Renewal of the Vows¹

"This day shall be for a memorial to you, and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord in your generations with an everlasting observance" (Ex 12:14).

By this ordinance, God enjoined the children of Israel to perpetuate the remembrance of their departure from Egypt and their freedom from servitude. During the night, a destroying angel had slain all the first-born of the Egyptians, both of humans and animals. The Israelites had eaten the paschal lamb, with their loins girt, with shoes on their feet and staves in their hands, to be ready to set forth for the promised land, and had, as also commanded, put the blood of the lamb on the side posts and the upper doorposts of their houses (Ex 12:3-11). The moment had come for them to depart for the desert in which would be worked such prodigies of power and mercy as the passage of the Red Sea (Ex 14:15-20), the promulgation of the Law from Mount Sinai amid thunder and lightning (Ex 19:16-20:17), the miraculous water from the rock (Nm 20:1-11), the column of fire (Ex 13:21-22), and the celestial manna (Ex 16:3-15). The Lord, wishing the Hebrews to keep forever the memory of so extraordinary an event, bade them do so by yearly observing the anniversary with appropriate pomp.

In a sense less striking but just as real, God has inspired founders of religious communities to have their members celebrate yearly, after a preparatory retreat, the anniversary of their profession, since this event marks their departure from the world, that other Egypt, and their entrance into the land of blessing. Let us imagine, then, my dearly beloved, that Jesus Christ himself, our God and Savior, on this occasion says to us all in general and to each in particular: "Remember your vows, and renew them on this day, which is as a sensible and everlasting memorial of them."

The words of my text undoubtedly look more to the Christian Pasch than to that of the Jews because, besides solemnizing it by worship and ceremonies that will end only with time, we renew the memory of the spotless lamb immolated for our sins, we celebrate the feast of our freedom from the tyranny of the devil by virtue of the blood shed for us, and we eat the holy victim in the unleavened bread of justification. They apply, furthermore, to our profession. Did we not shake off anew the yoke of the prince of darkness when we sacrificed ourselves by irrevocable contract to the glory of the most high? Did not the blood of the savior seal this new covenant and his flesh become our food? Oh, to the eyes of faith, it was indeed a true pasch, which we took from one state of life to another.² Thus, it is but just that we should prepare in solitude to celebrate its memory by solemnly renewing our vows with deepest gratitude, humility, and generosity.

We should renew our vows with gratitude. What do the promises we renew recall to us? They recall our vocation to religious life and, consequently, all the graces that preceded it, accompany it, and will follow it. Who could tell all we have received of blessings and singular favors from him who chose us for his spouse? Having given us Christian parents, a preference over so many others who are born into the bosom of paganism and other errors, he regenerated us by baptism and protected us from early youth by the sweetness of his blessings. With paternal solicitude, he guarded our infancy, sheltering it from all the accidents that could have ended our life. Then, as our intelligence developed, he illumined our mind with the light of faith and kindled in our heart the fire of his love. Thus, he

¹ Kevin Grove and Andrew Gawrych, eds., *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings, An Introduction to the Life and Thought of the Founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Christian Classics, 2014), 131-50.

² Moreau is playing on the word "pasch," which means a "passing over," in terms of religious life.

disposed our soul to the secret communications of his grace, inspiring us with taste for virtue, with horror of vice, and with the beginning of our attraction to religious life.

To fortify us in these happy dispositions, he guided us into the school of religion to receive catechetical instructions and to partake in the imposing ceremonies of the Church, but this was only the beginning of his loving predilection. As we grew older and the enemies of our salvation consequently redoubled their efforts and the world grew ever more dangerous to us, he invited us to his table where he gave himself to feed our souls as the bread of the strong—and not merely once, but yearly, monthly, weekly, daily. Then came the moment to decide our vocation. What did his providence then do to execute the designs he had conceived on us from all eternity?

Perhaps at that period of our life, levity, want of reflection, and liberty of the senses altered the purity of our conscience and opened our heart to sin. His grace sought us, and when it had enlightened, purified, and inflamed us, it pointed out to us our community. Soon, it suggested new thoughts, desires, and hopes. Then, docile to the voice that said to us, as of old to Abraham, "Go forth out of your country, and from your kindred, and out of your father's house, and come into the land that I shall show you" (Gn 12:1), we consulted the man of God who answered all our uncertainties, and we had no thought but to carry out our project. If we had not the means to defray the expenses of our new state of life, we found protectors provided by heaven. Then, all obstacles being removed, we found our community waiting with the open arms of disinterested charity to receive us among its children.

Forever associated therein with the spouses of Jesus Christ, we have had every means and aid to sanctification in good example, in the rules of our community, in the advice of our superiors, in frequentation of the sacraments, and in all the exercises of piety proper to our vocation. Our desires were foreseen, our pains divined, our difficulties removed. What, then, has our whole life been but a marvelous chain of graces and favors? What are we in the eyes of faith except children of mercy and predilection? Oh, my dearly beloved, we should be so grateful on this anniversary of the day of our consecration to God, and we should renew our vows most lovingly.

What might we have become without the singular blessing of vocation? Thrown into the midst of a world, which, under attractive guise, conceals so many horrors, and left to ourselves and surrounded by scandals, we might have lost our innocence and have surrendered, as many do, heaven for earth. But no, the Lord prevented us and brought us into the safe harbor of our community. Here, we are in the ark, with the family of the elect. We can sail with full canvas to a happy eternity, while so many in the world are swallowed up in the waters of a deluge of iniquities. Oh, let us give everlasting thanks to the good shepherd, to the gentle savior, to the tender and generous Father who has given us such great proofs of his love. Let us cry out with David in transports of gratitude: "What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that he has rendered to me" (Ps 116:12)? He has not given such grace to many others or treated them with such bounty. He chose me, me the least of my kindred, to raise me to the rank of his favorite spouses and to let me sing his praises in the assembly of his elect. O my soul, bless the Lord your God and exalt forever his holy name, for he has done great things to you (Lk 2:46-49).

It is less by words, however, than by works and by exemplary conduct that we can testify to our gratitude and devotion to our divine spouse. Can we truly say on reviewing the past that we have been constantly faithful to all our duties, fulfilling to the letter each of our vows, and making continuous progress in religious perfection? This is a certain mark by which we may know whether we have been truly thankful for the grace of our vocation, and reflection on it will likely cause us to renew our vows with humility. If, during the days of preparatory retreat, we examine our conduct since our entrance into religious life, we shall doubtless find motives to humble and confound ourselves.

By the promises of our baptism, we contracted to destroy the "old man of sin" within ourselves, to die to ourselves, and to live only the life of Jesus Christ, as he lived on earth only the life of his Father. If a tree be known by its fruits and a Christian by works and fulfilled obligations, we may perhaps find reason for weeping and saying with David, "O Lord, the sins of my youth and my ignorances, do not remember" (Ps 25:7). We shall not treat here of the obligations we took at the baptismal fount. However extensive these were, they were only the prelude to and trial of those we contracted on the day of our profession. Oh, how joyful and eager we were on that day. We can but love to recall our ardor in ranking ourselves under the standard of Jesus Christ and in becoming members of our community. O blessed day! O moment of salvation! The rule had, then, nothing too difficult for nature, and all our sacrifices seemed as nothing. All the monsters barring our entrance into the promised land were unable to frighten us. More courageous, more faithful than the Israelites, who soon wearied in the desert of pursuing the conquest of that happy land, we had a holy impatience to enter the most difficult places of our community.

Filled with gratitude for the divine mercies, we had such thoughts as these: "What shall I do for God in return for all he has done for me? How shall I repay him for that gratuitous preference of mercy by which he has chosen me among many more worthy than I of such ineffable bounty? He has snatched me from the soul-slaying Egypt to lead me into the loving solitude of religious life, and from it into the land of promise. To him alone belong the homage of my mind and the affection of my heart. I wish to live only for him and sigh only for his glory. Yes, I wish so to unite myself to him that I may be a complete sacrifice, immolated for his sovereign majesty. I wish to make him solemn promises and pay him my vows before all the world. Nothing can turn me aside from this purpose. Reason, hold your tongue. False lights of worldly glory, be snuffed out. All personal interests, be gone. Even you, sweet love of relatives, friends, and acquaintances I have cultivated so eagerly—you will vainly oppose yourself to the attractions of grace and the wooing of the Holy Spirit.

"High heaven, you have heard and bear witness to the great words I have uttered. I have vowed forever to God my poverty, chastity, and obedience, according to the constitutions of my community. I have vowed poverty, that is, I will own nothing and will not be attached to the conveniences of this life or to the objects destined for my use, and I will receive and keep nothing without the permission of my superiors. I have vowed chastity, that is, I will never permit my eyes the least immodest look, my tongue the least unguarded word, and my heart the least movement capable of wounding purity. I have vowed obedience, that is, I will do in everything the will of those who have the right to command me, and I will do it simply, promptly, without exception, and without relaxation. I will obey their voice as the voice of God; I will love their orders and submit to them blindly. I will observe my rules and constitutions from point to point, meditating on them day and night, forming my conscience on them, and keeping them for my guide even until death. Thus, will I be able to labor for the instruction and salvation of souls."

Such were the obligations we contracted by pronouncing our vows. The words our lips spoke are irrevocable; the great promises we made to God are everlasting. Have we ever lost sight of these sacred obligations? Have we always kept them faithfully with the same fervor we had in pronouncing them? Have we not lost the first brilliant beauty of our early zeal and pure charity? In the quality of our religious life, we are supposed to be noble children of Zion, bright and precious vessels of election of the celestial Jerusalem. Can we be reproached for changing ourselves into clay vessels of poor value? Perhaps, we deserve to have God say to us what St. John once said on his behalf to the angel of Ephesus: "I have something against you, because you have left your first charity. Be mindful, therefore, from where you have fallen, do penance, and do the first works" (Rv 2:4-5). These "first works"

are those of humility without disguise, penance without chagrin, repose without slothfulness, modesty without affectation, submission without murmuring, labor without inquietude—the works of an ever equable and uniform conduct.

It is not rare to see fervor relaxed in proportion as one grows older in the service of God. The ways of the just, like the rays of the sun, increase from brilliance to brilliance, but many in religious life seem to proceed by contrary ways, decreasing in piety as they advance in age. Have we perhaps experienced this humiliating truth since the day of our profession? Have not care of our health, search for ease, and fear of lacking something we want weakened the spirit of poverty that should constantly animate us? Have attachment to creatures, attraction to a particular friendship, wanderings of a too little guarded imagination, liberty of the senses never tarnished the luster of a complete purity? Have not too much self-opinionatedness, weariness of dependence, and distaste for continual subjection made our yoke less supportable and aroused sentiments against obedience and its blind simplicity?

Jesus Christ is our model of obedience. "He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross" (Phil 2:8). The bloody standards of this unacknowledged king are unfurled before our eyes, and the mystery of his cross shines everywhere. Such a spectacle can but revive our faith, reanimate our confidence, inflame our charity, and bruise our hearts with compunction. These are, at least, the happy effects that should be produced in us by contemplation of Jesus crucified. The Scriptures pronounce woe to the one who does not feel sorrow on the anniversary of his passion: "Every soul that is not afflicted on this day shall perish from among his people" (Lv 23:29). Nevertheless, sentiments of Christian piety and holy affections at remembrance of Calvary are often without merit before God and fruit for ourselves because they remain sterile and do not influence our conduct. To certain Christians, to religious especially, the crucifix says more than it says to the general population. From the height of that instrument of torture, the savior says to each of us, as in olden times he said to his apostles and disciples: "If any will come after me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross daily, and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

Let us obey today the voice of our divine master and follow him. The cross he bids us carry under pain of not being numbered among his disciples can be for us only fidelity to the rules prescribed for us on our entrance into religious life. Do we actually carry it as real disciples of Jesus Christ? Let us examine this in our meditation, and let us consider the qualities that our obedience to rule should have for the purpose of being a faithful imitation of the obedience of the Son of God. To be perfect, our obedience must be pure, prompt, universal, and constant.

Our obedience must be pure, that is, undertaken and carried out for a good motive—for love of God and his greater glory, as St. Benedict says. Charity makes our submission of will come from the heart and gives us no other end in obeying but the accomplishment of the divine will. It makes us honor and love those who command us, despise their faults, so that to their voice we answer as did the beloved disciple to the voice of Jesus: "It is the Lord" (Jn 21:7). The holy religious says to himself: "Whatever be the conduct of the ones who has authority over me, though they seem to me not to have the light and the experience necessary for the place they occupy, it is the Lord who addresses me through their mouths. Whether they be young or old, commendable or not for their spirit and talents, it is the Lord. Whether they have lovable or repellant qualities, even if they be imprudent, unfair, insincere, indiscreet, and capricious, it is the Lord, and I must obey." Animated by the fire of divine love, such religious trample underfoot all the unworthy motives that could rob them of the merit of obedience: all vain respect, all human considerations, and all self-interest. They purify their souls more and more by the "obedience of charity," according to the counsel of the prince of the apostles (1 Pt 1:22).

Have we learned thus to obey? Do not some of us, on the contrary, obey through vanity, habit, pure politics, human respect? Have not some of us as motives to avoid reprimands, to acquire the reputation of being fervent religious, to win the good grace of those charged to watch over our conduct, to merit the esteem and confidence of our brothers and sisters, to look after our own interests, and to procure ourselves some notable employment? Some among us, perhaps, obey as humanly as did the Jews; some in a mercenary way, as servants and slaves; some in a mechanical way, as inanimate beings; some as those of whom the apostle spoke, "serving to the eye" (Col 3:22) and forgetting that when we are alone the eye of God contemplates us. Oh, may divine charity be the sole motive and principle of our submission! Then, obeying only to please the Lord, we shall make our superiors carry easily the weight of their charge and shall edify our brothers and sisters. But, that our obedience may thus be a matter of habitual and mutual edification, it is not sufficient that it be pure in its motive, it must also be prompt.

Our obedience must be immediate, because to defer obedience is obviously to refuse it during the time of delay, to do God's work negligently, to give the first fruits of our acts to the devil, to resist grace, which, as St. Ambrose says, cannot suffice for sloth and delay, to lose all the fruit of our sacrifice, and to scorn all the examples given us by Scripture and the lives of the saints as models of prompt obedience. How could we act thus toward the great master we serve? Would it be reasonable to deprive ourselves thus of the many merits we could gain daily? Rulers of this world will not keep in their service lazy, indolent, slothful servants who are always late and carry out orders with great slowness. Neither will God, and so we should do immediately what is given us to do.

The promptness with which we should obey is comparable to an arrow that, when released from the bow, flies swift and straight to the mark without deviation to either side. It is comparable to those mysterious wheels of which Ezekiel speaks, which rapidly follow the movements of the spirit guiding them (1:15-21). It is comparable to the eagerness with which a starving child runs to its mother when she calls it to eat. Hence, in all communities, the members are exhorted to leave everything at the sound of the bell, not pausing to finish the task in hand but hastening to the place designated. Let those who are writing leave their letters unfinished; let those who are reading or meditating quit their task. The sound of the bell is the voice of God. Will the religious refuse to hear it? "The master ... calls for you.' She, as soon as she heard this, rose quickly, and came to him" (Jn 11:28-29).

Why all this haste? Because a faithful servant knows not the meaning of delay. Those truly obedient people of whom Cassian speaks, those angels of the desert in whom true perfection shines, give us marvelous lessons and confound our daily sloth with their fervor. At the first signal, they could be seen hastening in holy rivalry from their cells as a swarm of bees from their hives. Always ready of mind, prepared of heart, with eyes open, ears alert, feet light, and hands eager, they awaited only the command, or even anticipated it. "Oh, what is our life, if compared to theirs?" "Now, he is thought great who is not a transgressor." Surely such ardent vivacity will excite our indolence and make us prompt in rising and leaving our rooms in the morning. Surely it will make us resolve no longer to be the last to arrive at the various exercises of the day and thus begin them without a moment's preparatory recollection.

There are religious among us, it is true, who could be our models. Since, however, our obligations are common with theirs, since our reasons for promptness in obeying the rule are theirs, since the punishments we have to fear and the rewards we hope for are theirs as well, our perfection should already equal theirs. Then, too, the holy religious who have

³ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation*, 1.18.

⁴ à Kempis, *Imitation*, 1.18...

preceded us in our community should urge and drive us by their zeal. Let us imagine them all radiant in glory bidding us from the height of heaven to run as they did in the way of obedience. From their place of happiness they tell us: "Courage, good and faithful servants, if you persevere in exactitude, God will say to you as he did to us: 'Because you have been faithful over a few things, I will place you over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:23). Let us run, then, in the way that lies open before us. Let us so run that we may obtain the incorruptible crown (1 Cor 9:24-25).

To arrive at this happy end, however, we must practice a universal obedience, that is, extended to all matters without exception, embracing all times and places. Otherwise, it would be slow, servile, and imperfect. Let us obey without reserve, in secret as in public, in little things as in great, in silence as in recreation, in rest as in labor, in prayers as in mortifications, in health as in sickness. Thus, we shall practice that abnegation indispensable to any disciple of Jesus Christ; thus, we shall live only by our rule; thus, we shall carry our cross daily after the savior and walk in his footsteps.

This hourly obedience calls for constant denial of self. To rise at the first sound of the bell when we are tired and sleepy, to leave recreation for work or study, to be refused a desired permission to go to town, these mean denial of self. Obedience which is without reserve costs sacrifice at every moment. Surely, it is painful always to renounce self and act contrary to our will, but for our consolation, it is written: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent bear it away" (Mt 11:12). "How straight is the way that leads to life" (Mt 7:14). "Through many tribulations, we must enter into the kingdom of god" (Acts 14:21).

How can we, without this heroic obedience, one day appear beside those intrepid martyrs whose history we read so easily and yet in whom nature was so mercilessly crucified? Let us never forget that "there is no other way to life and to true internal peace but the holy way of the cross and of daily mortification." To follow any other way is to take the wide way that leads to death. Ah, let us listen to those brave models who say to us with the apostle: "You have not yet resisted unto blood" (Heb 12:4).

Our obedience should be constant, with that perseverance which is its perfection and its crown. What will it avail us to have been for some time models of obedience if we end in relaxation? Would not our many efforts to break and subdue our will be vain? Would this not be to abandon the harvest after we have sowed it, to renounce the reward after fighting for it? Let us be consistent and faithful, then, even unto death, after the example of Jesus, the author and consummator of our obedience as he is of our faith: "He was obedient unto death" (Phil 2:8).

God grant that our last days as religious resemble or even surpass in this regard our first ones. For this purpose, let us often renew our retreat resolutions. Of what account have they been thus far? Do not our consciences reproach us about them? Where would our virtues be, where the fruit of our many graces, should we now hear the words, "Render an account?" Because of our instability in the ways of perfection and our daily transgressions of rule, to some of us, the days that have slipped away since our entry into religion must seem as so many degrees by which we have descended into a state of lukewarmness.

The habit of violating the rule when we are not under the eyes of others causes us to observe it only through decorum or fear of arousing unfavorable comment. In neglecting obedience, we lead a relaxed life; we are inattentive to our faults; we lack zeal and piety and the interior spirit; we are softly indulgent to our evil tendencies; we even go backward, because not to advance in the way of perfection is to retreat. This relaxation of fervor is as a slow fever, which diminishes our spiritual strength, withers our hearts, destroys all sentiments

⁵ à Kempis, *Imitation*, 2.12.

of devotion, alters all our good dispositions, and daily consumes the life of our souls. O my God, let not this strange state be ours; let us not end in that lukewarmness which will cause you to vomit us out of your mouth (Rv 3:16).

St. Bernard cried out amid his tears: "What do I see here? I see a sluggard who needs the goad, a timorous creature who has lost courage, a lazy person who makes bitter and heavy the loving yoke of the Savior, a voluntary weakling who is immediately tired, a continual opening of the heart to worldly and sensual thoughts, an imprudent and untimely conversation, an imperfect and wholly human obedience, prayers without attention and respect—in a word, people going to the sacred tribunal with a will indifferent and insensible to their faults. They make a cold recital of their ordinary sins and profit neither by the accusation nor by the absolution. They are a thousand times reconciled and never penitent. They approach the holy table almost as the common one, and the bread of heaven is for them almost as the bread of earth."

This is the misery to which habitual infidelities to our general and particular rules reduce us, we who should be always animated by a new fervor, and these are the consequences of our daily disobediences. Happy are we if we have not come even to the pass of censuring the conduct of those who force themselves to remain faithful, of turning them from their exactitude by our talk after we have scandalized them by our example. Is this the way—I will not say a religious—a Christian should act? What can we answer when, at the last judgment, our brothers and sisters whom we have made lax will reproach us for being the first cause of their woe and for making them lose all the fruit of their exercises of piety? What can we answer when the souls who were entrusted to them and were lost through their negligence will blame us as the first authors of their reprobation? What can we answer when the founders, the benefactors, and the superiors of our community will accuse us of retarding, harming, and perhaps destroying the work they began, and thus making useless their gifts and their labors? What can we answer when our Lord himself will make us see all the good of which we shall have deprived his Church and all the evils to which we shall have exposed it? "Ah, the lukewarmness and negligence of our state, that we so quickly fall away from our former fervor, and are now even weary of living through sloth and tepidity."6

If the example of Jesus Christ and of the saints touch us, if the glory of the Church interest us, if our spiritual advancement be dear to us, let us recover ourselves and say to the God who will gladly hear us, "Now have I begun." (Ps. 77:10), "I have sworn and am determined to keep the judgments of your justice" (Ps 119:106).⁷ Why this determination? Should we who have trampled the world and its vanities underfoot, we who have cut off commerce with worldly people to shut ourselves into a monastery wherein we submit our will to that of superiors, should we render these great sacrifices useless and expose our final perseverance for the sake of slight infidelities? Give us grace, O my God, give us grace to keep from such evil, or withdraw us from it if we have already fallen into it. "Confirm, O God, what you have wrought in us" (Ps 68:29), finish the work you have begun in us (Phil 1:6), that you may crown us at the end of life (2 Tm 4:8). As for us, we resolve, henceforth, to practice an obedience that is pure, prompt, universal, and constant.

This pure, prompt, universal, constant fidelity to what is prescribed for us daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, will make of us so many victims of divine love, so many living hosts. Oh, how I should bless divine mercy for this. Permit me to borrow the language of St. Paul to address you, my, dearly beloved: "I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God, for I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor 11:2). Let us be obedient, then, with the obedience we vowed at the foot of the altar,

⁶ à Kempis, *Imitation*, 1.18.

⁷ Moreau's reference to Ps 77:10 is a literal translation of the Vulgate (76:11) "nunc coepi."

obedient to all the commandments of God and of the Church; obedient to our baptismal promises; obedient to the evangelical counsels of our state of life as determined by our rules and constitutions; obedient to the least desire of the supreme head of the Church and to the faithful interpreters of his will; obedient to the bishops who deign to employ our labors in conformity with our rules, being respectful, submissive, and united to them and through them with the Holy See; obedient to the civil authorities in all that is within their jurisdiction; obedient to our superiors with what St. Paul calls obedience unto justice (Rom 6:16). Without obedience to superiors, we shall be unhappy ourselves and make our superiors unhappy; we shall hinder God's work and incur a frightful responsibility.

Let no one say that obedience is the hardest and heaviest yoke in the community, that it suffices to obey God without subjecting oneself not only to the wisdom and charity of good superiors, but even to the passions, whims, and ill treatment of imperfect ones who are jealous of domination. We may reply that either the superiors acquit themselves of their office in accordance with the rules, or they do not. If they faithfully govern and direct us, we obey God in obeying them, and so, far from being rulers, they are but our servants since they must occupy themselves with all our needs of body and soul, must be all things to all people, must forget themselves and their liberty to become, by devotedness and charity, the servants and debtors of their brothers and sisters (1 Cor 9:19). If, on the contrary, superiors are capricious in exercising their power, if they even abuse it and become guilty in the eyes of him who will judge those in authority most severely, they yet give us opportunity of humbling ourselves, of renouncing and mortifying our will and our self-love, and, so long as they command nothing wrong, of reaping abundant merit and eternal reward. Though they do wrong in acting thus, their unjust and capricious will yet becomes in a mysterious and important sense the will of God for us, since we are in greater need of dying to our own will and judgment than of being enlightened, edified, and consoled by faultless superiors.

After all, the worst that bad superiors can do to us is to humiliate us and make us do penance. But, should we not strive for humility and always do penance? Is not the life of the ordinary Christian, even more of the religious, a sacrifice of love, humiliation, and continual penance, without which he would be unable to satisfy the justice of God for his countless sins? If, then, our superiors command kindly or cruelly, let us obey like little children, without stopping to reason on their commands, without questioning, without worry, and we shall be safe.

The psalmist tells us that they are happy, indeed, whom the Lord has chosen and taken under the covert of his wings, for "they shall be inebriated with the plenty of his house and shall drink of the torrent of his pleasure" (Ps 36:8-9). This abundance of pleasure is all the more precious in that it is spiritual and celestial. Far from the world and its dangers, sheltered from its errors and misfortunes, living in the company of wise virgins who keep their lamps always lit for the coming of their divine spouse, such as these can delight in the Lord and receive the requests of their heart. Like the bees that make their honey from various flowers, they can grow in perfection by imbibing the good example of their brothers and sisters, imitating the humility of one, the patience of another, the mildness of this one, the charity of that one. Hidden in the secrecy of the heart of the Lord, they know a peace, a repose, which is troubled only by the thought of those who have it not because of sin. Truly do they know how lovely are the tabernacles of the Lord, tabernacles not of ivory and gold but of the warm breathing bodies consecrated by the vow of chastity.

Let us be chaste, then, with a chastity that makes pure all our thoughts and affections, all our words and acts, our bodies and our souls. This sacred obligation is not a hard and heavy yoke; it is not a punishment. It is, as St. Paul assures us, an extra liberty, a sweet exemption from the distressful cares and bitter tribulations that so often afflict the married (1 Cor 7). Marriage is, as he teaches, a holy state, but the state of virginity is a higher and holier

state. This freedom of virginity we have all experienced. All of us who compare our lot to that of our families, no matter how happy and holy its members may be, know that we do not have their share of sufferings, cares, anxieties, contradictions, and self-denials. Every one of us can but cry out with the royal prophet: "The lines are fallen unto me in goodly places. I will bless the Lord, who has given me understanding" (Ps 16:6-7).

Let us deem ourselves happy, then, in being rid of the tribulations of the flesh of which the apostle speaks, and far from soiling ourselves with earthly and animal affections, let us lift ourselves up on the wings of divine love into the ways of the angels. If impurity makes people something less than human, purity makes them something more. If vice lowers humans to the level of the beast, virtue raises them to the height of the angel. Let us seek all our joy of love in the bosom of him who promised heaven and the sight of himself to the pure of heart and who chose for his best beloved on earth a Virgin Mother, a virgin foster-father, and a virgin disciple. Let us live in him who "purchases us from the earth" as virgins who will "follow the lamb wherever he goes" in paradise, singing "a new canticle before the throne" (Rv 14:3-4). To keep ourselves in this sublime state, we must submit more and more to the law of supernatural love that refers all things to God, that undertakes and suffers all for his glory.

To remain on this exalted plane it is literally necessary that we follow the injunction of St. Paul: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences" (Rom 13:14). You recall the way in which Jacob at the persuasion of his mother took by trickery the blessings of Isaac, his father. She clothed him in Esau's good garments that she had with her and put the skin of a kid on his neck and hands. If we translate this from the physical to the moral order, we shall put on the new man or Jesus Christ, to win new graces from our heavenly Father, not by trickery but with his consent and with our elder brother Jesus to clothe us in himself. This means that we must not limit ourselves to the wearing of the religious habit, which recalls the garb formerly worn by penitents, but we must let the change of dress produce in our souls and our whole exterior conduct the sentiments and the manner of action of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5). We have for guarantee that this is to put on the new man, St. Paul, who bade us put on the Lord Jesus. Our whole life should have for its end to assimilate so perfectly the thoughts, judgments, desires, words, and actions of Jesus Christ that we can say with the great apostle: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Let us be as the limb that lives on the sap of the tree to which it has been grafted, as real members of Christ's mystical body.

We must so identify ourselves with our divine model as not only to be a faithful copy of him, but to become, as it were, another him. This he asked for his own from his Father: "That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us: I in them, and you in me" (Jn 17:21-23). Is this possible? Yes, and it is accomplished thus: As the intelligence and will, the soul and body of Jesus Christ are united to the divine nature by the incarnation, so our mind is united to that of Jesus Christ by faith, our heart to his heart by charity, and our body to his body by Holy Communion. He invites us to contract this union with himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). He is the way by his example, the truth by his doctrine, and the life by his sacraments.

What is the wonderful transformation worked in us by this union with Jesus Christ, and what are its wonderful characteristics? It is an entire union of mind, will, and body. It is an intimate union which makes us live the very life of Jesus Christ. It is an efficacious union since it restores all we lost in Adam and makes us one moral person with the savior. It is a glorious union which gives to our actions supernatural merit and the right to eternal glory. How the soul dilates with joy at the thought. How could we ever surrender such a body, a body fed on the Body of Christ, to impurity? How could we ever divide a heart, a heart that is one with his, between him and a creature?

Of all our vows, chastity is the most glorious for our community, but it is also the most delicate and difficult to keep perfectly until death. Our youth was trained to obedience, and we were accustomed from infancy to ask for the means to satisfy our corporal needs. Thus, we were in a way ready for the obligations of our vows of obedience and poverty. If, however, we had a happy family life, we were not so well prepared for that complete detachment required by genuine chastity of the heart. Virginal integrity is only the first requirement of this consecrated virtue, though; alas, by all too many, it is supposed to satisfy even the spirit of the vow. Being other Christs, we must love all our brothers and sisters with a boundless love. Possessive love of one of them narrows this wide love in proportion to its exclusiveness.

Since there is no state of life so holy as to escape the onslaughts of the evil one, and since even the greatest saints were not exempt from temptations of the flesh, we shall look for a moment here at the essential malice of impurity. Christian philosophy describes a human being as an intelligence served by bodily organs, or, if you like this better, a soul created to the image and likeness of God, which gives form to a body that it should govern. If there be one of the passions of the body that, upsetting this natural order, subjects the soul to the senses and directs all its desires to the flesh so as, in a way, to materialize it, that passion may be said to turn a person into a kind of brute. Such is precisely the degrading effect of the vice we are discussing. It even degrades a person below the brute, since animals have no useless desires outside the purpose of reproduction, being chaste by instinct.

Due to the character of a Christian, the profanation of his body takes on the nature of a sacrilege. His body is as the ciborium and the chalice for the flesh and blood of Christ; he is the living temple of the Holy Spirit. Hence, the apostle writes: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification—that you should abstain from fornication; that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles that know not God" (1 Thes 4:3-5). These words were addressed, not to consecrated religious especially, but to the Christian living in the midst of the world as well. Impurity is a blasphemy against the three persons of the most adorable Trinity—against the Father whose image it defaces, against the Son whose members it defiles, against the Holy Spirit whose living temple it profanes. We can look to both faith and reason to measure the horror of this sacrilege.

We need not enter here into the kinds of impurity, those of thought, word, and deed. Nor need we dwell on the distinction between temptation and sin. Our purpose is rather to acquire a greater love for the virtue, a greater detestation for the vice, and to learn the means of safeguarding ourselves from yielding to temptation. There are but three means, but we shall find them efficacious. They are fear, avoidance of occasions, and prayer.

St. Augustine tells us that if we do not wish to be rejected from the presence of God, we must fear the fire of concupiscence. "Blessed is the one that is always fearful" (Prv 28:14). This fear should be founded primarily on the rigor of the chastisement God has always used and will everlastingly use against the impure. Are we tempted to commit one of those secret sins by which the body is despoiled of its sanctity? Be it only a word, a single voluntary thought, a deliberate glance, let us remember that everlasting hell is its punishment. St. Augustine teaches that to be forever damned, it suffices to take pleasure in one evil thought, to retain willfully in the mind one sinful desire, without actual intention of putting the thought into act. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: "Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Let us judge, then, the deceit of that pretended strength of mind that treats all these secret matters as mere trifles and see whether we have not reason to urge on ourselves, as the first means to avoid this sin, a great fear of it.

We should fear this vice also because of the great facility with which we fall into it, for it flatters so much our corrupt nature. Age is no protection. Wealth or poverty makes no difference. Holiness of life is no infallible guarantee. David, before his sin, was perhaps more holy than any of us, and yet he fell and, without a miracle of grace, would now be in hell. What caused his ruin? An indiscreet glance. St. Paul tells us to flee from this danger (2 Tm 2:22; 1 Cor 6:18). We must not go into this kind of combat; we must flee from it. The only way in which to keep our treasure is to run away with it. St. Ambrose tells us that the characteristic of a chaste soul is to be afraid of the unguarded look of a person of the other sex.

Our paramount duty, then, in regard to this treasure we carry in a fragile vase is to avoid all occasions of harming it. We surely need no warning against intimacies of a dangerous kind, for our holy rule forbids not only such physical manifestations of love, but even those outpourings of the heart in particular friendships which sully its complete virginal consecration to our divine spouse. Our rule takes care also to save us from dangerous reading with its almost limitless power to harm chastity.

Let us add to this salutary fear and to the continual avoidance of occasions, fervent, frequent, and humble prayer. Let us ask God with all our hearts to save us from every sin. Let not a day go by without our asking for grace to keep our chastity, and, along with our prayer, let us practice that continual temperance in all things which is prescribed by our vow of poverty. The vows supplement one another, and so both obedience to the rule and the poverty of the common life are safeguards to chastity.

It is a happy self-denial that begets the peace and the liberty of the children of God. It is a desirable poverty of spirit by which we divest ourselves of our own wisdom and of our own will and of our own body. Happy are those who understand it; happier still are those who open their hearts to this poverty of spirit. For such, command becomes easy, subjection seems right and good. It is very easy, nevertheless, to have illusions regarding the vow of poverty. Though we all promised God, by a public promise made before the altar, to renounce the use of anything without the consent of legitimate superiors, many of us have since fallen into the snares of our desires. How few of us are really poor in spirit and in heart, poor in detachment from created things, especially as regards our ease and convenience? Do not many of us give with one hand and take back with the other?

Self-love is prolific in pretexts to excuse its laxity in this matter. It winds in and out of all we do like a serpent, hiding when we grow suspicious of it. It takes all kinds of forms and repays itself in little details for the great sacrifices it had to make. It had to surrender home and wealth, perhaps, and now it clings to a piece of furniture, an article of clothing, a book, or some trifle not worth naming but capable of showing how much alive nature still is.

Far from being poor in food, in clothing, in the simplicity of our room, in every detail of life, some of us wish to have everything to our taste. We feel the least privation; we will not want for anything. If our food is not so good as we have been led to expect, we grumble. Ah, the rules we promised at the altar to observe do not regard poverty thus; nor did the founders of our community so regard it.

Let us look back on the history of the monastic orders. The early members proposed to themselves as models the toilers in the fields who earn their living by the sweat of their brow and manage only the bare necessities of life. In this true poverty many delicate virgins lived and, thank God, still live, virgins often of noble birth who were brought up in ease. They sleep on hard beds; they wear coarse clothing; they walk barefoot; they eat poor and scanty food; they fast frequently; they rise to sing the Office at midnight; they bear the cold and suffer the heat; they keep silence; they remain long on their knees in prayer; they wear hair shirts and perform other bodily austerities; they work like common servants; and they do all this with submission and joy. Ah, this is, indeed, to practice the poverty of Jesus Christ,

who was born on straw, had not whereon to lay his head during his journeys, and died naked on a cross.

O my God, shall not we, without going beyond our rules, imitate your poverty generously? At least, suffer not among us those who complain about food and clothing. Instead, give us new hearts, hearts worthy of you, hearts that are enemies to sensuality and that freely enjoy only what the rule permits us, hearts for which you suffice, hearts that delight in detachment and increasing privation. Keep in our minds the memory of your cross and your sufferings. Teach us what a lovely thing it is to be truly free, to be detached from everything, to cling to nothing that will pass with time. Grant that when the anniversary of our profession comes yearly, each new one may find us more and more filled with the spirit of our vows, so that our renewal of them may indeed be a feast to you and an everlasting remembrance of your great mercies in choosing us to come into your land of blessing.