

PRECAUTIONS 11

The First Precaution

*11. Let, then, the first precaution be that, **without the command of obedience**, you **never take upon yourself any work apart from the obligations** of your state however good and full of charity it may seem, whether for yourself or for anyone else inside or outside the house. By such a practice **you will win merit and security, avoid possession**, and flee from harm and evils unknown to you, for God will one-day demand an account. If you do not observe this precaution in little things as well as big, you will be unable to avoid the devil's deceiving you, to a small or great degree, no matter how right you think you are.*

St. John in this first precaution against the devil insists on living our life in total obedience to our superior. Obedience demands that we never take upon ourselves any work apart from the obligations of our life. Devil has extended his empire over the minds of evil men forcing them to disobey their authorities. Thus, in the passage from St. Paul, we read, "and you, when you were dead in your offenses and sins, wherein in times past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of this air, of the spirit that now works on the children of unbelief" (Eph 2.1-2). In the same way Christ in the Gospel calls him "the prince of this world". For when His enemies come to take Him, He looks beyond the instruments of evil to his Father who moves them, and says: "I will not now speak many things to you, for the prince of this world comes, and in me he has not anything" (Jn 14.30).

St. John in his *Dark Night*, states that very often obedience is distasteful for the beginners as they take delight in spiritual practices and the devil induces such desires to lead them astray. He writes: "Any obedience in this matter is distasteful to them. Some reach such a point that the mere obligation of obedience to perform their spiritual exercises makes them lose all desire and devotion" (*Night I,6,ii*). So, a religious is called upon to act under obedience and do whatever is demanded by his call. Any personal initiative in spiritual or daily life has to be experienced in and through obedience.

Obviously, the instruction directs our mind and heart to doing only what obedience demands from us. At times doing things with sheer enthusiasm may lead us astray if it is not recommended under obedience. It should be noted that our desire to take up commitments outside our house with the intention of doing charity may also be a

stumbling block to our intense growth in the Lord unless otherwise directed by obedience to the superior or from the obligations of our state as religious.

What is the meaning of the expression: *never take upon yourself any work apart from the obligations*? It means to settle down in the quiet of our own being we must learn to be detached from the results of our activity. We must withdraw ourselves, to some extent, from effects that are beyond our control and be content with the goodwill and the work that are quiet expression of our inner life. We must be content to live without watching ourselves live, to work without expecting an immediate reward, to love without an instantaneous satisfaction, and to exist without any special recognition. It is only when we are detached from ourselves that we can be at peace with ourselves. We cannot find happiness in our work if we are always extending ourselves beyond ourselves and beyond the sphere of our work to show ourselves greater than we are. We cannot achieve greatness unless we lose all interest in being great. Our own idea of greatness is illusory, and if we pay too much attention to it we will be lured out of the peace and stability of the being God gave us, and seek to live in a myth we have created for ourselves. It is therefore, a very great thing to be little, which to say, to be ourselves. Devil will try to provoke us to be important and centre of attraction. But when we are truly ourselves, sincere, transparent, and true, we lose most of the futile self-consciousness that keeps us constantly comparing ourselves with others to see how big we are. This is how we can flee from harm and evil unknown to us.

*Even if your negligence amounts to no more than not being governed by obedience in all things, you culpably err, since **God wants obedience more than sacrifice** [1 Sm. 15:22]. **The actions of Religious are not their own, but belong to obedience**, and if you withdraw them from obedience, you will have to count them as lost.*

God wants from us obedience than our sacrifices. What is obedience? It is surrender to God in everything that we do, of course in a practical sense, obedience to the person representing God here on earth, our superiors. At times it is so difficult to obey the one whom we do not like; but that is where we break our will and surrender our ego. In this sense of obedience, each one of us has to make a leap into trust; trust in the sacredness of every human heart, trust in the beauty of the universe, trust that in working for peace and unity, and purging our false self, we will find a treasure. This attempt to find the treasure lies in obedience to God through our superior. For those of us who are in our family this treasure is found in our parents and the elderly; for those who live in communities, this treasure is found in our obedience to superiors. When we obey, we say that our actions are from God, and they are inspired by our superiors. This needs

profound faith and hope that steers us to discover each day something new that will enrich us.

One thing we must know that our being is not to be enriched merely by activity. Everything depends on the quality of our life and our experiences. Normally a multitude of badly performed actions only half-lived exhaust and deplete our being. By doing things badly we make ourselves less real. When we act out of obedience, then we are real because obedience has the genuine value of a sacrifice.

There are times, then, to keep ourselves in existence we simply must sit back for a while and do nothing, if that is what obedience demands. And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act one can perform. And often it is quite beyond one's power. This requires God's grace under obedience. The fruitfulness of our life depends in large measure on our ability to doubt our own words and to question the value of our own work. The man who completely trusts his own estimate of himself is doomed to sterility.

We know when we follow our vocation in obedience, when our soul is set free from preoccupation with itself and can seek God, and at times it may not appear to find him, we feel deep peace within. Gratitude and confidence and freedom from ourselves; these are signs that indicate we have found our vocation and are living up to it even though everything else may seem to have gone wrong. They give us peace in any suffering. They teach us to laugh at despair. That is what St. John strongly affirms that *the actions of Religious are not their own but belong to obedience*. Christ obeyed the Father in total surrender. God sent Christ into the world to restore obedience to its rightful place in our hearts and lives, to restore man in general to obedience to God. Christ came, becoming obedient unto death, showing what the only true obedience is like. He lived it out and perfected it in himself as the life that He won through death and now communicates to us. The Christ who loves us, who leads and teaches and strengthens us, who lives in us, is the Christ who was obedient unto death. Obedience unto death is the essence of the life He imparts.

Withdrawing from obedience to our superior will cloud our mind and heart and will lead us into darkness. This signifies that when there is a sort of disobedience, normally an upheaval begins to grip the individual and gradually this turns into an internal turmoil resulting in restlessness. This will facilitate the devil to lead us astray easily through the weakness we experience. When we indulge in disobedience, St. John says

“*you will have to count them as lost*” means, a loss of our journey towards perfection and a loss to ourselves interiorly.

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