

# PRECAUTIONS - 7

## *The Third Precaution*

*8. The third precaution is very necessary that you may know how to **guard yourself in the community against all harm that may arise in regard to the religious.** Many, by not observing it, not only have lost the peace and good of their souls but have fallen and ordinarily continue to fall into many evils and sins.*

### **Harmful Relationship**

St. John is cautioning against all harm that may arise through a dangerous relationship in the community. We all come to religious communities from various family and social backgrounds and cultures. There will be always occasions where difference of opinion and attitude will occur. If anyone succeeds in guarding oneself from such danger will certainly experience interior peace and tranquility. What is the harm a relationship can cause? The harm that can be caused is disruption, division, and dysfunction. When members of a religious community involve themselves in creating dysfunction in the community by division and discord, that is a grave danger for personal as well as community life. Of course, St. John does not want us to do away with relationships, but a dangerous relationship that hinders God’s intervention and grace. Through this precaution he admits “harmful” relationships damage peace and good of the souls. Dangerous relationships can cause selfishness, unhealthy party spirit and provoke jealousy. When there is fraternal love, forgiveness and understanding in a community then one can attain peace of mind and ascend to God in prayer and devotion. If we continue to be agitated with all things that happen in a community, or if we lose our peace because we have to please or hate a member of our community, then it is hard to attain to that holy recollection and prayer. Then most of our attention will be diverted towards solving the problems or aggravating them. In any community for that matter there are endless problems and they should be solved by those who are put in charge and responsible. When unnecessary meddling happens on our part, we will lose our spiritual equilibrium and peace. Thus, those who give too much attention to the things that happen in the community are at risk of losing peace and will gradually drift away from holy recollection and serenity.

### **The good of the other**

We all must know that real love not only prefers the good of another in the community to my own, but it does not even compare the two. It has only one good: that of the

beloved (God), which is, at the same time, my own. Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own. The same good is enjoyed in its wholeness by two in the spirit, not halved and shared by two souls.

### **Distorted Image**

Quite often our relationship in the community can be distorted because of our own selfishness and egoism. One of the effects of original sin is an instinctive prejudice in favor of our own selfish desires. We see things as they are not, because we see them centered on ourselves. Fear, anxiety, greed, ambition, and our hopeless need for pleasure really distort the image of reality that is reflected in our minds. Grace does not completely correct this distortion all at once; but gives us a means of recognizing and allowing for it. And it tells us what we must do to correct it. Sincerity must be bought at a price; the humility to recognize our innumerable errors, and fidelity in tirelessly setting them right. It takes more courage than we imagine to be perfectly humble with other members in the community. Often our frankness is spoiled by a hidden viciousness, born of fear.

### **Fear and Honesty**

Fear is perhaps the greatest enemy of honesty. How many members of a community fear to follow their conscience because they would rather conform to the opinion of other members than to the truth they know in their hearts? How can one be sincere if constantly changing mind to conform with the shadow of what others expect of them? These intricacies diminish courage and diligence to the soul that strives after God. St. John warns that many have lost peace and good of their souls by not being attuned to God’s love and grace.

*It is that you very carefully guard yourself against thinking about what happens in the community, and even more against speaking of it, of anything in the past or present concerning a particular religious: **nothing about their character or their conduct or their deeds no matter how serious any of this seems.** Do not say anything under the color of zeal or of correcting a wrong, unless at the proper time to whomever by right you ought to tell. **Never be scandalized or astonished at anything you happen to see or learn of, endeavoring to preserve your soul in forgetfulness of all that.***

This part of the precaution centers on love of neighbour in the stricter sense. Guarding against thinking about what happens in the community means that we love one another unconditionally and accept them. One should not be disturbed because of their

character or their conduct or their deeds, no matter how serious any of this seems. To love another is to desire what is good for the other. Such love must be based on truth.

But a love that sees no distinction between good and evil but loves blindly merely for the sake of loving is hatred rather than love. To love blindly is to love selfishly, because the goal of such love is not the real advantage of the other, but only the exercise of love for our own sake.

True love is neither weak nor blind. It is essentially prudent, just, temperate, and strong. Unless all the other virtues blend in charity, our love is not going to be genuine. No one who really wants to love another will consent to love him falsely. If we are going to love others at all, we must make up our minds to love them well. Otherwise, our love is a delusion. This is what St. John insists saying *we need to guard ourselves against thinking about what happens in the community*. When we genuinely love, we refrain from speaking about our neighbour; anything of their *past or the present*. Nothing disturbs us about their character or their conduct or their deeds.

The first step to unselfish love is to understand that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (Jn 15.13). We must first purify our love by renouncing the pleasure of loving as an end. Loving in fact helps us to transcend ourselves to love God with our all our heart and mind. On the other hand, if pleasure is our end, we will be dishonest with ourselves and with those we love. We will not seek their good, but our own pleasure. That is why St. John says *do not say anything under the color of zeal or of correcting a wrong, unless at the proper time to whoever by right you ought to tell*. This is our responsibility, to correct out of love when a responsibility is entrusted with us.

## **Real Love**

Ultimately, it is always the love of God, which is drawing us through every human love, drawing us to give ourselves back in return of the love we have received. All love is holy, from the love of atoms or of animals to the love of humans. It is always a reflection of God. That is why *guarding oneself against thinking about what happens in the community* means we need to aim at perfection of love. Over and above this important caution, St. John insists that we *should not be scandalized or astonished at anything one happens to see or learn*. Forgetfulness is the best way to persevere in a community and this will help to love all equally.

Very often our impression about others are fabricated with the material we have borrowed from people and at times from our imagination or from our past background

experiences. Quite many times what we think of another person depends on what we think about ourselves. How difficult it is for us to be sincere with one another, when we do not know ourselves and the other. Sincerity is impossible, without humility and supernatural love. I cannot be sincere with other people until am sincere with myself and unless am prepared to do everything possible to understand them. St. John affirms, *never be scandalized or astonished at anything you happen to see or learn of*, means endeavoring to preserve our soul in forgetfulness of all. This will liberate us from falling into multiple errors and difficult situations.

### **Communion in the Community**

What St. John insists here is not indifference but a march towards communion in the community. Communion is mutual trust, mutual belonging; it is the to-and-fro movement of love among people where each one gives and each one receives. Communion is not a fixed state, it is an ever growing and deepening reality that can turn sour if one person tries to possess the other, thus preventing growth or getting scandalized or astonished at others' conduct which can lead to confusion. Communion is mutual vulnerability and openness one to the other. It is liberation for all, indeed, where all can be themselves, where all are called to grow in greater freedom and openness to others and to God.

Communion is at the heart of the mystery of our humanity. It means accepting the presence of another without prejudices and limitations. To a certain extent we lose ourselves when we are open to others. This is what *forgetfulness of all that* bothers one in the community where each one is respectful and loving. No one is scandalized but only helpful to promote peace and harmony. God is present in the liberating communion. That is why in the Bible John the Evangelist in his first letter writes: "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God and whoever loves is born of God and knows God" (I Jn 4.7).

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