

The Precautions - 2

*Instructions and precautions necessary for anyone desiring to be a true **religious** and reach **perfection**.*

To be a true religious, one must live a disciplined, lovable, and sincere life. The word ‘religious’ comes from Latin, *religionem*, signifies ‘to bind’, or ‘re-establish’. According to Cicero this word is derived from *relegere* “go through again” (in reading or in thought), from *re* “again”; *legere* “read”. The word “religious” clearly signifies re-integration, relationship and going through again. We are called to be *religious* to follow and to be united with Him to share in His life and His kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in His kingdom. If we find that place, we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our destiny according to God’s will, to be what God wants us to be, that is re-connect with Him. We are all freely invited to have that deep relationship with God through Jesus Christ, which cannot be established unless we are aware of God’s immense presence everywhere and follow his commandments. The commandments of God are very concretely presented to us through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord: “Love your God with all your heart and mind and love your neighbour as yourself” (Lk 10.27). As we are invited to see perfection of love in our lives, we need to learn to deepen our experience, thus enabling our ongoing way of relationship with the divine.

Perfection is a word that speaks of attainment of the highest good or the attainment of the deepest relationship with the divine. Its Latin rendering is *perfectus* signifies, completed, accomplished, excellent etc. A religious, may be a person dedicated in a religious order or congregation or a person who pursues a higher spiritual goal in a particular religion, strives incessantly to gain more wisdom of God and desires to be united with Him in daily life and thus attain that perfect state. The guidelines called ‘precautions’ are necessary in our life to find the right direction, to take the necessary means for spiritual journey and to avoid dangers and unexpected uncertainties that could come on our way. Anyone desiring to take the spiritual path, or the path of God-experience seriously needs precautions, so that the desired end is achieved.

The precautions of St. John are for those who genuinely desire to attain union with God quickly in their daily life. John wrote them as instructions to his disciples desiring to experience God and attain perfection. In the 16th Century during the time St. John wrote these precautions, there was a deep-felt desire for “perfection” among people as what Jesus had instructed his disciples, “Be perfect as my Heavenly Father is perfect”

(Mt 5.48). We know that attaining 'perfection' in any field is a human need and expression because we are never satisfied with ourselves no matter what we have already achieved in our life. We believe and are convinced that all the works we do in fact should give us satisfaction but in fact, works alone do not satisfy us. This does not mean that we are all perfectionists. Desire for perfection is an eternal thirst for authenticity in our life, which is regarded as a deep longing for the perfect - God. As a reflection we tend to imitate perfection that is found in others. Human beings crave for the ultimate and the greatest and perhaps the noblest in their life. But this is to be understood in the context of one's relationship with God. In fact, God is the fulfilment of human heart.

*1. The soul must practice the following instructions if it wishes to attain in a short time **holy recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness, and poverty of spirit**, where one enjoys the peaceful comfort of the Holy Spirit, reaches union with God, is freed of all the obstacles incurred **from the creatures of this world**, defended against the wiles and **deceits of the devil**, and liberated from **one's own self**.*

This is the first prerequisite to attain God experience. One should practice the following instructions to attain **recollection** and **spiritual silence** within a short time. Recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness, and poverty of spirit are the basic requirements for enjoying spiritual comfort and happiness.

Recollection

Recollection should be presence. It makes us, first, be present to ourselves. It makes us present to whatever reality is most significant in the moment of time in which we are living. And it makes us present to God, present to ourselves in Him, present to everything else in Him. Above all, it brings His presence to us.

Recollection is more than a mere tuning inward upon oneself, and it does not necessarily mean the denial or exclusion of exterior things. Sometimes we are more recollected, quieter, simple and pure, when we see through exterior things and see God in them than when we turn away from them to shut them out of our minds. Recollection does not deny sensible things, it sets them in order. For recollection brings the soul into contact with God, and His invisible nature.

This recollection is twofold: Active recollection that is obtained by recalling to mind God's wonderful deeds, his goodness, kindness, forgiveness, saving grace and his love. The second one is passive recollection that takes place when at prayer, and it

is experienced through God's grace who induces this type of recollection. The one who experiences it may feel the benefits in the soul and body but may not remember what has occurred during this recollection experience.

According to spiritual theologians and saints, active recollection may be acquired by our own efforts aided by the ordinary grace of God. Thus, any devout soul can acquire the habit of thinking of God's presence and of fixing attention upon Him and his Divine perfections.

Passive recollection does not depend upon our own efforts, but is an extraordinary grace infused by God, that brings together the faculties of the soul and manifests His presence and His perfections; this kind of recollection is classed by mystical writers as the first degree of infused contemplation.

The first kind of recollection belongs to ascetical devotion and practice. It is necessary for all who wish to attain Christian perfection. Without it, it is almost difficult to make progress in virtue and prayer. Therefore, it is necessary to observe how it may be acquired.

Recollection means recollecting, that happens when we gather the strength of the soul through its faculties; memory, intellect and will. Gathering our memory, intellect and will to attain this recollection strengthens our soul. It is like doing an immensely powerful work with full concentration and effort. This requires discipline and focus. In the same way recollection requires focus and effort at doing one thing at a time.

If we begin our spiritual work with recollection and with our hearts directed to God by prayer and a pure intention, we will avoid many baneful concerns and useless preoccupations as we proceed with our work. Scattered powers are easily fatigued. Spiritual fatigue proceeds from wasted and ill-applied effort. The disgust it generates slackens the powers of the soul, so that we waste even more effort and end in even greater fatigue.

Recollection without faith confines the spirit in a prison without light or air. Interior asceticism should not end by locking us in such a prison. It would only defeat all the purposes of God's grace by doing so. Faith establishes us in recollection not by setting limits to the activity of the soul, but by removing all the limitations of our natural intelligence and will and freeing the mind from doubt and the will from

hesitation, so that the spirit is let loose by God and plunges into the depths of His invisible freedom.

Recollection helps us to know God. We know God when we discover that He knows us. Hence recollection draws us closer to God and He draws closer to us. According to St. John, this type of recollection leads us to discover ourselves and go deeper into our spirit.

Religious community is the house of God and all who live there are close to Him. Yet it is possible to live close to Him and in His own house without ever finding Him. Why? Because we continue to seek ourselves rather than God, to live for ourselves rather than for Him. That is why a religious house becomes our house than His and He hides Himself from us. But genuine recollection can lead us to find Him and our existence becomes an existence of love for God.

Spiritual Silence

Spiritual silence is a fundamental requirement for any spiritual venture and progress. One may be recollected amidst the duties of an active life by avoiding distracting and dissipating occupations not dictated by reason or required by necessity or obedience. When we are distracted managing multiple occupations and not able to complete what we have begun, will prove that it is an obstacle to recollection. Father Faber a spiritual author suggests that the man who undertakes too much is a foolish man, if not a guilty one. Such a person is distracted and dissipated engaging in multiple activities.

What an excellent opportunity we have for the practice of humility by modestly keeping silence while others speak! How well we may practice mortification by refraining from relating something we very much desire to tell! What a splendid chance to exercise meekness by not replying to unjust accusations and insults! It is a known fact that frequent exercise of the presence of God can lead us to pure silence. As recollection is itself an application of the mind to the Divine presence within us, it is evident that the shortest way to its acquisition is frequently to call to mind that our souls are the temples of God where God lives silently and vibrantly.

Often our discomfort and distraction within ourselves is caused by myriad anxieties, worries of daily life that sever our holy aspirations. Holiness consists of holy silence allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and bear fruit of love, peace, joy, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control (Gal 5.23). It is the Holy Spirit who renews us in the silence of our hearts. The spirit of this 'world', the 'evil spirit' and our 'own ego centered spirit' do not allow the Holy Spirit to gain ground within ourselves in spite of our sincere efforts, even though we know that God dwells within us.

Freeing oneself from the obstacles incurred from the creatures of this world is what leads us to silence. This is obvious in our daily lives that attachments to things and people can pull us down and leave us miserable and distracted. St. Teresa of Avila in her *Interior Castle* first Mansion calls such attachments and distractions as *snakes, reptiles and poisonous creatures* that leads to chaos (*Interior Castle* I,2,xiv)

Spiritual silence enables us to pray. The most important thing in prayer is that we present ourselves as we are before God as He is to us. This cannot be done without a generous effort at silence and self-searching. But if we are sincere, our prayer will never be fruitless. Our sincerity itself establishes an instant contact with the God of all truth.

The virtue of silence does not consist in never speaking, but in keeping silent when there is no good reason to speak. Solomon says: "There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak." (Eccl 3.7). In reference to these words, St. Gregory of Nyssa remarks: "The time to keep silence is mentioned first, because by silence we learn the art of speaking well." When therefore should a Christian, who desires to become holy, be silent, and when should he speak? He should be silent when it is not necessary to speak, and he should speak when necessity or charity requires it. St. Chrysostom gives the following rule: "Speak only when it is more useful to speak than to be silent."

The discipline of silence is necessary for life. It enhances our spirit and enriches us our spiritual life. At times it is painful but effective. Through silence, we leave evil behind and look for good. Noise has no moderation, like a ship without a captain on a raging sea, whereas silence is a paradise, like a limitless ocean. Silence is also a great rudder that can lead to a safe port. To choose silence is to choose what is extraordinary and right. The man who loves silence can conduct his life wisely and effectively and attain to divine union quickly.

Nakedness and poverty of the Spirit

John insists that to obtain nakedness and poverty of spirit is the most difficult spiritual exercise for an aspirant to union with God. It requires love, faith, and genuine desire for God. Any type of ascetical practice cannot be called nakedness and poverty of the

spirit. That is why St. John insists, “some are content with a certain degree of virtue, perseverance in prayer, and mortification but never achieve the nakedness, poverty, selflessness, or spiritual purity (which are all the same) about which the Lord counsels us here. For they still feed and clothe their natural selves with spiritual feelings and consolations instead of divesting and denying themselves of these for God's sake. They think a denial of self in worldly matters is sufficient without an annihilation and purification in the spiritual domain. It happens that, when some of this solid, perfect food (the annihilation of all sweetness in God – the pure spiritual cross and nakedness of Christ's poverty of spirit) is offered them in dryness, distaste, and trial, they run from it as from death and wander about in search only of sweetness and delightful communications from God. Such an attitude is not the hallmark of self-denial and nakedness of spirit but the indication of a spiritual sweet tooth. Through this kind of conduct they become, spiritually speaking, enemies of the cross of Christ [Phil. 3:18].” (*Ascent* II,7,v) “Christ’s faithful have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5.24); they are led by the Spirit and follow his desires (CCC 2555). Poverty of the spirit is a way to avoid greed and envy. “Abandonment to the providence of the Father in heaven frees us from anxiety about tomorrow. Trust in God is a preparation of the blessedness of the poor. They shall see God (Mt 6.25-34). This attitude is difficult to attain and requires diligence and determination to practice it.

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