, I will also believe that he will never allow me to fail in corresponding to his grace" (v5). But someone could give this reply: "If I fail grace, it will fail me." It is true. If it is so, who will assure me that I will not fail grace hereafter, since I have failed it so often in the past? Generosity makes the human spirit say boldly and fearlessly: "No, I will not be unfaithful to God anymore" (v6). Because she feels in her heart that she is firmly fixed in it, then she fearlessly undertakes all that she knows to be pleasing to God, without any exception. And on undertaking all she believes that she can do, not from herself, but in God in whom she has placed all her trust and for whom she does and accomplishes all that she is commanded or counseled to do.

However, you ask me, is it ever permissible to doubt our capability of doing things that are commanded? I respond that generosity of spirit (v7) never permits us to doubt. I want you to understand this, and as I have often told you, you must distinguish the superior part of our spirit from the inferior part. When I say that generosity does not allow us to doubt, this is in relation to the superior part. For it could well happen that the will might be full of doubts and will be very troubled about accepting the responsibility given you. But in all of this, the generous person should not care and pay little heed to it and simply set about carrying out the responsibility without saying a word or doing anything to reveal the feeling that she has about her inability (v8). But for the rest of us, we are eager to show that we are very humble and that we have low esteem for ourselves and similar things, which is nothing less than true humility, which never allows us to resist the judgment of those whom God has given us to guide us along the way.

I have put an example which pertains to this subject, and which is to the point, in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (n6). It is about King Achaz (n7), who was reduced to very great misery by the fierce war that was waged against him by two other kings who had besieged Jerusalem. God commanded the prophet Isaiah to go and console him and to promise that he would gain the victory and triumph over his enemies. And Isaiah told him that for proof of the truth of what he said that he should ask for a sign "from God either in the heavens or" on earth and that it would be given him. Then Achaz did not say this because of the honor that he bore for God. However, just the opposite, he refused to honor him, because God wanted to be glorified at that time by miracles. And Achaz refused to ask God for one that he had pointed out that he wanted to perform. He offended God by refusing to obey the prophet who had been sent to manifest God's will to him.

We must, then, never doubt that we can do what is commanded of us, more especially because those who command us know our ability well. But you say that you may have great interior turmoil and great imperfections that your Superiors do not know about and that they base their opinion on outward appearances through which you may perhaps have led them into error. I reply that you are not always to be believed when you say, perhaps pressured a bit by discouragement, that you are so wretched and full of so many imperfections. Nor, on the other hand, must it be believed that you have none, because you say nothing about them? Generally speaking, you are what your works show you to be. Your virtues are recognized through the faithfulness that you have in practicing them, and so your imperfections are likewise known by your actions. You should know

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that if you do not sense malice in your heart, you will not mislead the judgment of Superiors. But you might say that there is evidence that many of the Saints have strongly resisted accepting responsibilities that were offered to them. However, what they did was not done only on account of the low esteem that they had for themselves but, principally, on account of what they discovered. Those who wanted to put them in positions of responsibility based their decisions on apparent virtues like fasting, almsgiving, a spirit of penance and bodily austerities and not on true interior virtues that they kept hidden and veiled under a very holy humility. They were sought out and pursued by people who knew them only by reputation. It seems to me that a bit of resistance could be allowed. Do you know who might be allowed to do this? By way of example, a Sister from Dijon to whom a Superior at Annecy might send the command to become Superior without ever having seen or known her. But a Sister from here to whom the same command is given must never consider it her duty to give any reason to explain that this command is repugnant to her (v9). (I am always speaking in relation to the superior part of our spirit.) However, she must set about fulfilling her responsibility with as much peace and courage, as if she felt very capable of fulfilling it, to the best of her ability. But I do well understand the feeling which is that we fear not coming out on top. We value our reputation so highly that we do not want to be considered apprentices in carrying out our responsibilities, but rather masters who never make a mistake.

I understand well enough the spirit of strength and generosity that we want you to have. It removes all foolishness as well as every pointless and sadness-inducing self-indulgence (v10) which only serves to place an obstacle in our path and prevents us from making progress in the way of perfection. These self-indulgences are fed by the silly reflections that we make on ourselves, chiefly when we have stumbled on our way through some fault. For here, by the grace of God, we never fall completely (n8). We have not seen this yet, but we do stumble. Instead of humbling ourselves very gently and then rising courageously as we have spoken about, we begin to dwell too much on our own unworthiness and from that we begin to pay too much attention to ourselves. Alas, my God, how worthless I am! I am fit for nothing! And after that we become discouraged and we say: "Oh, no, you must not hope for anything good from me anymore! I shall never do anything good! You are wasting your time by talking to me!" And after that we want, as it were, to be left alone as if it were fully known that nothing could ever be done again with us. My God, how far are these considerations from a person who is generous and who has good self-esteem, as we have already said? Such a Sister would not be troubled by the difficult nature of what she has to do, or by the size of the work, or the large amount of time that must be devoted to it, or by the delay that she sees in completing the work that she has begun.

The Daughters of the Visitation are called to a very great perfection. Their vocation is the loftiest, the most exalted that can be imagined. Inasmuch as they have only one goal of uniting themselves to the will of God as all Christians must do, but more than this, they aim at uniting themselves to his desires, yes even his intentions, anticipated rather than signified. And if anyone could imagine something more perfect, or one could find a higher degree of perfection than that of conformity to His Will, to His Desires and to His Intentions, the Daughters of the Visitation should undertake it without hesitation because their vocation demands that from them. Therefore, the devotion of this community must be a strong and generous one, as we have said many times.

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But in addition to what we have said about generosity, we must say again that the person who has it can accept at the same time the dryness as well as the tenderness of consolation, interior weaknesses, the sadness, the heaviness of heart, no matter how intense they can be, just as much as the warm feelings, the satisfactions of a spirit filled with peace and tranquility. This is because she remembers that he who has given her all the consolations is the same Person who sends her one or the other, moved with the same love which she knows to be very great because by interior affliction of the heart he intends to draw her to a very high level of perfection that involves the denial of all kinds of consolations in this life. She will rest assured that he who deprives her of them here and now will in no way deprive her of them eternally in heaven.

But you say that amidst such a state of darkness such considerations cannot be made, since it seems that you would be unable to speak a single word to Our Lord. Truthfully, you are right in saying that it seems to you, for it is not really so. The holy Council of Trent has determined that (n9) and we must believe that God and his grace never leave us in such a way that we cannot have recourse to his Goodness and protest that, despite all of the trouble disturbing our spirit, we will to belong to him totally and that we will never offend him. But take note that all this takes place in the superior part of our spirit. And because our lower nature perceives nothing of it and always remains troubled, this is what bothers us and makes us think we are wretched creatures. In light of this, we begin to be too attentive to ourselves as if lacking consolations is something worthy of compassion. For Heaven's sake! Remember that Our Lord and Our Master willed to endure these interior desolations and in a way beyond compare. Listen to the words that he spoke while on the Cross: "My God, why have you abandoned me?" (n10). He was brought to the most extreme point of his human nature, for it was only in the highest part of his nature that he was not overcome by this weakness (v11). He also spoke very weakly. But see how he proceeds to talk with God to show us how it is possible for us to do the same.

You will want to know whether at times like this it is better to speak with God about our difficulty and desolation or better to speak to him about something else. In answer, I say that here, as in all kinds of temptations, it is better to turn our hearts away from what troubles and makes them suffer, talking to God about something else rather than speaking about our sorrows. Undoubtedly, if we will to do it, the attentiveness that we have in our heart will surface anew, our nature being such that we cannot look on our troubles without having a great deal of compassion for them. But you say that if you pay no attention to them, you will not remember them well enough to speak about them. And what does that matter? We are certainly like little children who like to go and tell their mother that they have been stung by a bee so that their mother may feel sorry for them and softly blow on the wound which is already healed. We too want to go and tell our Mother that we have been greatly troubled, improving on what troubles us by going into great detail, not forgetting the smallest detail which can excite a bit of pity for ourselves. Now isn't this being overly childish? If we have committed some infraction, it would be good to tell it. If we have been faithful, we should also tell it, but briefly, without exaggerating either the one or the other, for we should tell all to those who have the care of our spirits.

Now you ask about when you have experienced a great feeling of anger or even some other type of temptation and you feel scruples if you do not confess it (v12). You ought to make it a part of

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your review of conscience, but not in the manner of Confession and only that you might learn how to behave in such a situation. I am speaking about the case when you do not clearly see if you have given some type of consent. For, if you would go and say: "I accuse myself of having felt deep feelings of anger for two days but did not consent to it," you would be talking about your virtues instead of speaking about your faults. But if I am in doubt whether I have committed some fault, I should look closely if this doubt has some foundation. Perhaps, for a quarter of an hour in the scope of two days you may have been a bit careless about turning your thoughts away from something. If it is that, say very simply that you have been careless for a quarter of an hour in turning your thoughts away from a feeling of anger that you have experienced, without adding that the temptation lasted for two days, if this is not what you want to say about it or to get advice from your confessor or because it concerns your review of conscience. In these cases, it is very good to do so. But in ordinary Confessions, it would be better not to talk about it, since you would be doing it more for self-satisfaction. And if a bit of pain would ensue for you by not doing it, you must bear it as you would anything else that you could not help (v13).

Live Jesus! The Glorious Virgin, Our Lady, and Glorious Saint Joseph!

NOTES

1. to know.
2. Phil. 4:13.
3. Phil. 1:6.
4. Lk. 1:38.
5. Lk. 1:32.
6. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Bk. III, Chap. 5.
7. Is. 7:3-12.
8. entirely.
9. *Acts of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, Chap. 11, 13.

VARIANTS

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1. E1629. *Conference Five, On Generosity*
E1933. *Conference Five, On the Subject of Generosity*
2. E1629. "...second point, which deals with the generosity of spirit of which you want me to treat presently."
3. E1629. "...prevents them from looking at the good that God has placed within them. They are very wrong...."
4. E1629. "...you say: `It is likewise for want of this generosity'...."
5. E1629. "...correspond to his grace. But you may reply: `If I fail...!'"
6. E1629. "...to God. And because she feels in her heart this resolution of never doing it again, she undertakes...."
7. E1629. "...never permits us to entertain any doubt. In order that you might understand this better, you must distinguish, as I have often told you, the higher part..."
8. E1629. "...inability. But the rest of us, we are more joyous than anything else, to show...."
9. E1629. "...commandment; so she...." The material in the parentheses is not present in this edition.
10. E1629. "...self-indulgences which only serve...." The words "pointless" and "sadness-inducing" are not part of this text.
11. E1629. The remaining phrase of this sentence is not part of this text. It resumes with the next sentence.
12. E1629. "...I say that you ought to talk about it in your review...."
13. E1629. "...could not help." The End of the *Fifth Conference*. May God Be Praised!