

## PRECAUTIONS – 12

### *The Second Precaution*

*12. Let the second precaution be that you always look on the superior as though on God, no matter who he happens to be, for he takes God's place. And note that the devil, humility's enemy, is a great and crafty meddler in this area. Much profit and gain come from considering the superior in this light, but serious loss and harm lie in not doing so. Watch, therefore, with singular care that you **not dwell on your superior's character, mode of behavior, ability, or any other methods of procedure**, for you will so harm yourself as to change your obedience from divine to human, being motivated only by the visible traits of the superior, and not by the invisible God whom you serve through him.*

To consider our superior occupying the place of God in disguise is a great step forward in our spiritual life. In the book of Deuteronomy, we hear, “love your God with all your heart, mind and soul’ (Dt 6.5) which sheds light on all that represents God here on earth. We cannot see God, but we can feel His presence everywhere, especially in everything that He represents. We have learnt that God manifests his will through our superiors. The command of God is to love. Where there is love, there is obedience. This attitude of love and obedience leads us to further grow in our spiritual relationship with God not dwelling on superior’s character, his mode of behavior, his ability, or any other method of procedure he might employ. Jesus says “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do...” (Mt 23.3). It is not easy always to look on the superior as though on God. It requires a great deal of humility to do so.

The devil takes advantage of the situations of uncertainty, weaknesses, frailty of the superior and leads one to believe in one’s own pride. No one can get a perfect superior without any weakness. If we continue to target a superior because he is weak in many areas of his life, then spiritual trouble will creep in. Therefore, it is best *not to dwell on superior’s character*. Moreover, it is relatively on the contrary, easy to get by in a community to keep the rules, to be at the right place at the right time, and to go through all the motions. Admittedly the routine is laborious and tiresome, but one can get used to it. What is hard is not the business of putting forth physical effort, but the work of really leading an interior life of prayer and obedience underneath all the externals. One can keep up observance of the rules and regulations without being internally disposed to God’s will.

In this connection, St. Teresa makes a direct reference to the question of 'honour' and 'rank' as deadly and contrary to the spirit of humility and obedience. "God deliver us from persons who are concerned about honour while trying to serve Him. Honour itself is lost by desiring it, especially in matters of rank" (*Way of Perfection* 12,vii). The best remedy to such issues is the practice of humility. "It calls for great humility to be silent at seeing oneself condemned without fault. The truly humble person must in fact desire to be held in little esteem" (*Way of Perfection* 15,ii); "it is only right that you should try to understand how to train yourselves a great deal in humility; in fact this is an important aspect of *prayer* and indispensable for all persons who practice it" (*Way of Perfection* 17,i). True humility consists very much in great readiness to be content with whatever the Lord may want us to do in obedience. It is being content with what is received. Hence this attitude of contentment can be obtained only in and through prayer. When we overcome our pride and self-importance through genuine obedience, we please God who watches us through our superiors. That is why St. John affirms that "*the devil is humility's enemy*"

*Your obedience is vain and all the more fruitless in the measure that you allow the superior's **unpleasant character to annoy you or his good and pleasing manners to make you happy**. For I tell you that by inducing religious to consider these modes of conduct, the **devil** has ruined a vast number of them in their journey toward perfection. Their acts of obedience are worth little in God's sight, since they allow these considerations to interfere with obedience.*

Disquiet in our life is a negative attitude because it creates an atmosphere favorable to the decisive action of the devil, in the same way as recollection precedes and prepares one for the action of God. The devil effects this decisive action by means of lies. Repeating the words of Jesus, St. Teresa calls him 'a lover of lies and a lie himself' (*Life* 25,xiv). Our disquiet within ourselves at times can spring from the actions of the superior but provoked by the devil. Unpleasant character may annoy us, and good and pleasing manners may make us happy.

Both Teresa and St. John emphasize the importance of demonic temptations in the process of our spiritual life especially in relation with our obedience. Teresa warns that the crafts and wiles the devil uses to prevent souls from walking the way of perfection are terrible. For St. John, the devil is the mightiest and most astute enemy; his wiles more baffling than those of the world and the flesh. He is "the hardest to understand," and causes the ruin of a great multitude of religious who set out on the life of perfection, and no human power can be compared with him (*Spiritual Canticle* 3,ix).



To ensure every chance of success in his design devil depends on the weak tendencies of the soul and its desires, giving it an appearance of the spiritual good. One thing is noticeably clear, both the blind tendency and the joy of the satisfied desire seem to impede all control of the reason in the aspirant to perfection. The devil works at this tendency well to confuse and destroy the soul. Hence, the devil gives consolations which will feed the spiritual greediness of a soul, urging it to excesses in exercises of piety and in mortifications against obedience; or at least he will make the soul terrified with aridity that follows spiritual joy, so painful that it will be discouraged. St Teresa speaks about this matter as false humility suggested by the devil. When one does not obey the superior it amounts to lack of humility; and on the contrary when works are done just to please the superior, then it becomes an act of false humility.

One's happiness and sadness should not be dependent on superior's behavior. The moment one gives importance to the character or actions of the superior to lead one to sadness or joy is an indication that there is human expectation rather than the divine action in one's experiences.

This is how devil takes possession of the weak and vulnerable because they are not strongly enlightened by faith; thus, they are deceived by the craftiness of the devil. When the devil succeeds in tempting the soul to get agitated in accordance with the behavior of the superior then it becomes prisoner to him. Only one thing that helps one to liberate from the devil's temptations is surrender to God and obedience to the superior. Obeying in the joyful hope that comes from faith — a faith in the exceeding abundance of grace, in the mighty indwelling of the Holy Spirit, in the blessed love of Jesus, whose abiding presence makes obedience not only possible but certain.

*If you do not strive, with respect to **your personal feelings**, to be unconcerned about whether this one or another be superior, you will by no means be a spiritual person, nor will you keep your vows well* <sup>4</sup>

Our personal feelings are very often biased due to our own weaknesses and prejudices. Therefore, it is necessary to take steps to control our feelings or transform them as feelings for the Lord. If we continue with our feelings secure or insecure then we will have always troubles living with our superiors. To grow in spirituality in this matter we need the help of prayer and discernment. We plead the Holy Spirit to guide us. Of

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between the superior and others in the community must be grounded in faith. As for superiors, John warned in his oral teaching, according to Eliseo de los Mártires, against boorishness and cruelty on their part and the consequent effect of promoting pusillanimity in subjects and a fear of expressing one's opinion in community meetings lest the superior be offended.

course, we need this divine help to overcome our feelings, or else the evil one, the devil will take advantage of us.

The interventions of the devil cannot produce in the soul the effects of peace and humility that the action of God brings. Jesus said, “learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11.29). Humility and the sweetness of peace are the perfume of His presence and sign of His direct action. The devil, the enemy of God normally produces the contrary effects of agitation, pride, and disobedience. When our personal feelings towards our superior are mingled with pride and disobedience then it is difficult to keep up our vows.

The New Testament underscores of course, that Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection definitively defeated Satan, that was because of Jesus’ obedience unto death and God highly exalted him to give him a name above every name (Phil 2.6-11). Jesus did not give vent to his personal feelings; rather eagerly waited in obedience to fulfil God’s will. In Christ, the love of God has decisively conquered the forces of evil, for “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rm 5.20). To be a spiritual person one must admit being weak and at the same time trust in the grace of God.

A genuine gift of discernment of spirits, a gift allied to experience, is generally necessary to discern the action of the devil and human weakness, not only in extraordinary phenomena, but even in ordinary manifestations in which devil and our weaknesses lurk beneath natural causes thus causing one to fall. Temptations to evaluate, judge and condemn are causes for this fall. The devil always uses disobedience as the weapon to defeat a soul. The saints were terrible to the devil because from the first, their fine spiritual sense discerned his presence and his action and defied the evil one.

To be a spiritual person and to keep our vows, we need the inner strength. The moment we give too much importance to who is the superior, and the advantages and disadvantages that may result in expectations, will lead us to create multiple thoughts about his weaknesses or other qualities that will hamper our inner peace and progress towards God.

One of the wisest sayings in the Gospel is “let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day” (Mt 6.34) which must inspire us to take up our crosses one day at a time. At times we complain about how much we are suffering because of this or that person without realizing that it may be the will of God or perhaps the result of our fault. As if today’s suffering were not enough, we add regrets about the past and worries of the future. It is no surprise we feel overwhelmed. For life to be bearable, we must practice



bearing today's problems only. When we overcome our personal feelings and live our life in faith and obedience, we are safe because the devil cannot overpower a soul living in surrender to God.

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