

## PRECAUTIONS - 14

### *Against Oneself And the Shrewdness of Sensuality*

*14. The other three precautions to be practiced in the wish to conquer one's own self and sensuality, the third enemy.*

St. John here provides two sets of counsels, the first of which has to do with the control of the passions, which by their very nature are self-centered. These maxims challenge the individual to exert ever greater effort in the ascetical struggle to control the demands of selfish love. Greater perfection always calls for greater effort; progress is made by moving onward and upward. Hence, if the counsels are put into practice, they can contribute to the formation of an integrated personality and an authentically Christian character.

In this context of controlling the passions, St. John urges the Christian to try not to prefer that which is easiest but that which is most difficult; not that which gives the most pleasure but that which gives least; not that which is restful but that which is laborious; not that which is the greatest but that which is the least; and so forth. In a word, one should strive to cultivate a spirit of holy indifference, a perfect obedience to the divine will (cfr. *Ascent* I,13,xi)

In the second set of counsels St. John returns to his basic teaching that "we are not treating here of the lack of things, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are treating of the detachment from them of the taste and desire, for it is this that leaves the soul free and void of them, although it may have them" (*Ascent* I,3,iv). When the soul cooperates with God for freeing itself from all attachments, then we know that it is on its way to conquer its own self and sensuality.

These counsels are reminiscent of the manner in which Christ spoke when he said: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16.25); "There is no one who has left home or wife or brothers, parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive a plentiful return in this age and life everlasting in the age to come" (Lk 18.29-30).

Similarly, St. John teaches that to receive the "plentiful return" promised by Christ, one must not *desire* to take pleasure in anything, to possess anything, to be anything, to want anything. He maintains that we can never be at peace until we control our selfish desires which keep us in a state of restless agitation and often activate one or another of the capital sins. It is necessary to hold oneself in a state of holy indifference, satisfied with whatever God wills for us. These are the sentiments expressed by St. John in his poem, *Glosa a lo Divino*:

“From creatures now my soul is free,  
Detached from all created things;  
Now she at last has taken wings  
And lives her life delectably.  
To God, and God alone, she clings.”

### ***The First Precaution***

*15. The first precaution is to understand that you have come to the monastery so that **all may fashion you and try you**. Thus, to free yourself from the imperfections and disturbances that can be engendered by the mannerisms and attitudes of the religious and draw profit from every occurrence, you should think that all in the community are **artisans** as indeed they are present there in order to prove you; that some will fashion you **with words**, others **by deeds**, and others with **thoughts** against you; and that in all this you must be submissive as is the statue to the craftsman who molds it, to the artist who paints it, and to the gilder who embellishes it.*

*If you fail to observe this precaution, you will not know how to overcome your sensuality and feelings, nor will you get along well in the community with the religious or attain holy peace or free yourself from many stumbling blocks and evils.*

Coming to the monastery so that all may fashion and try you, may seem scary at the outset. Does this mean, that members target one another in a community? No. It is a normal process by which a member gets to live in the community, learns about others and tries to live a holy life. That is why a community member must be ready to be fashioned by others and that is a normal fact to be accepted. Normally that is what happens in any community where disagreements, frictions, hatred, jealousy, competition drive individuals to shape one another. This may seem too negative, yet, it has its advantages too.



Let us think of a community where members live together. There is always need for the other to live in harmony with and dependence on the other. If there is no dependence, there is no community. First, we depend on God, then we depend on our superiors and finally we depend on one another. This dependence helps us to realize that we are not islands rather we are part of a continent. But in this process, we get to carry the cross of one another because we are called to shoulder each one's burdens.

### **Can we do something?**

It is a normal feeling that we are worried about things that are not going well around us, in our community. We are tempted to get discouraged and give up. That is when we must tell ourselves; whatever happens, whatever mistakes and faults are committed by this person or that, it robs us of exactly nothing. Even though we lived among people who were committing serious sins that could not prevent us from loving God and serving our neighbour, or deprive us of any spiritual gift, or stop us from tending towards the fullness of love. The world around us could collapse, it would not rob us of the possibility of praying, placing all our trust in God, and loving. This does not mean shutting ourselves in an ivory tower and being indifferent to what is going on around us or remain passive. When there are problems, we should want them to be solved, and try to see what God is asking of us. Should we intervene? Can we do something positive? If the answer is yes, then it would be a grave error omission to do nothing.

### **Constant Worry about others**

If everything seems to be going wrong around us, it is even more necessary to preserve our freedom to hope in God and serve him joyfully and enthusiastically. The devil often tries to discourage us and make us lose our joy in serving God and our neighbour. One means he uses particularly is to make us worry about everything that is not going well around us in a community. In order to make us lose that dynamism and spiritual energy, the devil will lead us to notice a host of negative things, the unfair attitudes of the people in charge, mistakes and lack of fervor among our brothers and sisters, their faults and so on. This constant weight of worry, insecurity, sadness, and discouragement will weaken our spiritual enthusiasm and eventually our spiritual challenge.

### **They will fashion us**

St. John's recommendation seems right here that there are many in our communities who will fashion us; this means that all things happen in a community will purify us

and help us get closer to God experience. Our community members will fashion us through words, deeds, and with their thoughts. As a marble block surrenders to the sculptor, so we need to surrender ourselves to our community members so that we may grow in charity. Our brothers and sisters are like artisans that chisel us through words, deeds and thoughts is a common accepted factor in any community. At times, the words uttered are resentful, hurting and discouraging; deeds of others can cause us despair and lead us into pain; we have absolutely no control over their thoughts. But according to St. John when we accept such actions with submission we grow in spirituality.

The fact that who we are has absolutely nothing to do with any thoughts or opinions that exist in anyone else in this world. Period. That person whose approval we desperately seek could change his mind tomorrow. Therefore, instead of thinking that we are intelligent, talented, and beautiful ...we need to be silent and obedient. If our false self dominates our thinking, we will be miserably affected. This is how ego lures us into disregarding our authentic self.

### **Our Ego**

Unfortunately, ego tries to take away awareness of our spiritual nature. Not being aware of its influence, we spend a lot of time trying to win the approval of everyone we meet. When we do not receive that approval, we begin to internalize those external evaluations and expend large chunks of our life trying to be what we think someone else wants us to be. That is why St. John warns that submission is the best way out of such situation that can help us come closer to God and attain holy peace; free ourselves from many stumbling blocks and evils.

**Fr. Rudolf V. D'Souza OCD**