

## PRECAUTIONS - 8

9. *For, should you desire to pay heed to things, **many will seem wrong, even were you to live among angels**, because of your not understanding the substance of them. Take Lot's wife as an example: because she was troubled at the destruction of the Sodomites and turned her head to watch what was happening, God punished her by converting her into a pillar of salt [Gn. 19:26]. You are thus to understand God's will: that even were you to live among devils **you should not turn the head of your thoughts to their affairs**, but forget these things entirely and strive to **keep your soul occupied purely and entirely in God**, and not let the thought of this thing or that hinder you from so doing.*

If we begin to pay heed to things *many will seem wrong*: This is correct because of our false perception, wrong judgements, and prejudiced outlook. Often, we err in our judgement. Even if we were to be right, we would not be able to understand the real substance of the problem as many details will be hidden from our analysis because we will not be able to comprehend the matters involved in the ultimate behavior of members in the community. St. John suggests that keeping our mind and heart occupied with the affairs of God will lead us to tranquility, peace and serenity in our daily lives, and our approach will be supported by the wisdom of God. Wisdom of God will never mislead us. Keeping our soul occupied purely and entirely in God *means* we look at him with love and adoration when we deal with the community matters and members.

### **Love bears all things**

Normally when we concentrate too much on something that is not right and make it our main topic of conversation and criticism, we end up giving to that ‘evil’ more substance than it has. Deploing evil sometimes only strengthens it. I recently heard someone say, “I’m not going to spend my life denouncing sin. That would be doing it too much honour. I would rather encourage good than condemn evil”. He was right. This is not a head-in-the-sand attitude, but the optimism of charity. “Love is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (I Cor 13.5-7).

When we advance in our spiritual life more surely and effectively by giving ourselves totally to the good despite our defects, we give more to help others to experience conversion and make progress by encouraging them in the positive aspects of their

lives than by condemning their errors. Good is more real than evil, and it can overcome evil eventually.

Jesus was surrounded by a sea of evil, hatred, violence, and lies. His heart was broken and pierced on the cross and he suffered more than anyone has ever suffered, but the wrong done to him did not penetrate him, because his heart was full of trust and his soul occupied purely and entirely on fulfilling the will of the Father. “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten” (1 Pet 2.21-23). Jesus always prayed even when he suffered because prayer helps in dire need.

### **Occupied with God**

To keep our soul *occupied purely and entirely in God* is to continue to have deeper and friendly conversation with Him. Prayer necessitates stepping back from the pain and joys of daily life and see the reality and respond positively towards it. We need this stepping back, particularly from all that is difficult or conflict ridden, taking a certain distance, in order to look at things not just from our own self-centered perspective but from the perspective of the vision we are seeking together. That vision is to create a place of love and belonging. Prayer is a time to let light flow into our lives to literally enlighten us every day and help us dispel the darkness of sin and violence.

We need space to re-read the day as it were. We need time to listen to the inner voice of hope calling us back to the essentials of love, essentials that we may have forgotten because of busyness and selfishness. To pray then, is more about listening than about talking. To pray is to be centered in love; it is to let what is deepest within us come to surface. Constant prayer liberates us from all worries and anxieties and helps us to overcome many stumbling blocks as St John points out. Prayer is also a meeting with the One who loves us, who reveals to us our secret value, who empowers us to give life, who loves us all and who calls us forth to greater love and compassion. Prayer is resting in the quiet, gentle presence of God. When we are compassionate, we can live a life of serenity and peace with one another.

*And to achieve this be convinced that in monasteries and communities there is never a lack of stumbling blocks, since there is never a lack of devils who seek to overthrow the saints; God permits this in order to prove and try religious.*

The ability to stay untouched by evil is not acquired at once. It is the fruit of a long process of self-conquest and grace that makes us grow in the theological virtues. We all know that there are several stumbling blocks in our communities and monasteries to overthrow our good intentions and works.



## **It is a gift from God**

If we obtain strength to overcome *stumbling blocks*, it is certainly an aspect of spiritual maturity that it is more a gift from God than result of our efforts. But this gift is given to us more quickly and surely, the more we strive for it, desire it and try to practice the attitudes described here: rooting ourselves in God through faith and prayer; not blaming people and things around us for what isn't going well in our lives and stop seeing ourselves as victims; resolutely shouldering responsibilities and accepting our lives as they are and using our present capacity for believing, hoping and loving to the fullest extent at every moment.

Our communities are filled with *stumbling blocks*. What are the stumbling blocks? They could be anything that hinders our spiritual growth. For example, jealousy, competition, criticism, greed, bad examples of laziness, apathy, scandals, imperfections connected with sexuality etc. The truth remains that our destiny is to love one another as Christ has loved us. Jesus had very few close friends when he was on earth, and yet He loved all people and he was most intimate friend to every soul born into the world. He faced many stumbling blocks, yet he conquered them all. Whether in our monasteries or communities the love of all people we meet and know are woven into our own destiny, together with the lives of many we shall never know on earth. But certain ones, very few, are our close friends. Because we have more in common with them, we are able to love them with a special selfless perfection since we have more to share. They are inseparable from our own destiny, and therefore, our love for them is especially holy. It is a manifestation of God in our lives. Despite all the love we experience in our communities, God permits at times trials and temptations to make us stronger in our spiritual pursuit.

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